

Epiphany

by melusin

How far would you go if you had total control over another human being? A tale of love, obsession, temptation and betrayal.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 18

How far would you go if you had total control over another human being? A tale of love, obsession, temptation and betrayal.

Disclaimer: All characters depicted belong lock, stock and barrel to JK Rowling. I'm not making a single Knut from this endeavour. I write purely for pleasure, albeit a perverted one.

A/N Many, many thanks go to Snarkyroxy for agreeing to Beta for me. Her help and advice is much appreciated.

You may have noticed that I have adopted a 'kitchen sink' approach to the warning options. BDSM forms a small but important part of the story and begins with such a scene. There is, however, a lot more to this tale than that. There will be some dark moments, but it is not without humour. Appropriate warnings will be posted along the way. So, put your feet up, grab a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans and enjoy!

PROLOGUE

'Are you ready to confess, Miss Granger,' said Severus.

'Yes, Professor,' his wife replied meekly.

'Very well, you may begin.'

Hermione Granger-Snape was tied spread-eagled to their four-poster bed and suspended, face down, about a foot above the mattress. She began her confession. 'I took a Dreamless Sleep Draught from your stores without permission.'

'Yes, anything else?'

'I broke your favourite stirring rod.'

'Yes, you did, didn't you? Anything else? What about last Saturday?'

'I put on a pair of knickers to go to Hogsmeade.'

'Was it a no knickers day?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Very well. That is three transgressions plus another three for not addressing me in the correct manner. That makes how many, Miss Granger?'

'Six, sir.'

'Correct. And at five strokes per transgression, how many strokes does that make altogether?'

'Thirty, sir.'

'Right again.' He swished his riding crop. 'Let us begin. You will count.' *Swish*. He brought the crop down on her right buttock.

'One.'

'One what?'

'One, sir.'

'Yes. Lets start again shall we?' *Swish*.

'One, sir.' *Swish* 'Two, sir.'

Severus hit her right cheek twice, did the same to her left and then flicked the crop up between her legs. She winced but did not cry out. He repeated the pattern, two right buttock, two left and one between the legs. She had anticipated the last one and had tensed up to receive the blow. Expecting another smack to her right cheek, she relaxed. He paused, then flicked the crop in between her legs again. She yelped.

'Weren't expecting that, were you?' said Severus. 'How many was that?'

'Um...'

'Forgotten? Well, we'll just have to go back to the beginning again, won't we?' He raised the switch...

Knock- knock.

'Can I come in?' a plaintive voice cried.

Severus sighed and cancelled the silencing charm. 'What do you want, Albus?'

'Can I come in? *Please.*'

'Go back to bed, Albus, it's late.'

'I've had a bad *dreeeam.*'

'Go. Back. To. Bed.'

'But there's a *monster.*'

Hermione tried not to laugh.

'I want *Mummeee.*'

'I'll have to go to him, Severus.'

'I know,' he said resignedly, releasing her restraints.

Hermione flopped onto the bed and got quickly to her feet. 'Do you think you can see to yourself while I see to him?' She squeezed the tip of his erection playfully.

'Witch,' he said, kissing her softly.

'Mum-meee.'

'All right, Albus. Mummy's coming.'

Transfiguring her black leather corset into more appropriate night attire, Hermione walked to the door, took down the wards and opened it. Before her stood a mini Severus Snape. He was clutching a teddy to his chest with one hand and rubbing his eyes with the other. His bottom lip was trembling. He was starting to work himself up into a tantrum.

'Okay, Albus. Let's go find this monster, shall we?'

He nodded.

'Have you looked under the bed yet?'

He shook his head.

'Very well, we'll look together.' She took his hand in hers and walked him back to his bedroom – it was the least she could do for her little saviour. Her arse would be much less sore in the morning thanks to him.

The Girl Can't Help It

Chapter 2 of 18

In which Hermione reflects on her life and we go back to the beginning.

Disclaimer: I own nothing. It all belongs to JK Rowling.

A/N Many thanks to Snarkyroxy for her time and trouble.

The Girl Can't Help It

As she had hoped, by the time Hermione got Albus settled and could return to her own bed, her husband was fast asleep. Severus was lying flat on his back, hogging the middle of the bed and snoring like a Manticore. Gingerly, she sat beside him and wriggled carefully into the small space available, trying not to wake him. She tried to find a comfortable position, which wasn't easy considering her backside felt like it was on fire, but she did not dare cast a Healing Charm without his permission that would only incur further punishment.

When he felt generous, he would heal her before she slept, but most times he would leave it until the morning so he could admire the welts he had given her. Then, he would kiss the battered flesh tenderly before casting the charm, hold her tightly and make love to her as though she were the most precious thing in the world. Rocking back and forth achingly slowly inside her, he would kiss her passionately, whispering words of love in her ear with a voice like molten chocolate. That was her favourite part. It was worth the pain just for that.

Punishment and reward she wasn't so stupid that she didn't see it for what it was. Gods, she loved him. She gazed with fondness at the sleeping wizard beside her. He only ever looked this relaxed when he was asleep. She loved the contours of his face, his high cheek-bones, his big nose and his thin, though soft and very kissable, lips. No one could ever describe him as handsome, though she, looking through the pink haze of love, thought he was beautiful. He reminded her of a painting she had once seen of a Renaissance prince in Italy. At the moment, however, he was not looking even remotely attractive, snoring as he was, with his mouth hanging open and saliva dribbling out of the corner. She twisted her wedding ring absentmindedly and turned her thoughts to her imminent thirtieth birthday.

An hour later, she was still wide awake. Hermione always seemed to be tired lately, and yet sleep eluded her. Consequently, she was taking far too many Dreamless Sleep potions than were good for her. It was as if something were tugging at the corners of her mind, but she couldn't quite pin it down. The more she tried to focus on the problem, the more it seemed to slip away from her. Severus had suggested an early night. Knowing that sleep was the last thing on his mind, she had nevertheless complied as usual.

She sighed. It had been a long week. What with teaching, looking after the children and seeing to Severus' needs, there never seemed to be any time left for herself. She had wanted a quiet night by the fire and a long, relaxing bath followed by a good night's sleep. Instead, as she was clearing up after the children's supper, he had put his arms around her waist from behind and whispered in her ear that he wanted her in her leather corset that night for 'something special'.

Well, she had been married long enough to him to know what that meant the three B's, as she privately referred to it Bondage, Beatings and Buggery, and sure enough, she hadn't been disappointed.

Thank God for Healing Charms, she thought, though not for the first time, *or there would be days when I wouldn't be able to sit down.*

Funny, really, how she had become used to it. She had been appalled at the idea when Severus had told her what he expected from her sexually after they were married. She had not been a virgin or a prude by any means, but her attitude towards sex had been somewhat conservative. Despite her misgivings, not to mention her low pain threshold, he had ripped away any sense of modesty or privacy she had ever had, and in time, she had come to accept his more exotic practices and enjoy them, in a weird way.

Yes, she mused, *sex with Severus could never be described as boring overwhelming, yes, unpredictable, yes; tiring, too, but never boring. Some women would kill to be in my shoes*, she suppressed a laugh, *so I suppose I should count my blessings.*

There were times, though, when she felt the need to retreat from his advances, to curl up in a ball like a hedgehog and hide from his onslaughts on her person. But there was no escape; he was as relentless as a battering ram. *Some simple intimacy would be nice once in a while*, she mused wistfully, *I wish he would just hold me some nights and stroke my hair until I go to sleep.*

Propping herself up on a pillow, she turned and studied the man she had loved all her adult life. Nearly fifty now, he was still in good shape, his skin still a pallid white with barely a wrinkle. The physical evidence of all the abuse he had suffered in his years as a Death Eater had faded to thin silvery scars, his muscles still well defined in that whip-thin body. Severus was in his prime by wizarding standards, although he did seem to need more sleep these days. He didn't seem to be slowing down in other areas though. His sex-drive had been off the scale to begin with, and then there was his special 'endurance' potion, which made him immediately hard again after orgasm his 'stiffy in a jiffy' potion, as she called it. This was kept for marathon sex sessions when they fucked their way through every position in the Wizarding Kama Sutra and then some. Whilst these sessions exhausted her physically and drained her mentally, she was never able to refuse his demands.

Despite a full and loving life, Hermione could not help feeling that something was lacking and that she had not nearly accomplished enough or reached her full potential. Nothing really inspired or excited her any more. She was a wife, mother and teacher. That was the sum of her existence. She closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind in preparation for meditation. She focused on her breathing. *Inhale. Hold. Exhale.* The loud snoring from the wizard at her side was too distracting. She gave up after a few minutes. A *Silencio* charm would do the trick, she thought in desperation, but pulling a wand on one's sleeping husband simply wasn't done. Besides, his reflexes were no less sharp these days than when he was a spy. She'd be on her back with his wand at her throat before she could get the first syllable of the spell out.

Gently, she encouraged him to turn onto his side. Severus rolled over and sighed. Hermione held her breath. He snorted a few times and then let off a silent but deadly fart.

'Oh, this is pointless,' she said to herself exasperatedly. 'I may as well get up.'

Putting on a dressing gown, she left the bedroom and went to look in on the children. Albus was soundly sleeping, still holding his teddy in a death grip, whilst Katy had fallen asleep reading *The Hobbit*. Hermione gently uncurled her daughter's fingers from the book and placed it on the bed-side table. She returned to the living room, lit the

fire and picked up her lesson plans for the first-years, wondering yet again why she had ever decided to become a teacher. Whenever Hermione pondered this, she could never quite remember. She had wanted to become a Curse Breaker after Voldemort had been defeated, but this had gone the same way as her prior ambitions to become an Auror or a Healer. After she became engaged to Severus, Professor Flitwick had approached Hermione and asked if she would consider becoming his assistant (as he intended retiring in a few years) in order to train as his replacement. Severus had pointed out that this was a much better career option for her as it was regular employment, unlike curse breaking, which was very often freelance, dangerous and usually meant a lot of travelling.

Strangely enough, those were the attributes of the job that had appealed to her, but she had taken the assistantship with Minerva's blessing and became the Charms mistress on Filius' retirement.

She looked at her notes and sighed. Hermione had never suffered fools gladly, and this year's first-years were the biggest bunch of idiots she had had the misfortune to teach. She sighed again and stretched. This wasn't going to help her sleep. Perhaps a cup of hot chocolate might do the trick.

'Winky!' she summoned the house-elf. A bleary-eyed Winky appeared with a *crack!*

'How may Winky serve, Mistress?' the little elf said, yawning. She had been fast asleep when Hermione summoned her.

'Would you bring me a cup of hot chocolate please, Winky?'

'Of course, Mistress.' She disappeared.

Such useful creatures, house-elves, thought Hermione, *always there when you need something.*

She wondered how anyone, particularly a working mother like herself, could manage without them. Although she liked cooking well enough she thought it was important to have meals as a family for the children's sake she hated housework with a vengeance. House-elves also made excellent nursemaids and were always on hand to babysit.

'Is that all, Mistress?' The elf reappeared with the hot drink and some biscuits.

'Yes, Winky,' said Hermione, 'that will be all.'

The house-elf looked at her sadly and vanished.

Hermione flicked through the latest copy of *Harpies Bizarre* for some light reading and sipped her chocolate.

It had all begun innocently enough as these things often do. If anyone had asked Severus Snape when he had first really noticed Hermione Granger as a woman and not an insufferable nuisance (assuming he had not told them to mind their own business), he would have said it was the first day of the autumn term at the start of her sixth year. He had been sitting at the High Table scrutinizing the dunderheads he was condemned to teach for the foreseeable future. Severus glanced down the Gryffindor table at Potter and his two side-kicks. It had been extremely satisfying taking seventy points from Gryffindor for Potter's late arrival before even a single ruby had dropped into the hour-glass. *A good start to the term indeed.* He smiled to himself with malicious glee. Severus was looking forward to observing Potter's reaction to his new post.

His eyes were drawn to Hermione. There was something different about the Granger girl, he noticed. She had an air of confidence about her, a subtle grace in her movements, and her customary slouching posture, due to the enormous weight of books she normally carried around in her satchel, was absent. He was not the only male present to notice this transformation; Draco Malfoy, for instance, was ogling her, much to the annoyance of one Pansy Parkinson, who nudged him forcefully in the ribs. In fact every boy over the age of fifteen seemed to glance in her direction at one time or another. This barely noticeable difference to the untrained eye, namely a school full of adolescent boys, merely tickled the edges of the subconscious mind.

To Severus, however, she may just as well have been wearing a sign around her neck proclaiming, 'Guess who got laid during the summer holidays?'

So, he thought, *I wonder which one of them managed to get into Little Miss Perfect's drawers?*

Weasley seemed the most likely candidate as he was staring daggers at any boy he saw who had the temerity to look at her. She seemed to be very cosy with Potter though; they had their heads together and were laughing over something.

Pity, he thought. *That girl has potential.* There was raw power inside that bushy head just dying to get out. He could smell it. *Shame to throw all that away on a Weasley,* he pondered. *What a waste.*

Then a most peculiar thing happened. Hermione looked at the High Table, saw him looking down at her and smiled. A jolt of arousal shot down his spine to his groin. He looked down at his plate quickly. *That did not happen. I am not attracted to Hermione Granger!* He turned to listen to Dumbledore's welcome speech and tried to forget all about it.

As it happened, Severus was wrong on both counts. When Hermione had got off the Hogwarts Express at Kings Cross at the beginning of the summer holidays, Ginny had handed her a small package and told her not to open it until she was on her own.

Hermione's parents were taking an extended holiday in their house in France that summer. Realising that their little girl was growing up, they wanted to spend some quality time with their daughter, as this year might be their last chance to do so. They picked her up at the station and then drove straight to Portsmouth to catch the overnight ferry. It was late the next day when they eventually arrived at their destination and even later when Hermione eventually remembered the package Ginny had given her. She duly unwrapped it to find two months supply of contraceptive potion with a note that read 'Lose it or Else'.

Hermione laughed. 'Some chance here in the middle of bloody nowhere.'

The Fates, however, were kind. The following morning, the son of the neighbouring farmer arrived at the house with a welcoming basket of fresh vegetables and some Charentais melons. Stephane took one look at Hermione and decided he liked what he saw. Like most Frenchmen, young or old, he was not backward in coming forward and asked her on a date. Things progressed until one Saturday afternoon he led her by the hand into a field of sunflowers where he laid her down and, as gently as he could, took her virginity. It had seemed a romantic idea at the time but was, in reality, hot, dusty and she was eaten alive by insects. It had not been as painful as she had expected, and her young French lover was considerate in making sure she had her fair share of pleasure, but when she climaxed and she closed her eyes, a vision of her Potions master came into her mind.

Well, that was certainly unexpected, she thought in her post-orgasmic bliss. They continued with their liaison. She had been a bit sore up until the fourth or fifth time, but after that she really began to enjoy it, and all in all, she thought she was getting quite good at it. As she started to explore her newfound sexuality, Stephane began to teach her the rudiments of oral sex. She was a bit uncertain when Stephane went down on her for the first time and hesitated when he asked her to reciprocate, but she soon got the hang of it, although she gagged when he tried to push his cock down her throat. He had seemed to like her ministrations nonetheless as, following a groan and a strangled '*J'arrive,*' he spilled his salty-tasting semen into her mouth. She quickly swallowed, trying not to retch as she did so. On the day before she was due to leave for her stay at the Burrow, he came to say goodbye. They both knew this was simply a holiday romance, so there were no tears or recriminations.

'ermionay may I 'av a souvenir?' Stephane asked.

'Of course, what would you like?'

'Your ...I forget ze English word, your *slip*.'

'Knickers?'

'Yes zat is ze word.'

'You want a pair of my knickers?' It seemed a strange request. 'Yes, okay, Stephane, I'll go and get a pair.'

'No, I meant ze ones you are wearing.'

She regarded him a moment. 'Oh, all right.'

She reached under her skirt, pulled them down and gave them to him.

He sniffed, '*Superbe*.'

She looked at him oddly.

'Boys are such strange creatures,' she thought.

She gave him a friendly kiss goodbye and went to pack. Stephane went home and added her knickers to his growing collection.

Hermione was sitting aboard the Hogwarts Express with her nose in a book, unsurprisingly. Her friends knew better than to interrupt her when she was reading, although, in actual fact, she was just staring at the pages. She had read the course work for her year already and was particularly excited to be moving on to Advanced Charms, Potions and Transfiguration.

All such excellent teachers, as well, she thought. *We are so fortunate.*

Hermione imagined watching Professor Snape demonstrate the advanced cutting and slicing techniques needed for NEWT level Potions, those long pale fingers moving with such practiced precision over the raw ingredients and the confident way his hands moved the stirring rod in the cauldron.

- *Just imagine what else he could do with those hands,* a treacherous voice in her head cajoled.

She shuddered. It was not the first time she had had such disturbing thoughts about that particular teacher since the incident in the sunflower field. He was even beginning to infiltrate her dreams. The idea that she might have a crush on the Potions master filled her with horror, and the argument inside her head started up again.

Stop it, she admonished herself. *There is nothing at all attractive about Professor Snape. He is greasy haired, sallow-skinned, his nose is crooked as are his teeth ...*

- *But what about the hands and that voice?* -

Oh, gods, yes, that voice. She shivered. There had to be more to it than that, though. *You can't base an attraction just on someone's hands and voice.*

- *Well, he's intelligent.* -

So are all of Ravenclaw. There's no one in that house I fancy.

- *He's brave.* - That was certainly true. - *He's... noble.* -

Noble? I think the jury's still out on that one. Snape. I mean, Snape? Why Snape of all people? He's nasty, sarcastic and he hates all Gryffindors.

- *He's sexy as hell.* -

So it's the bad boy image, then? No, Sirius was a 'bad boy' good-looking and dangerous. But I never fancied him. Perhaps when I see Severus again, he won't look as bad as I remember.

- *So, it's Severus now is it.* -

Hermione gave up the argument with herself. *You can really pick 'em, Granger. Go for someone attainable why don't you.* She snorted exasperatedly, causing heads to turn in her direction. *This is pathetic.* She scolded herself, *He is a teacher and far too old to pay me any attention. He'd laugh in my face if he knew. He could never be remotely interested in me.* She sighed and tried to push these uncomfortable thoughts to the back of her mind.

'Not long now, Crookshanks,' she said soothingly to her half-Kneazle pet, who was trying to claw his way out of his cat-carrier. Not long and she would see him. *I really need to get out more,* she decided.

At the Welcome Feast, Hermione was oblivious to the looks she was getting from the boys. She was too busy glancing up at the High Table, wondering where Professor Snape had got to. Later, after Harry arrived, and Snape had finally taken his seat, she regarded him and thought, *Nope, Granger, there's nothing wrong with your memory. He's exactly as you remember him.*

Harry had leaned over then and whispered in her ear, 'Don't look now, but I think Draco fancies you.'

She had burst out laughing, saying, 'Don't be ridiculous, Harry!' and then glanced up at the High Table only to see Severus staring at her. Her stomach flipped over, and she smiled at him before she could stop herself. He had looked away quickly. *Not a promising start, Hermione. Not a promising start at all.*

Every Breath You Take.

Chapter 3 of 18

Of Potions, Plots and Passions

Disclaimer: Everything belongs to JK Rowling. I'm just playing in her toybox.

Many thanks to my Beta Snarkyroxy for her endless patience and encouragement.

EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE

If Hermione had been displeased when she heard that Professor Snape would not be teaching Potions that year, the sight of him as the Defence teacher more than made up for the disappointment. Gone was the weedy, stringy-haired academic who lurked around the dungeon classroom like a great bat. In his place was the man she had watched knock Gilderoy Lockhart on his arse in her second year. At twelve years of age, Hermione had been too infatuated with Lockhart to notice just how little effort Severus had expended in the duel. At seventeen, in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, she finally realised that Severus Snape was a formidable, if not dangerous, wizard and a force to be reckoned with.

His opening speech in their first lesson wasn't bad, she thought, although it couldn't touch his first year Potions speech for melodrama. While he had a real knack for potions, she realised he was in his element here. They were not getting the theory from someone who had only read about Dark magic in a book this was a man who not only had first hand experience of the Dark Arts, but who had *embraced* them. The call had almost overwhelmed him, but he had pulled back in time and survived to tell the tale. Hermione knew he had been on the receiving end of more curses than she had ever heard of and that they were now all getting the opportunity to learn from his practical experience.

Hermione was mesmerised by him. She watched Severus striding confidently around the classroom, correcting wand movements and duelling stances. She observed how he tried to teach Harry how to better defend himself, whilst belittling him for the benefit of the Slytherins. She wished Harry could see that Snape wasn't the enemy, but his hatred for the man blinded him to accepting his help. Snape seemed to emanate power. Something in her reached out to him like a magnet.

Gods, he's magnificent.

This was the basis of the attraction, she realised. Power. Sheer, unadulterated, masculine power. She was being drawn to his magical energy like a moth to a flame, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

Severus was trying not to show his despair as he strode around the classroom.

Children, he thought, up against Death Eaters? They don't stand a chance.

He would do everything in his power to prepare them for the fight ahead, but he seriously doubted he had time on his side. He began to assess their strengths and weaknesses as he moved amongst them.

Potter is as stubborn and arrogant as his idiot father, he thought. Even though the power was there, it was unpredictable, and therefore unreliable, because the boy lacked focus. Potter would need more than luck and bravado to defeat the Dark Lord.

Longbottom had a look of a grim determination on his face. He was trying his best, but he would need more than just his thirst for vengeance to take out Bellatrix.

Still, Severus deliberated, I can work with that. The desire for revenge is a powerful emotion and one that can be utilised effectively in battle, if handled correctly.

Weasley, who at first glance seemed to be totally out of his depth, was, he noticed, skilfully probing for weaknesses in his opponent before striking. *Imm, promising,* thought Severus. *Natural strategic skills. There's definitely something there worth developing.*

Granger, though, he mused, was a different kettle of fish altogether. She was precise, controlled and quick to adapt. He had been astonished to see her mastering non-verbal spells within minutes a feat that had taken him hours to accomplish. He had no doubt of her power; he only hoped she lived long enough to harness it. Severus watched the concentration on her face as she repelled each hex and jinx that Longbottom threw at her and knew that she would fight to the death for the cause. He tried to imagine her up against Bellatrix Lestrange or Lucius Malfoy. She was good, but she wouldn't last five minutes in mortal combat with either. A sudden pain shot through his heart at the thought.

Girls in battle, he internally raged. *Merlin help us. Merlin help us all.*

And so the dance began. A look here, a glance there. Severus watched Hermione closely in class purely for academic purposes, he tried to convince himself. Hermione was fast on her feet, he surmised, and didn't her tits jiggle up and down nicely when she dived to the side like that?

NO, I cannot think like this; she is a pupil and out of bounds. But once he had noticed her breasts, albeit hidden under a rather unflattering school robe, he could not un-notice them, as it were.

She needs a bit of work on throwing wider protection shields, though perhaps I could engineer a detention so she can practice one on one with me. That would help her in battle.

His conscience would have none of it. *You are a lecherous old pervert. Stop lusting after the girl; she is not for you. Do you think she would be remotely interested in someone with a face like the rear end of a Graphorn and the social graces of a Blast-Ended Skrewt?*

He also began to follow her on her late night patrols. 'It's just to make sure she gets back to Gryffindor Tower safely,' he told himself.

Of course it is, scoffed the voice of reason in his head. *You don't want to drag her into an alcove and shag the arse off her then?*

Sometimes Hermione sensed a presence behind her on her rounds and hoped it was him. They both went to their respective beds thinking of each other and dreamt of nights of tangled limbs and bodies writhing in ecstasy.

'You are an ugly bugger,' said the mirror. Severus had just got out of the shower and was staring at his reflection. He did not reply. He had long ago given up trying to argue with the mirror. He had tried blasting it to bits on several occasions, but each time it magically repaired itself. He had tried removing it, but it was stuck firmly to the wall. Silencing charms, too, quickly wore off, and when they did, a tirade of abuse usually followed as the mirror made up for lost time. Severus tried to look at himself objectively, but all he saw was someone with a big hooked nose, crooked teeth, sallow skin and a lanky, skinny body. He sighed. Even without the added complication of his moral scruples, he had no chance. What woman would want him? The mirror took notice of his mood. A raging, sarcastic, shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later Severus Snape was normal; a morose, dejected, defeated Severus Snape was not.

It must be a woman. After all these years, the old bastard is in love. 'So,' asked the mirror, 'who's the lucky girl?'

Severus remained silent.

'Well, if you want my advice...'

'I most certainly do not.'

'There's nothing you can do about your face, short of casting a few glamours...'

'Don't push your luck.'

'But your body...Well, let's just say that no woman likes a man to be thinner than she is, and you'll need some padding for all that pelvic grinding. You could do with putting on some weight.'

Severus pointed his wand at his critic. 'One more word, just one...'

The mirror fell silent. Repairing itself took up a lot of magical energy, and it wasn't getting any younger. It knew when to cut its losses. Still, it had plenty of new material for future goading and was looking forward to some stimulating verbal battles. This was going to be fun.

Dejectedly, Severus walked over to the bed and pulled out a box from under it. Inside he kept a few select items of pornography. There were some wizarding wank mags, a few Muggle publications and one or two classic books of erotica. Leafing through them, he found a series of photographs of a glamour model who vaguely resembled Hermione. If he half-closed his eyes, he realised, he could pretend it was her. As the pin-up girl stripped and spread her legs for him, he imagined Hermione underneath him, welcoming him into her body.

This is the closest I'll get to the real thing, he thought sadly.

His right hand saw a lot of action after that. Many a night was spent doing the five-knuckle shuffle over the pages of the magazine, crying out Hermione's name as he climaxed much to the disgust of the model. It wasn't only the release of pent-up sexual frustration that fuelled his need for her, however. For, as the consequences of the Unbreakable Vow he had made with Narcissa Malfoy became all too clear and the walls started to close in around him, fantasizing about Hermione became Severus' only solace.

Hermione, on the other hand, being in a girls' dormitory, did not have the luxury of being able to let off steam in quite the same manner. Any late-night fingering had to be done quietly and surreptitiously with no groaning. She nearly bit through her bottom lip on a number of occasions to stop herself from crying out at the thought of Severus Snape ravishing her body and making her scream with pleasure.

They were both equally frustrated with the impossibility of their attraction to one another, and yet neither was entirely able to give up hope.

* * *

Hermione, too, was closely observing Severus. She couldn't help but notice how little he ate when he turned up at the Great Hall for meals. Was he ill? Severus seemed to be deteriorating in front of her eyes.

Am I the only one who can see this? she thought.

Do you really fancy this man, the nagging voice started up again, *or do you just feel sorry for him? He was no oil painting to start with. Now, he looks like shit, quite frankly.*

It seemed to her that Severus was even more stressed out than usual. Even though he was now teaching the subject he had always wanted to teach, he was as nasty as ever, if not more so. Hermione knew something about his activities for the Order, of course, and realised that he had to be under a great strain. Lately, however, he appeared to be close to breaking point. She wanted to help him somehow, but was at a loss as to how this could be accomplished.

Then, one evening, she spotted an opportunity. She had gone down to the dungeons to check on a Potions experiment she was running. Severus was there.

'What do you want, Miss Granger?'

'I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. I just need to add something to my potion.'

'Well, do it and get out.'

She attended to her cauldron, glancing in his direction as she did so. Her heart went out to him. He looked so tired. Severus was bottling up a large batch of something. She sniffed. Pepperup Potion? The amount he was brewing could only mean it was for the infirmary, she deduced. Didn't he have enough to do already?

'Would you like me to give you a hand, sir?' The words were out of her mouth before she had time to think about it.

You have no idea. 'If I am ever in the unfortunate position of requiring your help, Miss Granger, I shall ask for it.'

She noticed his hand was shaking, but she thought better of enquiring after his health. Gods, he was thin. In the light of the dungeons, he looked almost cadaverous. His stomach gave a loud growl.

'Shall I ask the house-elves to bring you something to eat, sir?'

'OUT! NOW!' He was embarrassed, and having Hermione in such close proximity was starting to make him tremble.

'Good night then, Professor.' She scurried away. He did not reply.

Despite his less-than-friendly attitude, she was even more determined to help him somehow. By helping him, she reasoned with herself, she would be making a positive

contribution to the defeat of Voldemort.

She pondered the problem as she began to make her way out of the dungeons *I know he needs help, but he'll never admit it. Hmm, perhaps I should have a word with Professor Dumbledore. Right now, though, he's hungry, and he needs to eat. I have to see Dobby anyway; maybe he can help.* 'Dobby!' she called the house-elf, 'if you're not busy I'd like a word, please.'

She rounded the corner and ran straight into Draco Malfoy.

She went for her wand, but she was not fast enough. Malfoy had her pinned to the wall in an instant.

'All on your own, Mudblood?' He thrust his body against her.

'Get your filthy paws off me, Ferret.' She struggled and tried to knee him in the groin to no avail.

'Temper, Temper. Crabbe, Goyle keep her still.' His two henchmen took an arm each to restrain her. Malfoy grabbed her hair and pulled her head back. He leaned in as if to kiss her, but instead licked the side of her face with one sweep of his tongue.

She spat in his eye.

'You little bitch!' He slapped her hard across the cheek.

'I'll get you for this, Malfoy.'

'Oh! I'm so scared.'

It was no use struggling; she was no match for the three of them.

Draco stepped back and leered at her. 'My, haven't you grown up? Let's have a better look, shall we? *Divestio!*'

Her robe unfastened itself. He pushed it off her shoulders and looked her up and down. Hermione looked back at him defiantly. She was determined not to show him how scared she was.

'Not bad.' His hands moved towards her bra. 'I think I'll take this off the Muggle way. Would you like that, you little slut?'

Crack! 'You will not harm the friend of Harry Potter!'

Hermione felt a force like an enormous hand pull the three Slytherins off her and hurl them against the opposite wall. Before she realised what was happening, Dobby grabbed her and Disapparated. They landed with a thump on the floor of the Gryffindor Common Room.

In the dungeons, Severus had heard the commotion and gone to investigate. Draco was face down at the bottom of the pile of bodies, trying to free himself from the dead weight of Gregory Goyle, who had landed, unconscious, on top of him.

'I'll have that elf's head stuffed and mounted for this,' Draco yelled in anger and frustration. The hem of a black robe came into his line of vision.

'Would you care to explain, Mr Malfoy, what the three of you are doing on the floor?'

'It was that Mudblood bitch, sir.'

'What happened?' *If you've harmed her, you little shit, I will kill you.*

Draco recounted his version of events. 'We were just having a bit of fun, Professor.'

Severus managed to maintain his calm exterior, although his blood was boiling with rage. 'Did you touch her, Draco?'

'What if I did?' he replied insolently.

Draco never knew how close he came to death at that moment.

Severus kept his temper and managed to feign a bored voice. 'Draco, no doubt Miss Granger is on her way to the Headmaster as we speak to complain about your behaviour. As Head of House, I will be called in to mediate on your behalf. Now, unless you want to be expelled,' Draco looked horrified at the prospect, 'I suggest you tell me everything that transpired here tonight in order that I may defend you. So, I will ask you once again. Did you touch her?'

'No, that treacherous house-elf snatched her away before I had the chance.'

Severus let out a sigh of relief. 'That will make my job somewhat easier.'

'Mind you,' Draco grinned evilly, 'she does have a nice pair of '

'Obliviate!'

* * *

'I say we go now.'

'Okay, Harry. How do we get inside the Slytherin common room?' asked Ron.

'Bad Dobby. Bad Dobby.' *Thump. Thump.*

'Invisibility cloak and Dobby will Apparate us in.'

'Maybe we should leave it until tomorrow?'

'Dobby hurt Draco Malfoy.' *Thump.* 'Dobby is a bad, bad elf.' *Thump. Thump.*

'Naw, he thinks he's safe. We'll have the element of surprise.'

Hermione watched the scene in front of her in a daze. She was still sitting on the floor where she landed. Harry and Ron had been in the common room when she had Apparated in, and they had rushed over to her. When she told them Draco had attacked her, they began ranting about how, where and when they were going to get him. They hadn't asked if she was hurt or even offered to help her get up off the floor. Hermione was bruised, tired and angry.

Apparate into the Slytherin Common Room? They've both gone barking mad. I've had quite enough of this. She stood up.

'QUIET!!!'

The boys fell silent. Dobby stopped banging his head against the wall.

'That's better. You two sit down. Dobby, come over here.'

Harry and Ron sat down obediently on the settee facing the fireplace. Hermione had that look on her face. You did not argue with Hermione if you knew what was good for you when she gave you that look. It was that look that sent Dolores Umbridge out into the Forbidden Forest for her tête-à-tête with the centaurs. Reluctantly, Dobby walked over to join them.

'Harry, tell him he did the right thing.'

'Dobby, you saved Hermione from harm. You did the right thing. You must not punish yourself anymore, okay?'

'Harry Potter is pleased with Dobby?' the elf squeaked.

'Yes, Har- I'm very pleased with you, Dobby.'

'Hermione?'

'Yes, Ron.' She turned to face him. He had gone bright pink which, she noted, clashed with his hair somewhat.

'Your, er, robe.'

'Oh. Right,' she said, quickly covering herself up. 'Now, to business.'

'I still say we go tonight,' said Harry. 'There's a spell written by the 'Prince' in my Potions book that I'd like to try out on him.'

Hermione smiled sweetly, 'Harry, does the phrase 'Revenge is a dish best served cold' mean anything to you?'

Harry looked at his shoes. Ever since Malfoy had broken Harry's nose on the Hogwarts Express at the beginning of the year, he had been itching to get his own back, and this was too good a chance to pass up. In spite of this, he knew Hermione was right. He was just being hot-headed, as usual.

'What has food got to do with it?' asked Ron.

Hermione merely looked at him.

'Just joking. I'm not stupid. So, what's the plan?'

'I have an idea,' said Hermione, 'but I have to check something first. Oh, and I think we'll need Neville's expertise as well. Can you find him and meet me back here in about twenty minutes?'

'Sure,' said Harry.

She turned to Dobby. 'Thank you for saving me, Dobby, I am in your debt.'

'Dobby would do anything to help the friend of Harry Potter, miss.'

'Would you now? Then come with me.'

Dobby followed Hermione up to her dormitory. Ignoring the looks Lavender and Parvati gave her, she sat on the bed with Dobby, closed the curtains and cast a Silencing Charm for good measure.

'Now, Dobby, this concerns Professor Snape.' Dobby's ears drooped. 'He needs our help.'

Dobby protested. 'Professor Snape is a nasty man. He said to stay out of his classroom, or he would turn Dobby into Potions ingredients.' He looked around for something suitable to hit his head with.

'I'm sure he didn't really mean that, Dobby.'

Dobby was not convinced.

Hermione went on, 'Professor Snape is not eating properly, Dobby. I want you to go and see him in an hour's time, and if he is still working, please take him some sandwiches and pumpkin juice. Could you then ask the house-elves who serve him to keep an eye on him for me, please?'

'Miss, house-elves do not like you because of SPEW.'

'I know that, Dobby, but I've found something that might change their opinion of me.' She leaned out through the curtains and picked out a book from a pile at the side of her bed. 'I want you to read this, Dobby. It concerns the house-elves.' She pointed at a passage in the book. 'I only recently discovered this in the library.'

Dobby read it, his eyes getting wider and wider. 'Humans put house-elves under a curse?'

'Yes, Dobby, to enslave you. I had heard about it, but this is the only written evidence I've ever come across. It's all here. The wizards thought your magic was a threat and wanted to make sure it was under their control. The beauty of the curse is that it makes you love the fact that you are in service to wizard-kind. Even you, as a free elf, still feel the need to serve and to punish yourself for disobedience, don't you?'

Dobby nodded his head. 'House-elves need to see this book.'

'I agree, but I want your promise to help Professor Snape first.'

Dobby reluctantly agreed.

'Tell them that I will help them in whatever way I can, Dobby. If, after reading this, they still chose to remain in servitude, then I will disband S.P.E.W. I will abide by whatever decision they make. If they want me to take up their case, I will, but the curse can only be lifted by the Wizengamot. It will take a lot of time, effort and money to take legal action, and until I leave school, I don't think I will be able to pursue the matter. Besides, the Wizengamot has other matters of great importance to deal with at the moment. I'm afraid your rights would not be very high on their list of priorities.'

'Dobby understands, miss.'

'Let me know their decision, Dobby.'

'Yes, miss.' And with a *crack*, he was gone.

Right, that's that sorted, she thought, collapsing on the bed. It was tempting to stay there and go to sleep, but there was still work to be done.

Hermione got up, went to her trunk and removed one of her most prized possessions. *Let's see what Granny's Herbal has to say.* She flipped through the pages until she found what she was looking for. *Yes, that should work. Draco won't know what hit him.* Picking up her copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, Hermione set off for the common room once again.

* * *

As soon as Neville saw Hermione enter the room, he was on his feet.

'Hermione! Are you all right? Did he hurt you?'

'I'm fine, Neville. But thank you for asking.' She glanced disparagingly at Ron and Harry, who looked suitably shamefaced.

'If you'll all sit down, we'll go over the options'.

The three boys sat on the settee and looked at her expectantly.

Hermione put her books down, took her wand out for effect and began pacing up and down before them, tapping her wand in the palm of her left hand as she did so.

'Option One. We behave as Malfoy expects us to. We go in, wands blazing in the good old-fashioned Gryffindor way. We throw a few hexes, and hopefully Malfoy ends up in the hospital wing.'

'Sounds good so far,' said Harry.

'Count me in,' said Ron.

'Me, too,' said Neville.

'The downside of this approach,' said Hermione, ignoring the interruption, 'is that Madam Pomfrey would quickly patch him up, and ~~we~~ we would be the ones to get into trouble for attacking *him*. We would definitely lose House points and most likely get detention with Filch until the end of term.'

'That wouldn't be so bad,' said Ron.

'You could be banned from playing Quidditch, or we could lose our Hogsmeade privileges.'

The boys were silent on that one. She let the point sink in.

'In any event, Malfoy would come out of it smelling of roses and what would be the point of that?'

'And Option Two?' said Harry.

'We do it the Slytherin way and beat Malfoy at his own game.' Hermione picked up her Potions textbook and started to explain. 'Professor Slughorn has been following the syllabus pretty closely. By my reckoning, we should be brewing a Calming Draught tomorrow.' They looked at her blankly. She showed them the instructions.

'See here, at this point, after the crushed moonstone is added, the potion becomes extremely volatile. If you add anything to it or if you stir it in any way other than a clockwise direction, it will explode. When the potion comes into contact with skin, it will turn it bright blue.'

'Okay,' said Harry, 'but Madam Pomfrey will have the antidote. He'll be out of the Infirmary before dinner.' Harry still thought they should go with Option One.

'Aha. That's where Neville comes in.' She picked up her grandmother's Herbal and showed it to Neville. His face lit up.

'This is amazing, Hermione.'

She pointed her wand at one of the entries. 'I need you to get hold of some of this. Have you noticed it growing anywhere?'

'That's not a magical plant,' said Neville, 'but yes, I think I've seen some growing down by the lake.' He was entranced with Hermione's book. Her grandmother had obviously loved plants as much as he did. She was a woman after his own heart.

Harry was beginning to see where Hermione was going with this. 'If you add this, the antidote won't work, will it?'

Hermione smiled and shook her head. 'No, it won't. Better still, because the plant has no magical signature, it is virtually untraceable. Professor Slughorn may check the other ingredients for contamination, but he won't find anything. Everyone will believe that Malfoy stirred the cauldron the wrong way. It will take about a week for the effects to wear off. Draco will be humiliated and no one will believe that it's not his fault.'

'Sneaky,' said Ron. 'I like it.'

'We'll need a diversion,' said Hermione. 'Ron, can you blow up your cauldron on cue?'

'I think I can manage that,' Ron replied.

'I can give you a few tips,' said Neville, grinning.

Suddenly, there was a flash of green in the fireplace and Professor Dumbledore's head appeared in the flames.

'Ah, Miss Granger, good, you're still up. Professor Snape tells me you were involved in an incident in the dungeons this evening. Would you like to come to my office and discuss it?'

'Now, sir?'

'Yes, now, Miss Granger. You may use the Floo.' A small pot of Floo powder appeared on the hearth.

Will this evening never end? Hermione turned to the boys. 'I should have told him sooner. He'll no doubt believe whatever lies Malfoy told Professor Snape. Oh, well.' She took a handful of Floo powder from the pot. 'Neville, look after my book for me.' She threw the powder into the fire, called out 'Headmaster's Office,' stepped into the flames and was gone.

* * *

Professor Dumbledore was deep in conversation with Severus when Hermione Flooed into his office.

'Ah, Miss Granger! Do sit down. Professor McGonagall is on her way. Would you like some tea while we wait?'

'Um, yes. Yes, please, sir. Milk and no sugar.'

The cup appeared before her. Hermione took a sip and immediately felt calmer. She wondered if there was something in it besides tea. Fawkes flew over to her and perched on her shoulder. Hermione bit her lip to keep back the tears as she began to realise how serious her predicament had been. Fawkes began to sing softly to her, and she felt her strength and courage return.

Severus fought the urge to put his arms around her. He clenched his fists at his side.

'Did he hurt you, Miss Granger?' He took an involuntary step towards her.

'No, sir. The only thing hurt was my pride.'

Dumbledore observed the interaction between the young witch and the man who was the closest thing he had to a son with some concern. He had discovered, over the years, that appearing absentminded and doddering was a good cover for people-watching. Albus had been around a very long time and had seen it all before.

Although their conversation gave nothing away, Severus and Hermione's body language spoke volumes. In addition, Severus' aura was reaching out to cover hers in a blanket of love and protection. Albus did not think anything physical had happened between them yet, but he surmised it was only a matter of time. He suddenly felt very old. What to do for the best? If anyone needed a friend right now, he realised, it was Severus, but there was obviously an attraction here that went beyond friendship. It could be very dangerous for him to become attached to someone, particularly a young Muggle-born witch; he was going to need all his wits about him for the fight to come.

Furthermore, Albus had a duty of care towards Hermione, though he was sure Severus would never abuse his position as a teacher. Albus was confident he could trust him on that score. He decided not to interfere for the moment but to keep a close eye on the situation nonetheless.

'How is your arm, sir?' Hermione enquired politely.

'Much the same, my dear, I'm afraid,' he replied, 'but I'm confident that Professor Snape will find the cure.'

A flash in the grate signalled the arrival of Professor McGonagall.

'I came as quickly as I could, Albus.' She spotted Hermione. 'Miss Granger? Whatever is the matter?'

Albus filled her in on the night's events.

'My dear girl.' Minerva went over to her in a flurry of tartan robes. 'Are you harmed? Do you need to see Madam Pomfrey? She knelt down beside Hermione and put her arm around her shoulders.

'I'm all right, Professor, really.'

'Albus, I want that boy expelled!' Professor McGonagall was outraged.

'Calm yourself, Minerva,' said Professor Dumbledore. 'I'm afraid the situation is complicated.'

'Complicated? Hermione was almost raped! What more needs to be said?' Minerva looked at Severus accusingly. 'I suppose you have something to say in his favour.'

'No, I do not, Minerva. Under normal circumstances, I would be the first to recommend expulsion. Unfortunately, these are not normal circumstances.'

'No, indeed,' said Professor Dumbledore. He hesitated. 'I must ask you both not to repeat what I am about to tell you.' Both women looked at him. 'Draco Malfoy has taken the Dark Mark.'

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth, 'Oh, no.'

Minerva was equally shocked. 'But surely, Albus, if he is now a Death Eater...'

'Both Severus and I believe that the boy is not beyond redemption. As far as we are aware, he has not been involved in any atrocities. Whilst he is at Hogwarts, he is away from the influence of his father, and he cannot take part in any Death Eater activities. I'm sure you will appreciate that it is safer for all concerned if Mr Malfoy remains here where Severus can keep him under observation.'

'Of course.' Hermione nodded. 'I understand.'

'But what about Hermione's safety?' said Minerva. 'What's to prevent him doing it again?'

Me, that's what. 'It is not in Draco's interest to be expelled,' Severus replied. 'I will tell him that I managed to talk the Headmaster out of it this time but that next time he will not be so lucky.' He went on, 'Miss Granger, you should know that I saw fit to modify his memory of the event. As far as he is aware, you were rescued just after he slapped you. That goes for Crabbe and Goyle, too.'

'But why, sir?'

Because they had no right to see you like that. 'It might have aroused his suspicions if I were to easily convince the Headmaster to absolve him of the crime of attempted rape. He knows he assaulted you, but I will tell him that I managed to play down the attack by arguing that it was merely a prank that went wrong.'

'I see, sir. Thank you for telling me. Oh, Harry and Ron will have to know, I've already told them what happened.'

'Make sure they do nothing rash, Miss Granger. Now, if that is all, Albus, I will bid you all goodnight. I'm expecting Remus Lupin tomorrow, and I must attend to his potion.'

'Of course, Severus. See you at breakfast.'

Severus inclined his head, 'Minerva, Miss Granger.' He went over to the fireplace and Flooed back to the Potions classroom.

As she watched him leave, Hermione mentally ticked off the list. *So, not only is he teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts, he has his Head of House duties and has to nursemaid Draco Malfoy. On top of that, there's his work for the Order, he brews potions for the infirmary, the Wolfsbane Potion for Remus, and he's trying to find a cure for the curse afflicting the Headmaster. Oh, and lets not forget reporting to Voldemort and needing all his strength to shield himself from that monster's mental probing. And that's just the stuff I know about. No wonder the man's exhausted; it's a miracle he's not dead.* She felt very angry on his behalf. She had to say something.

'Do you wish me to accompany you back to Gryffindor Tower, Hermione?'

'No thank you, Professor. Really, there is no need.'

'Very well, then I, too, will say goodnight.'

After Minerva had left, Hermione turned her attention to the Headmaster.

'Professor?'

'Yes, my dear?'

'I can't help but notice that Professor Snape seems a little stressed these days.'

Dumbledore regarded her over his half-moon spectacles.

She went on, 'His work for the Order is important, isn't it, Professor?'

'Yes, Miss Granger, it is.'

'He does seem to have a lot on his plate, and I was just wondering if I could help. I noticed the other evening that he was brewing some very basic potions for the hospital wing. I could do that it would free some time for him to concentrate on more important things. *And*, I'd feel I was doing something constructive to help the war effort.'

Dumbledore smiled. 'That is an excellent suggestion, Miss Granger. I shall inform Professor Snape in the morning of your offer of assistance.'

'Um, sir?'

'Yes, Miss Granger.'

'Would you mind telling him that it was your idea? He'd bite my head off if he thought I'd suggested it.'

Dumbledore chuckled. 'Yes, he just might at that. Very well, my dear, I shall tell him I think he is overdoing it and needs an assistant. He won't like it, but I shall insist.'

'Thank you, sir. May I Floo back to the Gryffindor common room?'

'Of course you may. Off you go, now, it's getting late. Good night, my dear.'

'Good night, Professor.'

The boys were still up when she stepped through the fire-place.

'How did it go, Hermione?' said Ron.

'Is he going to be expelled?' asked Harry

'It went okay, and no, he's not.' She held up her hand against their protests. 'There are reasons, and I'm fine with it.' She told them what Professor Snape had done.

'Trust him to stand up for Malfoy, the greasy git!' said Ron.

'Ron,' Hermione said tiredly, 'Professor Snape did what he thought was right. And I for one am glad that Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle have no memories of seeing me in my underwear.'

Ron blushed at the memory that evoked.

'So, is operation Smurf still on?' asked Harry.

'Absolutely.'

'Excellent!'

Neville looked at Ron.

'No idea, mate. Trust me, it's better not to ask.'

Fever

Chapter 4 of 18

Severus confronts his feelings, and things heat up in the dungeons as Hermione plays with fire.

FEVER

Disclaimer: Nothing's mine. Never will be.

A/N: This chapter contains BDSM and some lemons.

Big thanks, as ever, to Snarkyroxy for her help and advice.

Severus could hear Draco whinging before he entered the Hospital Wing.

'But I'm telling you, I stirred the bloody thing clockwise!'

'Language, Mr Malfoy,' said Professor Slughorn. 'Ten points from Slytherin.' He spotted Severus.

'Ah, Professor Snape, there you are. Perhaps you can throw some light on this mystery. I'm afraid Madam Pomfrey and I are completely baffled.'

'I heard there was an explosion in Potions, and that a member of my House was injured,' replied Severus, looking at Draco. 'Judging by the colour of your face and hair, Mr Malfoy, I would hazard a guess that you were brewing a Calming Draught and stirred the potion anti-clockwise after adding the moonstone.'

'I didn't! Why won't anyone believe me?'

'Why have you not administered the antidote, Madam Pomfrey?' Severus asked, ignoring Draco's outburst.

'I have, Professor, but it hasn't worked. This must be that one-in-a-million case where the antidote is not effective.' She turned to Draco. 'I'm afraid you're just unlucky, Mr Malfoy. You'll have to wait until the effects wear off naturally.'

'What? You must be joking!'

'Come now, Mr Malfoy,' said Professor Slughorn. 'It could have been a lot worse. If Miss Granger had not had the presence of mind to cast a Cooling Charm and to Scourgify your clothes, you could have been badly burned.'

'Are you sure the antidote is not at fault, Madam Pomfrey?' asked Severus.

'Yes, I am. Ron Weasley made the same mistake. The antidote worked just fine in his case.'

'Weasley was involved in a separate incident?' Severus asked Slughorn.

'Yes. Both cauldrons blew up almost simultaneously.'

'Hmm. Interesting,' said Severus. 'I take it you've checked to see if anything else was added to Mr Malfoy's potion?'

'Indeed,' replied Professor Slughorn, passing Severus a small phial. 'There was nothing in that cauldron that shouldn't have been. The only thing left to check for is contamination of the actual ingredients.'

Everything seemed to point to Draco making a careless error, and yet Severus knew that Draco was not usually so incompetent. He took out his wand and performed the same diagnostic scan on the sample as Professor Slughorn had earlier. All the ingredients he expected to see were accounted for. He then scanned Draco's body. Passing the wand over Draco's hand, he noticed a small blue stain on the sleeve of his robe.

If Draco is telling the truth, then why would the potion...? Wait a minute. It should not have dyed his robe blue, only his skirt. He performed the scan again. *Nothing. Unless...* Severus let his hair fall forward to hide the smirk that was in danger of turning into a full-blown grin. There was only one person he could think of who could have come up with this. *Clever, clever witch.*

He said out loud, 'I'm afraid I have to agree with Professor Slughorn, Draco. I can find nothing out of the ordinary. Now, unless Madam Pomfrey thinks otherwise, there is no reason for you to miss any more classes.'

'But-but, I can't be seen like *this*,' Draco almost shouted.

'There is nothing wrong with you, Mr Malfoy,' said Madam Pomfrey. 'You may leave.'

'But...' Draco protested.

'No more buts, Draco,' said Severus. 'I shall expect to see you in the Great Hall for dinner.' And with that, he turned and strode out of the Infirmary, his robes billowing in his wake.

In the corridor, Severus allowed his face to relax into a smile. He couldn't be absolutely sure what Hermione had used, but there weren't many non-magical plants that produced such a strong blue dye.

A cunning plan worthy of a Slytherin, thought Severus, chuckling to himself. *So devious in its simplicity. She even cleared up the evidence! Merlin, I love that girl.* He stopped dead in his tracks. *Love? Where the fuck did that come from?*

* * *

After his last class of the day, Severus returned to his chambers, poured himself a large glass of firewhisky and collapsed in his favourite armchair. His emotions were in turmoil.

'This cannot continue,' Severus said out loud. If the Dark Lord were to summon him now, in this state, he realised his Occlumency shields would fail. He would not survive the night.

Determinedly, Severus put his drink down, closed his eyes and began the descent into the depths of his subconscious mind. He arrived in a room very much like his own Potions laboratory, only the many coloured glass bottles and phials which adorned the shelves here contained a carefully chosen selection of memories and emotions. This was the room Severus always showed Voldemort.

He walked over to a set of shelves, which swung out to reveal a hidden door. Severus stepped through the opening into a small library. On the walls, between the bookshelves, were portraits of people who had influenced his life, Dumbledore and Voldemort included. This room was his back up if the Dark Lord ever breached his first line of defence. Here, Severus kept some more of the things that Voldemort would expect to find in the mind of a loyal disciple, including some of his darker memories his father's abusive tendencies, the bullying of the Marauders, his feelings of inadequacy and his desire for recognition and power. There were also some carefully constructed false sentiments, such as a hatred for Muggleborns, his devotion to the Dark Lord and his contempt for Albus Dumbledore.

Severus touched a candle sconce to the left of the portrait of Albus. An archway shimmered into view, revealing a set of stone steps. Severus descended the stairway, down, down into the part of his mind he called The Vault. At the bottom was a thick steel door, complete with a combination lock. He spun the dial, pulled the handle and entered. In this small room, Severus kept his few truly happy memories, as well as any feelings or emotions he deemed dangerous to his health. Conjuring a box and labelling it 'Hermione Granger', Severus collected his feelings for her and poured them into it. He closed the lid, added a padlock for extra security, and placed it on a shelf next to the box marked 'Lily Evans'.

Once he had done that, Severus felt a lot calmer. His emotions were now safely filed away to be examined at a later date. He downed the remainder of his whisky in one gulp and made his way to the Great Hall for dinner.

* * *

The Slytherin table was, indeed, graced that evening by a bright-blue Draco Malfoy. Following a stunned silence at his entrance, the school erupted into a cacophony of laughter. Hermione, Ron, Harry and Neville, of course, laughed the loudest.

Explain that to Voldemort, ferret-face, Hermione thought vindictively.

Severus glowered fiercely from the High Table at the sea of faces in front of him.

Serves the arrogant little wanker right. Severus inwardly smiled.

Later, after the plates for the main course had been cleared away and the desserts arrived, Hermione casually mentioned to Harry and Ron that she had agreed to assist Professor Snape brew potions one or two evenings a week.

'You volunteered to spend extra time with *Snape*? Harry was appalled. 'Are you nuts?'

'Look,' said Hermione patiently, 'it's quite simple. *Professor Snape* is trying to find a cure for the Headmaster. Madam Pomfrey needs supplies for the Infirmary. I can brew the potions Madam Pomfrey needs, which gives Professor Snape more time to find the antidote.'

'Well,' said Harry, 'I suppose if you put it like that... all right. Will you be okay on your own?'

'Do you want us to escort you, Hermione?' asked Ron, tucking into his second helping of bread and butter pudding.

'Thanks for the offer, boys, but I'm not going to let Malfoy intimidate me. Besides, I don't think he'll be roaming the corridors much in his present condition.'

They all laughed.

Severus glanced at the trio. *They're just children. Nothing more.* He congratulated himself on his self-discipline. Albus said something, and Severus nodded absentmindedly.

'Capital,' said Professor Dumbledore. 'I'm glad you're amenable to the idea, my boy. I fear I have been overworking you lately.'

What's the old codger on about now?

'I think Miss Granger fits the bill nicely.'

'Albus, what are you talking about?'

'Your new assistant, Miss Granger.'

'My new *WHAT*?

'Assistant,' replied Dumbledore slowly, as if speaking to a small child. 'Miss Granger has kindly agreed to brew the Infirmary's supplies under your supervision, of course, in order to free up some of your time.'

'I do not need anyone's help, let alone that insufferable know-it-all's!' Severus spat.

'I disagree. You are worn out, Severus.'

'Are you suggesting that I cannot cope with my workload?'

'No,' replied Albus, 'you are more than capable, but at what cost to your health?'

Severus snorted. *Since when were you so concerned about my health, old man?*

Albus glanced down at his hand. 'Miss Granger, as well as being discreet, understands that by sharing the burden of that workload, you will have more time to attend to... other matters.'

'Professor Slughorn'

'Agreed to teach, Severus. No more.'

'Miss Granger has her studies.'

'True,' Albus agreed, 'and I intend to see that they do not suffer. But Miss Granger is also well aware that as a Muggleborn witch, a bad outcome in this war would have an adverse effect on her future. She wants to play her part, Severus, and I do not want to dissuade her or others like her.'

Severus huffed but said nothing.

'It's settled then,' said Albus, taking his silence for acquiescence. 'You may call upon Miss Granger two evenings a week. I'm sure the two of you will come to a workable arrangement.' He got up quickly and left the table before Severus could think up a scathing retort.

Severus remained seated. He knew Albus was right. He did need help, but his pride would never allow him to admit it. *But why does it have to be her?*

Deep inside The Vault, the box marked 'Hermione' rattled on its shelf.

* * *

Hermione stood at the top of the stairs and took a deep breath. She repeated the mantra, *I will not be intimidated. I will not be intimidated*, before descending to the dungeons. On the look-out for any trouble, she kept her hand on her wand, ready to draw it at a moment's notice. She was, therefore, slightly alarmed as she reached the bottom of the stairs to see the Bloody Baron drift through the wall and float in front of her.

'Good evening, Baron,' said Hermione politely.

The Slytherin ghost did not reply, but pointed a spectral finger in the direction of the Potions classroom. Hermione wasn't sure what he wanted, but he didn't appear to mean her any harm, so she continued on her way. In silence, the Baron floated slightly ahead of her until they reached the classroom, then he bowed and disappeared.

Severus was checking his notes for the umpteenth time. It was infuriating. He was no closer to finding the antidote than he had been a month ago. And now, for the next phase of his research, he was having to consider combining some very dangerous ingredients in a completely unorthodox manner.

Up until this point, Severus had conducted his experiments in his private lab, but although the protective shields surrounding it were very strong, they were nothing in comparison to the ancient wards protecting the Potions classroom. As Severus was entering uncharted territory, he had deemed it expedient to move his cauldron where both he and the castle would be better protected. He laid out the necessary ingredients on the table in front of him, together with a few medicinal potions and a bezoar in case of emergencies. Severus was so engrossed in his work, he did not hear Hermione enter the room.

'Good evening, Professor Snape.'

Severus whirled around. 'What are you doing here?'

'Has the Headmaster she began.'

'informed me that I must suffer your presence two evenings a week?' he cut her off. 'Yes, he has.'

'Do you'

'The Infirmary's supplies are up-to-date. Madam Pomfrey will give me a new list detailing her requirements for the forthcoming week tomorrow. You may return then.' Severus waved his hand at her dismissively and turned back to his cauldron. He did not need this distraction; besides, the potion he would soon be attempting would be potentially explosive and quite probably lethal if handled incorrectly. He did not want to endanger her.

Hermione was unperturbed. 'Very well, sir. I'll just check my project while I'm here, if that's all right with you.'

Severus grunted by way of response.

They worked in silence. Hermione was dying to find out what Severus was doing but knew better than to ask. Instead, she gave her own work her undivided attention and tried to be as unobtrusive as possible.

Severus glanced once or twice in her direction, almost smiling at the intense look of concentration on her face. Despite himself, Severus was intrigued to know what she could find so absorbing.

Hermione was going over her notes again when suddenly a voice next to her ear said, 'What're you doing, Miss Granger?'

She nearly jumped out of her skin. *How does he do that? Is he on castors or something?* 'It's a potion that will hopefully relieve menstrual cramps, Professor.'

'Really? Are the proprietary brands not effective?'

'They relieve the pain, sir,' Hermione replied, 'but they either make me feel sleepy or nauseous or sometimes both. I'm trying something different.'

Severus picked up some leaves next to her cauldron. *Ruta Graveolens*. 'Common Rue?' He knew of no magical properties for the plant.

'Yes, sir. It has been used in Muggle herbal medicines for menstrual problems for centuries.'

'Muggle?' He snorted, but she still held his interest.

Hermione sighed before explaining, 'Muggle herbals that is the books often use plants in a similar fashion as us only, obviously, the magic is missing so they are not effective in the same way.'

Severus nodded. 'Continue.'

'Well, I have often wondered if Muggle folklore is based on knowledge that was gleaned from the wizarding community at the time when they knew of our existence. Whereas we stopped using plants like rue, for example perhaps because we discovered something more effective they continued to be used by Muggle herbalists. I thought it would make an interesting study, that's all.'

'An intriguing hypothesis, Miss Granger. Do you have any of these Muggle herbals, by any chance?'

'Yes, sir, I do.' Hermione pulled a small book out of her sleeve and enlarged it. 'This was my grandmother's herbal, sir.' She handed it to him.

It was not a printed work as he expected. The fly-leaf bore the inscription *Cassie's Book* in copperplate writing. It was rather a combination of a journal and a scrapbook, illustrated with some of the most beautiful pen and ink botanical drawings he had ever seen. It was a lifetime's work of the study and observation of plants and their uses.

It seems scientific minds run in the family.

Severus leafed through the book until he found what he was looking for. 'Hmm,' he said, looking at one of the drawings. 'Woad. A plant with a long and *colourful* history. The ancient Britons used to paint their bodies with it before going into battle, you know.'

'Really, sir?' Hermione said innocently. *Shit, he knows.*

'Yes, really. The leaves produce a stubborn blue dye that takes forever to wear off.' He smirked.

'How interesting.'

Suspicious confirmed, Severus let the matter drop. 'Cassie was your grandmother, I take it?'

She nodded. 'Yes, sir. Short for Catherine.'

'This is fascinating, Miss Granger. Are you sure your grandmother wasn't a witch?'

Was he teasing her? Hermione smiled. 'If she was, she kept it very quiet.' She paused. 'Sir, if you think it could help you in any way with your potion, you are more than welcome to borrow it.'

Severus looked at her. This book was a treasure, a family heirloom and totally irreplaceable, and yet she was willing to lend it to him? 'That is most kind, Miss Granger. I shall take great care of it.'

She beamed. 'I know you will, sir.' Hermione put a stasis charm on her cauldron and yawned.

'It is almost curfew, Miss Granger. As there is nothing further that requires your attention, you may leave. The Bloody Baron will escort you out of the dungeons.'

'Sir?'

'I have asked him to ensure your safety if ever you are in the dungeons unaccompanied.'

'Thank you, sir. That was very kind of you. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight, Miss Granger and...' Indicating the herbal, he added hesitantly, 'Thank you.'

The weeks passed and Hermione fell into the routine of helping Severus brew Madam Pomfrey's medicinal supplies. Her taciturn companion rarely spoke, but Hermione found she did not mind in the slightest. There was nothing awkward about it; in fact there was a certain intimacy in working together in silence. Naturally, she was curious about the experimental potion, but as Hermione was anxious not to spoil Severus' concentration or risk being peremptorily thrown out of the classroom for asking nosy questions, she kept quiet and tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. On occasion, the silence was broken by a curse and a slammed fist on the worktable as yet another attempt failed. Hermione fixed her attention on her cauldron at those times and ignored him. Much as she wanted to commiserate, she never said a word for fear of upsetting him further.

From time to time, the Headmaster dropped by for a chat and to check on Severus' progress. Albus was optimistic. He had the utmost faith in Severus' ability to find a cure, which only served to make Severus feel more wretched at his lack of success.

Hermione observed the interactions between the two men, wishing there was something more she could do. Severus always looked so dispirited and subdued after a visit from Albus that Hermione just wanted to throw her arms around him and tell him everything was going to be all right. Instead, she did the only thing she could. She cleared up early and left him in peace.

* * *

Hermione read the next item on Madam Pomfrey's list. Boil Cure Potion. Well, that was straightforward enough. 'I need to get some snake fangs from the storeroom, Professor. Do you need anything?'

Severus was stirring his cauldron and counting. 'Dragon bile,' he said, glancing up. 'Oh, and Miss Granger, please remain in the storeroom until I call you.'

Hermione nodded. Severus was ordering her to stay out of the way more frequently now while he took ever-increasing chances in his desperation to find the cure. Hermione scanned the shelves, quickly locating the jars containing the ingredients they both needed. As she reached for the dragon bile, there was a tremendous *bang*. Dropping the jar, Hermione rushed back to the classroom, terrified at what she might find. Severus was on the floor, struggling to breathe. A cloud of green gas hung in the air around him. His skin was turning purple and yellow blisters were erupting on his face.

'Professor!' Trying not to panic, Hermione cast a Bubble-Head Charm and put up a defence shield around her body before running across the room. She pointed her wand at the cauldron, intending to throw a containment charm around it, but before she could complete the incantation, there was another explosion. Hermione threw herself down on top of Severus. To her relief, the defence shield held, protecting them both. The contents of the cauldron bounced harmlessly off it.

'*Anapneo!*' Hermione cast the breathing charm, but Severus was rapidly losing consciousness. 'Stay with me, Professor.' She supported his head on her shoulder, grabbed the bezoar and pushed it down his throat. Severus' breathing began to ease, and his skin slowly returned to normal. Hermione heaved a great sigh of relief.

They sat, unmoving, for a few moments. Hermione, relishing the contact with Severus' body, was unwilling to push him away.

Severus had neither the energy nor the inclination to move. *Just let me die now, here, like this, leaning against this angel. I've had enough; I can't go on any longer.*

'Are you all right, sir?'

'What do you think, Miss Granger?' His voice was almost a whisper.

'I don't think you're all right, sir. I don't think you've been all right for a long time.'

'Why, you insolent...'

'Sir, you are injured. You have inhaled poisonous gas; you are stressed and exhausted and you're so thin I wonder how you manage to stay on your feet, let alone brew complex potions. You need to rest; let me help you up.'

'I do not need your help, Miss Granger.' Severus tried to get up and promptly collapsed to his knees.

'I'm getting Madam Pomfrey.'

'No.' The last thing he needed was that old harpy molesting his person. 'There is no need.'

'Then I'm getting the Headmaster.'

'Please... just help me to the office. I will be all right,' he said wearily.

'Lie down then, sir. I'm going to cast *Mobilicorpus*.'

Severus was too weak to argue. He let Hermione levitate him to the office. Once there, she gently laid him on the floor again while she quickly Transfigured a chair into a sofa. She then helped him onto it.

'Can I get you anything else? A Pepperup potion?'

'No, that will not be necessary, Miss Granger. You may leave.'

Severus started to shake. Thinking he must be cold, Hermione Transfigured a handkerchief into a blanket and covered him with it.

'You're shivering. This isn't normal.' Without thinking, Hermione reached out and put her hand on his forehead.

Severus froze. No one, but no one, touched him voluntarily, and yet Hermione Granger, the girl he had fantasised about for so many months, had her cool hand on his face and was looking at him with concern. Severus wanted her touch needed it but knew he had no right to expect any such thing. He was an old man to her, not to mention her teacher.

'Don't touch me.' The simple, unconscious gesture was too much for Severus. His carefully constructed façade began to crumble. He felt like he was coming apart.

Ignoring him, she said, 'You're burning up.' Hermione summoned a facecloth and some water and began to press the cloth to his face.

Torture and bliss. Only his mother had ever shown him such tenderness. He couldn't take much more.

'Why are you doing this?'

'I want to help you.'

'Why?'

'Because I want to.'

Hermione pushed a stray lock of hair off his face. He stilled her hand, brought her palm to his mouth and kissed it. Severus expected her to snatch it away and run off screaming, but she didn't. She just sat there and smiled at him.

'Leave, Miss Granger. Leave while you still have the chance.'

Hermione paused. *He looks so vulnerable. Should I kiss him? No, he's not himself. It would be taking advantage.* 'Okay, I'm leaving.' She squeezed his hand. 'But I shall be back tomorrow, and I'm informing the Headmaster about your condition. Do you want me to clear up the lab?'

'No, you go. I will see to it.'

'I'll see you tomorrow then, Professor. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight, Miss Granger.'

* * *

Next evening, Severus awaited Hermione's arrival with some trepidation. *What must she think of me, behaving like that? Perhaps I should blame the potion.*

Hermione, too, was anxious. Last evening, Professor Snape had been weak and vulnerable. She knew him well enough to know that he would have been embarrassed to be seen in that state. *I shan't say anything*, she decided as she walked to the Potions classroom. *I'll leave it up to him.* She stopped outside the room and turned to her companion. 'Thank you again, Baron.'

The ghost nodded and vanished. Hermione took a deep breath and opened the door.

Severus turned around and his heart gave a little flutter as Hermione walked towards him, remembering just how close he had been to the young witch the night before.

He cleared his throat. 'Miss Granger, I feel I owe you an apology.'

'Whatever for?'

'I was not in my right mind last evening, but that does not excuse my conduct. My behaviour towards you was entirely inappropriate. It will not happen again. I also wish to express my gratitude for your quick thinking, which no doubt saved my life. I am in your debt.'

Hermione was disappointed. 'It may have been inappropriate, sir,' she said softly, 'but it was not unwelcome.'

His black eyes fixed on her. She held his gaze.

'It is as well you left when you did, Miss Granger.'

'I didn't want to leave you like that.'

'I do not want your pity.'

'It's not pity. I was *am* concerned about you.'

'Why do you care?'

'I don't like to see anyone suffer so much. Professor?' Hermione spoke carefully. 'You seem weary, weighed down by something.' Severus looked at her sharply. 'I don't know all you do for the Order, sir, and I don't want to,' she added quickly, 'but I do know that you need all your wits about you and... well, you're not yourself, sir, and I'm worried about you.'

She cares about me? He snorted. 'It is not your concern, Miss Granger.'

'I disagree, sir. Your wellbeing may have a direct consequence on the outcome of this war, and that does concern me.'

Severus stared at her. What was it about this girl? He wanted to open up and confide in her, tell her everything, fall at her feet and beg her to understand. He knew that very soon his name was likely to be reviled throughout the wizarding world, and he was prepared for that, but for some unknown reason he could not bear for her to think badly of him. He could take anything Voldemort threw at him, but not her disdain. He could not contain it any longer.

'Miss Granger... Hermione, I have been charged with a terrible duty, something so reprehensible that you will in all likelihood hate me for it. Before you say anything, that is all I can say on the subject. But I would like one person to believe I would like *you* to believe that after the... event, despite appearances, my loyalties will remain the same.'

Hermione put her hand on his arm. 'I trust you implicitly, sir.'

Severus believed her; those big brown eyes couldn't tell lies to save her life. He picked her hand up and kissed it. Hermione smiled and caressed the side of his face. He leaned into her touch and exhaled in pleasure. He couldn't hide it and he didn't want to. Severus ached to crush her to his body, but he knew if he pulled her into his arms he would never be able to let go. Hermione put her hands on his shoulders and stood on tip-toe to try to kiss him. He stopped her.

'No, Hermione, we cannot. It is not right.'

'You don't want me?' she asked, sounding hurt.

'You are a very lovely young witch, Hermione. How could I not want you?'

He wants me?

'But it is not right or proper.'

He wants me. She tried to protest. 'Why not?'

He continued, 'For one thing, I am your teacher. I cannot afford an... attraction to anyone, much less a pupil. It would put you in danger, and that, I will not contemplate.' *Besides, Dumbledore would have my balls on a plate.*

He wants me. I'm yours, take me. Here. Now. Over the desk or up against the wall, I don't care. Aloud, she found herself saying, 'May I kiss you, just once?'

'I cannot allow you to, as much as I would like it. Now, are you going to finish the potion you started last night?'

Resignedly, Hermione moved away from him.

'Oh, and by the way,' Severus added, 'do I have you to thank for the endless supply of sandwiches and pumpkin juice that keep appearing in the laboratory and in my quarters?' His voice was stern but his eyes were smiling.

Hermione blushed. 'How did you guess it was me?'

'The house-elves would not do such a thing of their own volition, and as you are the only person to enquire about my health, I thought it was a safe assumption.' He smirked.

They went back to their work, acutely aware of their close proximity to one another. Hermione, though, could not accept Severus' refusal to kiss her. In fact, she was wracking her brains to think up a way to change his mind. They both wanted it wanted more, in fact. What was the harm in one kiss? Did he think she was just some silly girl who wanted nothing more than a bit of hand-holding and a walk around the lake? She was a woman, not a girl. What would it take to show him she was mature enough

for an adult relationship? There must be *something* she could do to persuade him. Resolving to try again as she went to leave, Hermione put her hand on his arm to wish him goodnight.

Severus stiffened but made no move to touch her.

Hermione could have conceded defeat at this point, but she wasn't a Gryffindor for nothing. She had a wicked idea. *If this doesn't do it, nothing will.* She looked him in the eye, and while she still had the courage, she reached under her robe and pulled down her knickers.

'What... what are you doing, Miss Granger?' Severus was shocked.

'Just a little present to remind you of me, sir.' Hermione stepped out of them and laid them on the desk.

Severus was incredulous, but he quickly recovered. *So, she wants to play games, does she? Well, why not? I'll be dead in all probability before the month's out* Despite his racing pulse, he managed to keep his voice steady. 'Refrain from wearing such restrictive garments in future, Miss Granger. There will be spot checks.'

Did he mean what she thought he did? Nodding, she blushed and almost ran from the room.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Severus grabbed the knickers and buried his face in them. They smelled of her essence. He could feel her body heat and they were still wet.

WET! FUCKING HELL they're WET!

Potion forgotten, he ran to his chambers, hurriedly warding the door behind him. He threw off his robes and streaked into his bedroom, spelling the rest of his clothes off as he did so. Sitting on his bed, he inspected the pink satin knickers carefully, rubbing the lace inserts with his thumb and forefinger.

So, Miss Granger is a closet sensualist. Whoever would have guessed? Severus looked at the stain of her arousal and licked it. He moaned. He went to wrap the knickers around his cock, but changed his mind instead, he stepped into them and pulled them up very slowly and deliberately, over his thighs, his buttocks and around over his erection. He stood up and went over to the mirror. Smoothing the material with his hands, Severus languished in the sensuous feel of the satin and the slight scratchiness of the lace. He stroked his buttocks and hips through the material, and then brought his hands around to the front where he rubbed his balls and cock. Closing his eyes in hedonistic pleasure, he groaned in delight.

If the mirror had any opinion on the sight of the former Potions master poncing about in pink ladies' knickers, it kept it to itself. It was not worth being blasted into a million shards over.

Not wanting to come in them and overpower her scent, Severus took them off again equally slowly. Then, lying on the bed, he put them over his face; imagining Hermione sitting there, he quickly climaxed, crying out her name as he came shuddering into his fist. Sighing, he placed the knickers reverently on the pillow next to him. His last thoughts before drifting off to sleep were of finding a good hiding place where the house-elves couldn't get their thieving little hands on them.

* * *

Hermione was making her rounds after curfew the following night when Severus stepped out of the shadows in front of her.

'Inspection, Miss Granger.'

Hermione did not understand.

'Your robe. Raise it.'

Hermione lifted her robe to her thighs.

'Higher, please.'

She lifted it above her waist, blushing as she did so.

He looked at her bare flesh. 'Thank you, Miss Granger. That will be all.' He turned and disappeared back into the shadows.

The game continued for some weeks. Severus would appear before her at any hour of the day and demand an inspection. Sometimes he would not speak at all, just gesture 'up' with his outstretched palm. Hermione would comply; he would look her up and down, then turn on his heel and walk off without saying a word. Severus took great care to ensure their encounters never took place near any voyeuristic portraits, but often they occurred seconds before someone came upon them in the corridor. For Hermione, the risk of discovery only added to the thrill. It was wicked, exciting and dangerous, and she loved every minute of it.

On top of this, Severus would torture Hermione by standing so close behind her in class that she could feel his breath on her neck. Hermione so wanted to lean back, just to make contact with him. The inspections continued, but he made no move to touch her. It was driving her crazy with lust. Then one day, Hermione decided to see what would happen if she broke the rules.

On discovering she was wearing knickers, Severus said, 'I will not tolerate disobedience. Give me your wand and follow me.'

Hermione's heart was pounding as Severus led her into a deserted classroom. He pointed his wand at her.

'*Wingardium Leviosa.*' Once her robe had risen above her waist, he spelled off her knickers.

'Turn around and bend over the desk,' Severus ordered. Hermione did as she was told. Severus picked up a discarded quill, quickly Transfigured it into a long cane and swished it in the air.

'Wha-what are you doing?'

'Six of the best, I think, for that flagrant flouting of the rules, Miss Granger.' He brought the cane down ruthlessly on her bare backside six times. There were tears in her eyes when he finished, but she had not cried out.

'You may get up now. Do not disobey me again.' He left her there, hurting yet strangely aroused. Her knickers were nowhere to be seen. Severus, who had nearly come in his pants, hurried to a quiet alcove and found a quick release. Hermione plotted her revenge.

* * *

'You stupid twat, what the fuck were you thinking?' Severus paced in his chambers, berating himself. 'Of all the stupid, irresponsible... Do you think you'll ever bed her now? What if she goes to Dumbledore?' A plate of sandwiches appeared on the coffee table. He picked the plate up and threw it as hard as he could against the wall, yelling in anger and frustration as he did so. Panting, he stood still and pinched the bridge of his nose.

I need some release from all this tension, he reasoned, or I am going to explode! Somewhat reluctantly, he sat at his desk and wrote on a piece of parchment:-

Magenta,

I require your services.

Any evening would be suitable.

S.S.

He put his quill down. At the thought of Magenta, his cock twitched in the hope of seeing some action. It had been a few months now too long, in his opinion but thoughts of Hermione had put him off visiting prostitutes. Magenta, however, was special. She had serviced his more exotic desires since his early twenties.

Nearly fifteen years previously, Severus had bumped into Lucius Malfoy in the Leaky Cauldron one evening and had a few drinks. Severus tried to steer the conversation to discuss old times, hoping that Lucius would let slip information about current Death Eater activities. Lucius' preferred topic of conversation was, however, the exploits and achievements of his wonderful son.

'Draco is so clever, Severus. I'm sure he will be able to teach you a thing or two when he gets to Hogwarts.'

'Really,' Severus replied.

'Yes. Did I tell you I bought him his first toy broomstick? No? Well, he's a natural flyer. He's bound to make the Slytherin Quidditch team.' Lucius grinned. 'He does have rather a temper, though. I caught him beating one of the house-elves over the head with it the other day because it didn't do what it was told fast enough for his liking.'

'Sounds like a chip off the old block,' Severus said dryly. 'You must be proud.'

'Indeed I am,' Lucius replied. 'He will serve the Da...'

Severus leaned forward and whispered, 'He lives, Lucius?'

'This is not the time or place to discuss such matters, old friend,' Lucius hissed.

Severus looked at him, his mind racing.

'Well,' said Lucius, drinking up, 'as pleasant as all this has been, I must be going... Destiny awaits.'

'That's a bit melodramatic, isn't it? Even for you, Lucius.'

'Destiny, for your information, Severus, is a high-class prostitute who specialises in catering to my... tastes.' Lucius hesitated. 'Why don't you come along? You look like you could do with some relaxation.'

It was Severus' turn to hesitate. 'I'm not sure if your idea of *relaxation* and mine are in any way alike.'

'Well, consider this an opportunity to find out. Besides, do you have anything better to do this evening?'

Severus thought it over. He had not been with a woman for some time, but this was a leap into the unknown. What did he have to lose? It was either that, or return, alone, to the dungeons for some serious monkey-spanking into the wee hours of the morning. Severus decided to take Lucius up on his offer.

The two wizards left the Leaky Cauldron and headed towards Knockturn Alley. Lucius led Severus through a maze of side streets and stopped outside a nondescript entrance. He rapped on the door and called out 'Malfoy, Lucius.' The door opened into an ante room where they were welcomed by a young woman wearing a wide red velvet collar and matching stilettoes. Her body was pierced in some very interesting places. Severus was fascinated.

'Good evening, Lucius. Destiny is ready for you. Room Nineteen.' She looked at Severus. 'Good evening... Professor.'

Oh fuck, an ex-pupil. He had been too busy looking at the piercings to study her face. *That's the trouble with wizarding brothels,* he thought. *Any tart under twenty-five, I either went to school with or taught.*

'You're a novice, I take it?'

'Yes,' he said, recovering his composure.

'I believe Magenta is free.' The girl led them into the main waiting area. A palace of red and gold baroque splendour greeted Severus' eyes.

'Madam Andromeda was a Gryffindor,' said Lucius, stating the obvious.

'So it would appear,' Severus replied.

'Please follow me, Professor.'

'Enjoy yourself, Severus,' said Lucius. 'My treat. I've a date with Destiny.'

Severus followed the girl up the wide, red-carpeted staircase, keeping his eyes on her rather enticing backside as it swayed in front of him. She stopped at a door and knocked. A voice called out, 'Come in.' She opened the door for Severus; he stepped inside, and the door closed behind him.

Severus exhaled sharply at the sight in front of him. Magenta was a rather statuesque woman with long, black hair that reached to her waist. She was pretty, a few years older than Severus, and much to his relief, a total stranger. She was dressed in a sheer body stocking with holes cut out to expose the breasts and crotch. Her nipples were pierced.

'Please, sit down.'

Severus sat and began to take in his surroundings. His attention was drawn to the various whips, crops, floggers and what looked like implements of torture laid out on a nearby table.

Magenta studied Severus for a moment. She could usually tell straight away whether a client wanted to be dominant or submissive, but Severus, she thought, could go either way or may even want to switch. She began by explaining the rules of the establishment.

'Madam Andromeda's is an exclusive House. Membership is by invitation or recommendation only. We do not allow anyone to walk in off the street, give them a whip and say, 'flog me'. We provide training. There are rules and they must be strictly observed.'

'I understand,' said Severus.

Magenta continued, 'Even if you wish to dominate rather than be dominated' Severus nodded his head at this 'you must first experience the role of the submissive. By being on the receiving end, you will learn the behaviour and responses required of a good sub. This, in turn, will make you a better dom.' She allowed him a moment to digest this. Severus did not object. 'I will give you a taste of things to come this evening, but I will not allow you to tie me up. If you decide you like it, we will make arrangements for your training. This is not a cheap establishment...'

'I have money,' said Severus, looking at the table again.

Magenta smiled. 'I see you have noticed my toys. We shall not be using any of them tonight. Now, sit up.' She got down on the floor next to him and put herself across his knees. 'You may spank me.'

Severus was a bit uncertain at first. He gave her a few light smacks.

'Harder than that.'

Smack.

'Even harder.'

Smack!

'Is that the best you can do?' she goaded him.

Severus slapped her really hard.

'Good, much better. Now, between the legs.'

'What?'

'Smack me between my legs.'

'Won't that hurt?'

'Of course it will. That's the point.'

Smack!

'Oh yes, master. I like that.'

'Don't call me that.'

'Sorry, sir. What would you like me to call you?'

A jolt of desire ran down his spine to his already erect cock. No one had ever called him 'sir' and meant it. He called Dumbledore 'sir' out of respect, and he had called Voldemort 'master' or 'my lord' because his life would have been forfeit if he hadn't. He wanted neither epithet.

'Spank me. Spank me, please, sir.'

Severus regarded the tenderised flesh and rubbed it gently instead.

'Don't stop, sir. Please, don't stop.'

He was rock hard. Shit, he hadn't been this turned on fully clothed since he cast his first Disillusionment Charm and sneaked into the girls' changing room when he was fifteen. He grinned at the memory. That had been a day of triumph for the Half-Blood Prince...

Severus smirked. 'Highness,' he said, 'you may call me, 'Your Highness.'"

Severus knew he owed Hermione a huge apology for his loss of control. If she could find it in her heart to forgive him, he decided, they would forget all this nonsense and resume a purely professional relationship. With this in mind, Severus went looking for Hermione the next day. He eventually found her in one of the alcoves in the restricted section of the library, studying a book on Transfiguration. She had put up a Do-Not-Notice Charm and a Silencing Charm, but he spotted her anyway.

'Miss Granger,' he began. Hermione was startled even though she had been half-expecting him. She got to her feet and faced him. Before Severus had a chance to say anything further, Hermione quickly spelled open her robes and dropped them to the floor. She stood in front of him dressed in a pair of ankle socks and her school shoes. All the blood in his brain decided to head south. He stopped breathing.

That's certainly got his attention, she thought. Maintaining eye contact, Hermione put her hands on her breasts and made lazy circles around her nipples. Something like a whimper escaped Severus' throat. She noted his reaction and decided to do something a bit more daring. Arching her back, she pushed her breasts up and began to knead them, brushing her fingers over her nipples and pinching them.

He groaned.

Teasingly, she pushed her left breast up as far as she could, put her head down and licked the nipple. Hermione had planned to put her hand between her legs and stroke herself, but she never got the chance. A whirlwind of black grabbed her, spun her around and slammed her against the wall. Kicking her legs apart, Severus lifted his robe, quickly freed his cock and with one swift, hard thrust, sheathed himself completely inside her.

He squeezed her breasts. 'Touch yourself,' he gasped.

Hermione was only too happy to oblige. She thought she had died and gone to heaven. Severus was holding nothing back and Hermione was on sensory overload his cock pounding into her, his hands squeezing her nipples, the rough feel of the wool of his teaching robes, the wonderful smell of him, and his voice...

'So... tight.' Severus knew he couldn't last. He had wanted this for too long. 'Gods, yessss you fucking. Little. Tease. Ahhh... come for me, come for me *now.*'

'Oh, gods... harder... Yes, Severusss, oh yesss.' Hermione bit down on her lip to stop from screaming out as she shattered.

Hearing her say his name for the first time, Severus groaned and thrust harder. He felt the approaching surge of his climax just as her muscles clamped down on his cock. Straining not to roar out his orgasm, and with his heart pounding fit to burst, he exploded into her. It was as much as he could do to remain standing.

Severus pinned her to the wall with his body until he had got his breathing under control. Then he withdrew, stepped back, adjusted his clothing and said, 'Thank you, Miss Granger,' before turning and walking off.

Severus left Hermione weak-kneed and panting, leaning against the wall, his seed running down her leg. She scooped some of it up and licked her fingers. It was a taste she could get used to, she decided. Hermione raised her wand to cast a cleaning spell but changed her mind, deciding she wanted to savour the evidence of their encounter for as long as possible.

Still reeling from the experience, Hermione dressed and slowly made her way back to the Gryffindor common room, wondering where they would go from here.

Two days later, Dumbledore was dead and the man she loved was on the run wanted for his murder. It would be over a year before she saw him again.

A/N Magenta, of course, takes her professional name from 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show' of which she is a big fan.

Happy Birthday

Chapter 5 of 18

Hermione's thirtieth birthday.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Disclaimer: I am not JK Rowling, therefore nothing is mine.

Many thanks to my Beta, Snarkyroxy, for keeping me on the straight and narrow and sorting out my erratic punctuation.

Hermione was dreaming. She was in her parents' back garden, watching a little girl playing in a sand-pit. It was a lovely summer day; she could feel the warmth of the sun on her cheeks. The little girl ran up to her, laughing as she said, 'Come and play with me.' She tugged Hermione's hand, but Hermione could not move. The little girl tried again then gave up and ran to the garden shed. She stood by the door and waved to Hermione before going inside. Hermione tried to move once more but could not. She looked down to see a black serpent coiled around her feet. The snake raised its head and regarded her before slowly uncoiling and winding its way up and around her body. It flicked its tongue as it moved, smelling and tasting her until it drew level with her neck. Hermione stared, mesmerized, into its black, glittering eyes before it bared its fangs and lunged to strike. She screamed.

Hermione woke with a start to feel something wet in her ear.

'Awake at last, I see,' said Severus, removing his tongue. 'Good morning, my love. Happy Birthday.' He licked the shell of her ear again and gently fondled her breasts.

Hermione felt Severus' morning erection pressing into her back as he spooned her. 'What time is it?' she asked sleepily whilst rubbing her bottom against him.

Severus moved his hand lower to caress her belly. 'Early,' Severus replied. 'Would you rather sleep? I'll stop if you like.' He cupped her mound and slipped two fingers inside her pussy.

'Mmm? Don't you dare.'

Severus whispered huskily, 'You're lovely and wet. Been having wicked dreams?' He began to slowly circle her clit.

Hermione moaned. 'That is sooo good.'

There was a loud banging on the door.

Severus slumped back on the pillow, defeated. 'I will slip something in their pumpkin juice, I swear it.' He took the wards off the door while Hermione hurriedly put on a nightgown.

'Surprise!' Albus ran into the bedroom carrying a bundle of envelopes and parcels. He jumped on the bed in excitement. 'The post has been. Can I open some for you, Mummy?'

'Is it *your* birthday, Albus?' Severus asked sternly.

'You can help me, darling,' Hermione intervened, seeing the pout on the little boy's face. 'Come and sit next to me.'

Katy followed Albus into the bedroom, struggling under the weight of an enormous breakfast tray. Winky brought up the rear, anxiously watching the tray in case she dropped it.

'Happy Birthday, Mummy,' said Katy. 'We made you breakfast.'

'Thank you, my darlings, what a lovely surprise. Did you do this all yourself?' Hermione grabbed her wand quickly and floated the tray over the bed.

'Well,' Katy replied, looking at the house-elf, 'we ordered it from the kitchens, and Winky brought it.'

Winky bowed and vanished.

Katy gave her mother a kiss and a hug before clambering on the bed. 'Morning, Daddy.' Severus got the same treatment.

'Good Morning, my Two-Eyes.' Severus kissed his daughter affectionately.

'Shall I pour you some juice, Mummy?'

'Please, sweetheart.' Hermione, with Albus' help, started to tackle the pile of cards and presents that were on the bed, nibbling some toast as she did so. There seemed to be a fashion this year for cards which, when opened, burst into a hearty rendition of 'Happy Birthday to You' then exploded and rained down anything from rose petals and sweets to squashed tomatoes and stew, depending on the feelings of the sender for the recipient. They were, naturally, creations of the Weasley twins and a profitable sideline in their ever-expanding empire.

The children, of course, had made their own cards, and Hermione cooed over their artistic efforts in the appropriate manner. The card from the Potters contained a cryptic note from Ginny which simply said *Be ready by 10.*

'What's this?' Hermione asked, looking at Severus.

'As much as I would like you all to myself today, my dear, Ginny has persuaded me to let you accompany her to a health spa for a - how did she put it - ah, yes, a girly treat.' Hermione squealed and hugged him. 'It's their present to you, not mine.'

She kissed him anyway. 'Are you sure you don't mind? I mean, I thought we'd all be spending the day together.'

'Yes, I mind, but a determined Mrs Potter is not a witch to be trifled with,' Severus said with mock severity. 'Besides, I'm sure I can think of some way you can make up for my... disappointment.'

Hermione gave him a 'not in front of the children' look.

Severus smirked. 'I've booked a table for us tonight at *Equinox*.'

'But, Severus, that's really smart. I haven't a thing to wear.'

'I somehow knew you'd say that,' Severus said sardonically, 'which is why I've made an appointment at Madam Malkin's for you. Now, go and get ready,' he kissed her, 'you don't want to be late.'

After three hours of pampering, Ginny and Hermione were relaxing in the spa's café-bar, enjoying a glass of sparkling pumpkin juice and catching up on some gossip. Hermione felt like a million galleons.

'Thanks for this, Ginny. I really appreciate it. I feel ... invigorated.'

'My pleasure.'

'I can't remember the last time I had a facial or had my hair done.' Hermione was pleased at how wonderful her skin felt. Her hair, though, was a different story. Despite the best efforts of the spa's hair stylist, it was already starting to frizz. 'I've been thinking about getting a new look, Gin. I'm fed up with this mop. What do you think?'

'My hairdresser's pretty good,' Ginny replied. 'He's a bit expensive but, if anyone can tame that shrubbery of yours, he can.' She grinned. 'Seriously, though, we both thought you needed a bit of spoiling. You've been looking tired lately.'

'I've been having a lot of sleepless nights,' Hermione reluctantly admitted.

'Any particular reason?'

'None I can think of. I feel tired a lot of the time, but when I go to bed, I'm wide awake.'

'Have you seen Madam Pomfrey?'

'No, I'm sure it's just a phase. It'll pass. Now tell me,' said Hermione, 'how are the kids?'

This was usually guaranteed to change the subject. Ginny was becoming more and more like her mother as she got older and her brood increased. She and Harry now had five children, all of whom she quite naturally adored. When not playing with them or fussing over them, Ginny would talk about her children ad infinitum to anyone who would listen. Today, though, she would not be sidetracked. Ginny looked at her friend closely.

'What's worrying you, Hermione? Is it the children again?'

'The children are fine.'

Ginny inclined her head.

'Oh, don't give me that look, Ginny Potter.'

Ginny remained silent.

'All right, all right, I admit I've been feeling a bit bored and restless lately. Perhaps it's something to do with turning thirty. Satisfied? Now, can we talk about something else? Please.'

Ginny let it pass. She knew that Hermione never felt comfortable talking about her children and usually avoided the subject.

Since the birth of her first child, Hermione had feared that she was not cut out for motherhood. When Katy was born, Hermione had gazed at the screaming bundle of humanity Madam Pomfrey had plonked in her arms and had felt well, nothing. She had looked at the smiling faces around her and the baby. What were they expecting her to do? She had handed Katy to Severus saying she was really tired and wanted to sleep.

Severus, on the other hand, had looked into the face of his first-born and seen his own eyes looking straight back at him. He fell hopelessly in love. 'My Two-Eyes,' Severus said in wonder, and from that day forward, it became his term of endearment for his daughter.

Severus turned out to be a loving and indulgent father, much to the surprise of everyone except Hermione. He adored Katy and Albus unconditionally and involved himself with their upbringing from day one. It was Severus who delighted in getting down on the floor to play with his children, while Hermione usually left them to it so she could catch up with some reading.

Over the years, Hermione had tried to analyse her sense of detachment by looking at her own childhood experiences. There had been two major female role models with children in her life. The first was her own mother, a high-earning professional woman who had always worked, even when Hermione was small. There was never any doubt that Hermione had been loved and wanted, however, despite the fact that her mother wasn't there for her all the time. The second was Molly Weasley. Molly's family was her life. She always put the needs of her husband and children before her own, and had been satisfied to stay at home even though she was a formidable witch in her own right. Hermione's childhood had, therefore, been a largely happy and secure one; she saw no reason why she should be incapable of being a good mother herself.

Naturally, Hermione worried if there was something the matter with her. She felt no real link with either child; in fact, sometimes they seemed like total strangers. No matter how hard Hermione tried, she could not see anything of herself in either of them. Katy and Albus were both the image of Severus. She thought, dispassionately, that they were both rather sullen children. Not that they were naughty or anything far from it; they were mostly quiet and studious. It was just that they rarely laughed or did anything with great joy. They were dutiful and obedient as you would expect any child of Severus Snape to be. It was just that they didn't seem to have any spark in them.

Hermione had eventually confessed her concerns to Ginny.

'It's not that I don't love them or anything, Ginny. It's just I've never felt that overwhelming sense of motherly love I was led to expect. When I look at you and your kids, I feel cheated, somehow.'

Ginny had looked at her strangely. 'Hermione, I would die for my children, wouldn't you?'

Hermione had thought about it. Of course she would protect her children, but would she throw herself in front of a Killing Curse for them, the way that Harry's mother, for example, had done? Then it hit her. Lily Potter had given her life for Harry without thinking about it. It was purely instinctive a mother's instinct to protect her offspring even

if it meant sacrificing herself.

That's what is missing in me; I have no maternal instincts whatsoever, she realised with horror. *God, I am a terrible person. I don't deserve such beautiful children.* She had broken down and wept in the knowledge that whatever it was Lily and Ginny had, she, most definitely, did not.

* * *

When she got home, Ginny Flooed the Burrow. 'Mum, I've been talking to Hermione.'

'How is she, dear?' asked Mrs Weasley worriedly.

'I'm not sure,' said Ginny, 'but I think it's starting.'

Molly looked even more anxious. 'I'd better let Minerva know.'

'Can I do anything, Mum? Anything at all?'

'No, dear, I'm afraid not. All we can do now is wait and hope.'

* * *

The doorbell tinkled as Hermione entered Madam Malkin's. A young shop assistant emerged from behind a rack of dress robes and greeted her.

'Good morning, madam, how may I help you?'

'I'm looking for an evening robe,' replied Hermione.

The girl looked her up and down. Scrubbed face, no make-up, wild hair and a cloak that had seen better days. Not couture material, she surmised. 'Our off the peg items are over there, madam,' she said snootily, 'together with some end of line items at bargain prices.' She turned to walk away.

Snobby cow, thought Hermione. 'Excuse me, but I believe Madam Malkin is expecting me.'

The young woman thought this unlikely. 'She's with a client at the moment, madam. What is your name, please?'

With that, Madam Malkin appeared. 'Madam Snape, how lovely to see you! I haven't seen you for such a long time, how are you?'

'I'm well, Madam Malkin, and you?'

'Mustn't grumble,' she replied. 'Now, what are you looking for today?'

'I need an evening robe. Severus is taking me out to dinner tonight.'

'I may have just the thing,' she enthused. 'Our new Paris collection has just arrived you'll be the first to see it.' She picked up a box of pins. 'I won't be a minute; I've nearly finished with my client. Would you like some tea while you wait?'

Hermione was about to politely decline when she realised who would have to make it. 'That would be *lovely*. I'm a bit parched, to tell you the truth.'

'Very well. Mirabelle, escort Madam Snape to the red fitting room and bring her some tea.'

'Certainly, madam,' said Mirabelle, wondering why this scarecrow deserved such special treatment. The red fitting room was reserved for their best clients.

'Well, hurry along, girl. Madam Snape doesn't have all day.'

'She's French,' Madam Malkin said to Hermione by way of explanation. 'Beauxbatons.' She raised her eyes heavenward.

'Oh, I thought I didn't recognise her,' Hermione replied.

Mirabelle showed Hermione to the fitting room. 'May I take your cloak, madam?'

Hermione unfastened her cloak and handed it to her. Mirabelle held it up by her thumb and forefinger as if she might catch something from it, draped it over the back of a chair, then turned to leave. 'Please make yourself comfortable.'

'Thank you,' said Hermione as she sat down on the plush red sofa. 'Oh, and Mirabelle?'

'Yes, madam?'

'It's milk and no sugar.'

Nearly an hour later, Hermione had chosen a dark sage green velvet robe with golden embroidery on the bodice. It was sophisticated without being matronly and pretty without being overly fussy. The robe emphasised her bust and drew attention away from her hips and bottom, which she thought were way too big. It fell softly to the floor and seemed to ripple like water when she walked.

'I think it is just perfect, my dear,' said Madam Malkin.

'Yes, I think so, too.' She looked at herself in the mirror one last time and was pleased with her reflection. 'I'll take it. Please charge it to Severus' account at Gringotts.'

'Will there be anything else?'

'I really need some new teaching robes, but I haven't time to try anything else on today. Perhaps next weekend?'

'Of course,' said Madam Malkin. 'No problem at all. I look forward to seeing you then.'

When Hermione got out of the shower later that evening, Severus was waiting for her in the bedroom. He had laid out her new robe on the bed together with a suspender belt and black stockings. On the top of the dress was a box wrapped in gift paper.

'This is for you, my love.' Severus handed her the box. 'Happy Birthday.'

Hermione opened her gift. Inside was an emerald necklace set in filigree gold.

'Oh, Severus. It's beautiful.' The workmanship was, indeed, exquisite.

'So, you like it?'

'Of course I do.'

'It's goblin made. Would you like me to help you put it on?'

'Please,' she said, then added, 'Does it have any, um, magical properties?'

Severus looked at her suspiciously. 'It is intended to give the wearer a sense of wellbeing. You have been looking tired lately. I thought it would be a welcome gift.'

'It is, Severus, it was very thoughtful of you.' She smiled. 'Emeralds for you, gold for me.'

'Indeed,' he smirked. 'Lift your hair out of the way.' Hermione pulled her hair up, dropping the towel to the floor as she did so. Severus removed the locket Hermione always wore, put the necklace around her throat and fastened it. Hermione felt her spirits lift somewhat.

Hermione touched the necklace as she admired it in the mirror. Severus stood behind her and smoothed her hair. 'It's truly lovely, Severus, thank you so much. I will always treasure it.'

'My pleasure,' he put his arms around her waist and kissed the top of her head. 'I'd like that to be the sum of your attire tonight, my dear, but it might cause a commotion in the restaurant. Now, let me dress you. Stay there.' He walked over to the bed and picked up the suspender belt and stockings. Kneeling down, he put the belt around her waist and fastened it. He sat back on his heels and rolled up a stocking.

'Foot.' Hermione placed her toes inside the stocking and rested her foot on his thigh while he rolled the stocking up her leg, smoothing it and attaching it to the suspenders.

'Now the other one.' He repeated the procedure, rubbing his hands over her thigh more than was strictly necessary. Finally satisfied, he got up and brought her robe over to her.

'I need a bra, Severus.'

'Not tonight,' he said. 'A lifting charm will do just as well.' He helped Hermione into her robe and fastened it. Hermione took her wand and made the final fittings to the dress, cast the lifting charm and tightened the bodice for good measure.

'You look ravishing,' Severus said admiringly.

'You don't look so bad yourself,' she replied. And it was true. He was wearing very dark green dress robes and had tied his hair back. 'In fact, you look incredibly sexy.'

Severus smiled. 'Are you going to be much longer?'

'No, I just need to do my make-up, and I'll be there.' Hermione stepped into her shoes and began to rummage in her cosmetics bag.

'I shall summon Winky and wait for you in the living room.'

Hermione quickly applied some make-up and pulled a brush through her hair. Deciding it would be too much of a fiddle to put up, she fixed the sides back with a pair of combs. 'That will have to do,' Hermione sighed, looking in the mirror at her wild mane in exasperation. For the second time that day, she seriously considered getting it cut.

Ten minutes later, Hermione emerged from the bedroom wearing her best travelling cloak. 'I'm ready,' she said, walking towards the children's bedrooms. 'I'll just say goodnight to the kids.'

'Hurry up, Hermione. We're going to be late.'

'You be good for Winky, Albus,' Severus heard her say, 'or next time I'll ask the Bloody Baron to babysit.'

'Don't fuss so much, Hermione. They'll be fine. *Now* are you ready?'

'Yes, I'm ready.'

'About time. *Accio broom!*

'Broom? We're not flying to the restaurant? Severus, you know I hate to fly.'

'I know, but you've never flown with me.' Severus looked slightly embarrassed. 'I never got the chance to take a girl for a broom ride when I was a teenager, and I believe no one asked you, either.'

'That's true,' she said.

'So, do we have a date?'

Hermione laughed. It was probably the silliest, most romantic gesture he had ever made. 'It's a date,' she said.

* * *

Equinox was an exclusive restaurant and hotel set in its own grounds about ten miles the other side of Hogsmeade. It had been recommended to Severus by Draco Malfoy for its cuisine. As they touched down, a young wizard was waiting to take their broom. Severus declined the offer, shrunk it and put it in his pocket. The broom had been his seventeenth birthday present from his mother. Merlin only knew what sacrifices she'd had to make to buy it for him; he had never asked, but it was precious to him and he never let it out of his sight. It was not nearly as fast or as comfortable as a modern broom, but was nevertheless considered a classic model, and Severus would not have swapped it for the world.

'It looks very posh, Severus,' said Hermione as they approached the reception desk.

'It is,' he replied, 'but the food is said to be excellent. Otherwise we would not be here. You know how I hate pretentiousness.' He addressed the receptionist, 'Table for two in the name of Snape.'

'Ah, yes,' said the witch behind the desk, 'I believe sir requested a private dining room?' She looked Hermione up and down.

'No, I did not,' replied Severus. 'There must be some misunderstanding.'

'I assure you, sir, there has been no mistake,' said the receptionist, checking the reservation diary. 'It was booked and paid for by a Mr. Malfoy.'

'I see,' said Severus.

'He must have intended it as a birthday surprise,' said Hermione. 'That was kind of him.'

The reception witch summoned a young waiter. 'Jonathan, show this lady and gentleman to the green dining room.'

'Certainly,' said the young man, 'follow me, please.'

They walked through the main foyer where Hermione had the uncomfortable feeling that she was being watched. Although she was well known in the wizarding world, Hermione's picture hadn't appeared in any newspaper or magazine since Albus was born, so she was hardly flavour of the month.

Why are people staring at me? she thought.

'I will kill Draco,' Severus hissed.

'Whatever for?'

'I will tell you later.'

Jonathan led the way to their private room and sat them at their table. 'Would you like to order some drinks, sir?' he asked.

'Yes,' replied Severus, 'we would like some champagne to celebrate my *wife's* birthday.'

'Of course, sir.' With a swish of his wand, a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket appeared together with two champagne flutes. The waiter opened the bottle and filled the glasses. 'I will leave you with the menu, sir. Just touch your wand to the meals you require, and they will arrive. You will not be disturbed again until you ask for the bill.'

After he had left, Hermione could see that Severus was quietly fuming. 'Out with it,' she said, 'what's the matter?'

'These private dining rooms,' he almost spat, 'are usually reserved by wizards who want to take their mistresses somewhere, *welprivate*.'

'Oh, my God,' said Hermione, giggling. 'That's why they were staring. They thought I was some... some *floozy*!'

'I fail to see what is so amusing. We are a respectable married couple. I am not some desperate old man trying to seduce some young chit of a witch!'

'Oh, this is priceless,' gasped Hermione, laughing even harder. 'Just wait until I tell Harry and Ginny.'

'You will do no such thing,' said Severus crossly.

'Oh, please, love, try to see the funny side of it.' Hermione got up, walked over to him and put her arms around his neck. 'The waiter said we wouldn't be disturbed. Perhaps we should take advantage of that, hmm?' She kissed his cheek.

'Just what are you suggesting, Mrs Snape?' Severus asked, starting to cheer up a bit.

'Why don't we pretend that you are, in fact, my rich, um, *benefactor*, and I am an impressionable young witch who knows a good thing when she sees it?'

'That has possibilities,' he purred. 'Why don't we order something to eat? Sit down and look at the menu.' Hermione returned to her seat. 'What would you like to eat, Miss Granger, or may I call you Hermione?'

She smiled flirtatiously. 'Oh, I don't know, sir. The menu's all in foreign, and this fancy food is all new to me. You choose.'

'Certainly, my dear. How about some oysters to start?' Severus knew she loved them. 'They're very good for the, uh, blood.' He looked her up and down in what he hoped was a suitably lascivious manner.

'Ooh, sir,' Hermione said, sipping her champagne, 'you're spoiling me, and I think them bubbles 'ave gone to me 'ead.' She giggled prettily, hiding behind the menu. The oysters duly arrived and they tucked in. Severus watched as Hermione sucked them off the shells and drank the juice, which inevitably ran down her chin.

'Let me get that, my dear,' said Severus, getting up and dabbing his napkin to mop up the spillage. 'You don't want to ruin your lovely new robe now, do you?'

'No, sir,' Hermione replied. 'I don't.'

'Perhaps it may be safer to remove it?'

'Ooh, but sir, I'm not wearing any underthings.'

'How careless of you.' Severus unfastened her robe and pushed it down to her waist. 'Much better. Now, continue.'

Hermione picked up another oyster and slurped, making sure that some of the juice spilled on her breast. 'Oops,' she said, 'how clumsy of me.'

'Indeed. Let me attend to it.' He licked it up greedily. 'Mmm. Perhaps we should skip to dessert?'

'Oh, no, sir, I want a proper dinner, I do. A few oysters ain't gonna fill me up.'

'I may have the very thing for that,' Severus said, sucking one of her nipples.

Hermione lifted his chin up with her thumb and forefinger. 'Food first, afters... after.'

'Minx,' he said, going back to his seat. Severus sat through the main course looking at his wife's breasts and trying to ignore his throbbing erection. Hermione took great delight in eating everything as suggestively as possible. Paying particular attention to the baby vegetables, she speared a carrot on her fork, sucked it gently, and then bit off the tip. Severus winced.

He had planned on having an evening of debauchery, but hadn't expected to start quite so early. He had to pace himself; he wasn't a young man anymore, and he hadn't taken an endurance potion. So when Hermione said she would like some strawberries and cream for dessert, Severus almost groaned. She was trying to kill him; he was convinced of it.

'Remember our honeymoon?' said Hermione, picking up a dollop of whipped cream with a spoon and placing a bit on each nipple. She then put half a strawberry on top of that.

'Come here,' he growled.

Hermione stood up, stepped out of her robe and walked around the table. She sat astride Severus' lap and began to dry hump him while he licked the strawberries and cream off her breasts. Severus gritted his teeth. He didn't want to come, not yet, not like this.

Hermione, however, was going for gold.

'Yes, oh, yesss.'

Severus held her hips on target as she ground herself against him. Licking and sucking each nipple alternately, he prayed she'd come soon before he lost all control.

'Don't stop...so close...' Hermione held his head in a vice-like grip against her breast.

He sucked harder.

'Oh, gods. Oh, yess, oh, SEV-ER-USSSSS.' She came, shuddering, on his lap. Hermione kissed him, licking some stray cream off his lips.

'Do you want coffee?' Severus asked, massaging her buttocks.

'No. I think I'll pass.'

'Very well, get dressed, and I'll get the bill.' Hermione looked disappointed. He kissed her soundly. 'The night is still young, my love.'

A little later, they had kicked off into the starlit sky and were heading back to Hogwarts. Despite the fact she hated flying, Hermione was starting to enjoy herself. Severus was an excellent flyer, and she felt very safe riding tandem with him.

They had passed Hogsmeade and were making their way over the Forbidden Forest when Severus slowed down and began to circle. He whispered in Hermione's ear, 'Ever wanted to do it on a broom?'

'What? No, it's too dangerous.'

'Scared, my dear? What happened to all that Gryffindor courage?'

'Are you daring me, Professor Snape?'

'I believe I am, Professor Granger,' he said nibbling her ear lobe.

'All right,' she agreed, 'but we do it naked.'

'What? It's freezing!'

'All or nothing,' Hermione insisted, 'and there are such things as Warming Charms. Oh, and you can keep your wand holder on.'

'Deal,' he said, banishing their clothes, 'now lean forward a bit... yes, and... oh, yes, like that. Just. Like. That.'

A roosting hippogriff looked up and surveyed the broom flying erratically around its tree. Deciding the crazy humans did not pose a threat, it tucked its great head under its wing and settled down for the night. Their cries of ecstasy ringing out through the quiet of the night sky was the last thing it heard before falling asleep.

Hermione was staring at the canopy of the bed, holding the golden heart of her locket close to her chest. Inside were two photographs. On the left, a Muggle photo of her parents, and on the right, a wizarding photo of the trio taken after the Triwizard Tournament in their fourth year. Hermione bit back the tears as the memories came flooding back. 'Mum, Dad, Ron' she said to herself quietly, 'I'm thirty now, and I still miss you all.'

Hermione's parents had been killed in a Death Eater attack in the January following her eighteenth birthday. Mr and Mrs Granger had known of the danger they were in but had refused to be intimidated. After a mass breakout from Azkaban at Christmas, Hermione had been worried sick and had begged her parents to go into hiding, but to no avail. Her worst fears were confirmed when a Death Eater, with the aid of some Polyjuice Potion, disguised himself as the postman and managed to fool the Aurors who were guarding the house. He rang the bell on the pretext of delivering a parcel and forced his way inside when Mr Granger answered the door. The Aurors rushed to their aid, but the murderer had cast the Killing Curse twice and Apparated before they could stop him.

In a few short months, Hermione's world had been turned upside-down twice, initially by Severus' betrayal and later by the death of her beloved parents. Ron had been like an anchor in a storm on both occasions.

Still reeling from the shock, Hermione had leant against Ron at Dumbledore's funeral and wept at her lover's treachery. Ron had stroked her hair as she sobbed on his shoulder.

'I trusted him, Ron. I trusted him.'

'I know. I know,' he replied absentmindedly. Despite having the witch of his dreams leaning her head on his shoulder and looking to him for comfort, Ron was not happy. Apart from the horror of the last few days, something was bothering him. Things just didn't add up. He knew it in his gut, and if there was one thing he had learned in all his years at Hogwarts, it was to trust his instincts. All the pieces of the puzzle were there, he was sure; it was a question of making them fit.

Best leave it stew a bit, Ron decided. These things have a habit of working themselves out.

Ron had loved puzzles of any sort since he had been a small boy. He remembered being given a wizarding jigsaw of his favourite Quidditch team one Christmas. He spent hours lost in concentration putting it together, looking forward to the moment when the completed picture would animate. However, much to his annoyance, some of the pieces just didn't seem to belong. This was because one of the twins, as a practical joke, decided to substitute some of the pieces with ones from a different puzzle. It drove Ron mad with frustration until his mother, realising what had happened, sorted it out.

Is that what's going on here? Ron mused, *Are things not making any sense because the pieces are jumbled up with a different puzzle entirely that we know nothing about?* His brain hurt thinking about it. He needed to discuss his misgivings with Hermione, but not just yet.

'Hermione.' Ron held the distraught witch closer to him. 'We have to be strong for Harry's sake. He needs us. We can't afford to fall apart now.'

Hermione's crying began to subside as a thought suddenly occurred to her.

My loyalties will remain the same.

'You're right, Ron, as usual.' She sat up, wiped her eyes and gave him a wan smile. 'But you and I need to talk. There's something I have to tell you.'

Sunday Bloody Sunday

With some free time on her hands, Hermione looks back at the events leading up to the final confrontation with Voldemort.

SUNDAY BLOODY SUNDAY

Disclaimer: All the characters depicted belong to JK Rowling and associates. I just enjoy playing with them once in a while.

Once again, many thanks go to Beta extraordinaire Snarkyroxy, for her input and encouragement.

Sundays in the Snape household were usually spent together as a family. On this particular Sunday, however, the children had been invited to a birthday party in Hogsmeade, and Severus had decided to take the opportunity this afforded to catch up on his private research. This left Hermione with some rare free time on her hands.

After Flooing to Hogsmeade with the children, Hermione decided to walk back home, thinking that the fresh air would do her good and that the exercise would help her sleep. It was a brisk but sunny early-autumn day as she set out, and it wasn't long before her solitude and the beauty of the countryside put her in a contemplative mood. A cool breeze with the promise of winter behind it blew in from the north. Hermione shivered and pulled her cloak around her. The cold didn't really bother her that much; in fact she welcomed its cleansing effect on her mind.

Like blowing out the cobwebs in a dusty old attic, she thought to herself.

As she passed through the gates, instead of going straight up to the castle as she had intended, on impulse Hermione veered off the path and headed in the direction of the Quidditch pitch. Just before it lay her destination the patch of ground that had come to be known as the Place of the Fallen, the site where Voldemort had finally been defeated and destroyed. There were no graves here, but simple white stones had been erected to mark the locations where each witch and wizard fighting for the light had given their lives.

Hermione knew who most of the stones commemorated without looking at the inscriptions. First there was Hagrid's, followed closely by a cluster of stones representing the Aurors that Hermione had not known at the time, but whose names had since passed into legend. Closer to where the centre of the action had been, Hermione walked around Kingsley Shacklebolt's marker and briefly stopped next to the small black obelisk that indicated the spot where Tom Riddle had met his nemesis. Moving past the point where she herself had fought, Hermione turned to the right and walked the short distance to a stone that stood apart from the main battlefield. Ron's.

Picking up a twig, Hermione Transfigured it into a low stool and sat down. She was soon lost in contemplation. Although Ron was buried near his family home, it was here that both Hermione and Harry felt closest to him. Each year on the anniversary of the battle, they made the short pilgrimage to Ron's Stone together, but Hermione rarely went there on her own, due to the memories that were invariably invoked. Today, though, she found the tranquility of the place soothing.

Hermione had learned how to meditate in her late teens. She had found it a useful practice to order her thoughts and to find inner peace whenever she was troubled. She had fallen out of the habit in her early twenties, but lately she had been trying to incorporate it into her daily schedule once more. Annoyingly, it was proving to be more difficult to switch off and turn inward than she expected. She had never experienced any difficulty finding her still centre before, but now she found she could only go so far and no further. There seemed to be an obstacle in her way that she could not overcome. This in turn bothered her as she tried to fathom out what that obstacle could be.

She inhaled a great lungful of cool air and exhaled slowly. 'Remember when I tried to teach you, Ron,' Hermione said out loud, 'and you kept falling asleep? I wish you were here now to tell me how you managed it.' She smiled at the memory. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

Her eyes were drawn down to the white tomb next to the lake. The sunlight reflecting off the marble seemed to make it shimmer, from where Hermione was sitting.

Meditation and Ron, she thought. *Two things that probably saved my sanity.*

The period immediately following Dumbledore's death had been the most miserable time of Hermione's life, and yet she had gone to Bill and Fleur's wedding not long after and managed to put on a happy face.

Security had been tight at The Burrow with Harry Potter in attendance, no one was taking any chances. While everyone did their best to make the day a special one for the bride and groom, the occasion was still tinged with sadness. Even with Fleur's Veela relatives working their magic on the male guests, it had still been a sombre affair.

Ron had been watching Hermione the whole time, waiting for an opportunity to speak. He knew she had something on her mind, but each time he had tried to approach her, she would make some excuse, saying she was tired or had a headache or she had to be somewhere else.

Ron spotted his chance after the ceremony when Hermione wandered off into the garden alone. Picking up two glasses of champagne, he followed her.

'Drink?'

'What? Oh, yes. Thanks, Ron.'

'Shall we go and sit over there?' Ron guided her by the elbow to the far corner of the garden. They sat on the ground in the shade of an old oak tree.

Hermione sipped her champagne and stared off into the middle distance. 'At least the weather held for them.'

Ron was worried by Hermione's behaviour. She was always the sensible one, always focused, always reliable. She had become very remote since Dumbledore's death as had Harry. He felt like both his friends were slipping away from him. Without Hermione's help, Ron didn't think he would be able to reach Harry either. He had to find out what was troubling her, although he had a pretty good idea already.

'Hermione,' he began, 'you said you wanted to talk to me.'

'When? Oh, right, at the funeral. I, um... it doesn't matter. It wasn't important.' Hermione stared at her drink as if fascinated by the bubbles.

'It's Snape, isn't it?'

Her head shot up. 'How did you guess? I mean how...'

'I've been thinking a lot about him, too, Hermione. A lot of things have happened that don't make sense, and I'm guessing you think so, too, but don't want to say anything because Harry would go ballistic.'

'What sort of things, Ron?' Hermione asked cautiously.

'Well, and this is just off the top of my head... Why did Dumbledore Stun Harry and not defend himself for starters? Harry couldn't be seen they would have had the element of surprise with him wearing his Invisibility Cloak. Harry might even have been able to stop Snape from killing Dumbledore. He could certainly have taken out Malfoy. I just don't understand it.'

In all honesty, Hermione had not given this much thought. She had been too wrapped up in her own problems to think about Dumbledore's actions that fateful night. She gave Ron her full attention.

'Then there's Snape,' Ron continued. 'Why didn't Snape kill Harry when he had the chance, or Flitwick or you or Luna or Tonks or anyone else, for that matter?'

Hermione tried to think logically. 'Other than Harry, I suppose the answer could be that he didn't want to show his hand too early. He wanted to get to Dumbledore unimpeded.'

'True. But Harry? Even if he was under orders from Voldemort not to kill him, he could have done him some serious damage, but he didn't. Snape just kept blocking every spell Harry threw at him. *And* he stopped the other Death Eaters from cursing him as well.' Ron shook his head. 'I just don't get it.'

There was a pause. 'Hermione, you spent a lot of extra time with him, didn't you?'

She nodded. 'Yes, I did. You know I did.'

'Did you notice anything odd about his behaviour, I mean, anything suspicious or... or...*something*?'

Hermione had been uncertain up until that point what, if anything, she should tell Ron about her relationship with Severus. Suddenly making her mind up, she took a deep breath and told Ron word for word what Severus had said to her that night in the dungeons.

Ron whistled. 'It's ambiguous, though, isn't it? *My loyalties will remain the same. Loyalty to who?*'

'Yes, I know, but *despite appearances*. Doesn't that imply 'despite the fact I killed Dumbledore and everyone thinks I'm a traitor, I'm still on your side'? And another thing,' she added getting into her stride, 'you know he was trying to find the cure for the curse that withered Professor Dumbledore's arm?'

Ron nodded.

'Well, I saw him throw things in a temper because his potion kept failing. I saw him forget to eat, Ron, because he was so desperate to find the cure. Why go to all that trouble if he planned on murdering Dumbledore? I don't think it was all an act for my benefit.'

'But if he *is* on our side *why* did he kill Dumbledore?'

'That I can't tell you,' Hermione admitted. 'I'm just as confused as you are. I'll have to give it more thought.'

Hermione's brain went into overdrive. Ron watched as his friend shook off her stupor and started acting like her old self. It hadn't escaped his notice, either, just how animated she had become as she spoke about Severus Snape or how her features seemed to soften. It seemed familiar somehow, like the look on Ginny's face when she talked about Harry...

Merlin's Balls! It can't be. Not Hermione and SNAPE.

'You're in love with him, aren't you.' It wasn't a question.

Hermione hung her head and nodded. She wasn't going to deny it.

'What about him?'

'He has...*had* feelings for me,' Hermione admitted hesitantly.

'You haven't...' *Please tell me you haven't.* The thought of Hermione having sex with Snape was almost as bad as the thought of his parents doing it.

'He didn't want to abuse his position as a teacher,' she replied carefully. There was no way she was going to tell anyone, not even her closest friends, about the incident in the library. 'I don't want to talk about it, Ron, and I would be grateful if you didn't mention it to anyone else.'

Ron decided not to pursue it, although the question of conflicting loyalties did cross his mind for a fraction of a second. 'So, what do you think we should do, Hermione? Should we tell anyone about our suspicions?'

'No. They're just that. Suspicions. We have no proof. Let's keep it to ourselves for the moment. Our first priority has to be helping Harry find the remaining Horcruxes.'

'Okay, agreed.' Ron stood up. 'I don't know about you, but I could do with another drink after all that.' He held out his hand to Hermione.

She smiled up at him. 'I don't suppose another glass of fizz would do any harm.' Hermione rose to her feet and brushed the grass off her robe. 'Thank you Ron.' She gave him a peck on the cheek.

'What was that for?' he asked, reddening slightly.

'For being there.'

Feeling more hopeful that all was not lost, Hermione took Ron's hand, and they strolled back to the party.

It had taken a few weeks after the tragic events at Hogwarts, but, under Professor McGonagall, the Order of the Phoenix had regrouped. Now that Harry had come of age and had left the Dursleys' for the last time, it was unanimously decided that his safety was the number one priority.

To that end, number twelve, Grimmauld Place was once again made Unplottable, placed under the Fidelius Charm and a new Secret Keeper appointed. As much as Harry detested the house, he realised that Sirius' old home was as safe a place as any for him to stay and that the Order needed a Headquarters. He was advised by Alastor Moody not to go out unless it was absolutely necessary and to let an Order member know if he did.

Not long after Bill and Fleur's wedding, Ron and Hermione moved in with him. Harry was grateful for their company as he was starting to climb the walls in boredom and frustration. Harry wanted vengeance. He wanted to lash out in all directions to assuage the grief and guilt he felt over Dumbledore's death. Most of all, he wanted to kill Severus Snape.

Hermione and Ron could both see that Harry's present state of mind was not going to get him anywhere. In fact, it was likely to get him killed. With a great deal of tact and persuasion, they managed to convince him that this was a time for planning and recuperation. Vengeance could wait. The Horcruxes had to be located and destroyed before a confrontation with Voldemort could even be considered. The trouble was, none of them had a clue where to start the search.

The three of them were sitting in the library when they had their first real break.

Hermione, for some light relief, had picked up a book on ancient runes. She opened the cover and shrieked, making the two boys leap out of their seats and draw their wands in fright.

'Look,' she said, grinning from ear to ear. She turned the book around so they could see. On the inside of the front cover was a bookplate, which bore the inscription:

EX LIBRIS

Regulus A. Black

'R. A. B.,' said Ron and Harry together.

'That's brilliant, Hermione!' exclaimed Ron. 'Now we just have to work out where he could have hidden the locket.'

'Here,' said Harry. 'He hid it here.'

Hermione and Ron looked at him, but before they could say anything, Harry yelled, 'KREACHER!'

With a *crack* the surly old house-elf appeared.

'Master called me?' Kreacher bowed deferentially, if somewhat reluctantly. He looked at Hermione in disgust and opened his mouth to say something.

Before Kreacher had a chance to launch into his usual tirade of abuse, Harry cut in. 'Yes, Kreacher, I believe there is a locket hidden somewhere in this house, a golden locket with an 'S' like a snake on the front. I want you to bring it to me. I want you to bring it to me right now; you are not to go anywhere else, either before or after retrieving the locket. You are to bring it straight to me, and you are not to tell anyone in any way shape or form that you have done so. Do I make myself clear?'

Within minutes, Harry was holding Salazar Slytherin's locket. Hermione and Ron looked at the locket with him, but neither made any move to touch it.

'How did you know, Harry?' Hermione almost whispered, staring at the ancient artefact with a look of both awe and horror on her face.

'I saw the locket in Dumbledore's Pensieve, remember?'

The others nodded.

'I remembered there being a locket that no one could open when we had that cleanout last year. I just put two and two together.'

'The stuff that Kreacher wouldn't throw away, of course,' said Ron.

'Yes. Looks like he did us a favour. He will be pleased.' Harry grinned, feeling that perhaps, at last, their luck was changing. They had found a Horcrux; the question now was, what were they going to do with it?

* * *

The three of them argued long into the night about the best course of action to take. They knew the locket was certainly protected by at least one lethal curse, and even if they managed to get around that, there was still the problem of removing the soul fragment from the Horcrux itself. Eventually, they had to admit they were out of their depth, and after much deliberation, they decided to let Remus in on the secret.

Remus duly arrived at number twelve looking decidedly the worse for wear. Since Severus' defection, Remus had been unable to find a reliable source of the Wolfsbane Potion and had undergone two transformations without its benefit. Harry offered to get in touch with Professor Slughorn on his behalf a proposal that Remus was only too happy to accept.

After they had explained the situation, Remus poured himself a large firewhisky and sat in stunned silence for a while.

Hermione spoke first. 'Remus, I've scoured the library at Hogwarts as well as the one here, but I've only ever found a passing reference to Horcruxes. I can't find anything about how they are made, never mind how they are destroyed.'

'I'm not surprised,' Remus eventually spoke. 'They are so evil, who but a madman would want to know how to make one?' He took a large gulp of whisky and continued, 'What I find interesting is that you, Harry, destroyed the diary without it harming you, and yet when Dumbledore destroyed Marvolo's ring it almost killed him.'

'I had thought of that, too,' said Harry. 'It has to be something to do with my scar. Perhaps the diary didn't see me as a threat.'

'I think you may be right, Harry,' Remus agreed, 'but I don't think you should try anything with the locket yet; it's too risky. I will make some enquiries and get back to you.'

Harry sighed. 'Okay, I won't touch it. I'd feel a lot happier, though, if I could destroy this fragment. It gives me the creeps.'

'You cannot *destroy* the soul fragment, Harry.'

'What do you mean?' Harry asked.

'A soul, by definition, is immortal even Voldemort's,' Remus replied. 'You can destroy the vessel holding it to the earth plane, that is all.'

Harry was about to question Remus further when the Floo activated and Professor McGonagall stepped into the parlour.

'Oh, good, you're all here. Hello, Remus, nice to see you.'

'Hello, Professor McGonagall,' said Hermione, 'is everything all right?'

'Yes, my dear,' replied Minerva. 'I have two pieces of news. The first is that Hogwarts will be opening as normal next month.'

'Oh, that is good news,' said Hermione, feeling a slight pang that she herself would not be going back.

'Indeed,' continued Minerva. 'The Ministry decided that the children would be as safe at Hogwarts as anywhere. The only stipulation is that the children of known Death Eaters will not be invited to attend. I'm afraid Slytherin House will be sadly depleted this year.'

'That's no loss,' said Ron.

Minerva ignored him. 'The second piece of news and the reason I have come here today is that Sybill Trelawney has made another prophecy.'

'She really should cut down on the cooking sherry,' Hermione muttered under her breath.

'What was that, dear?' Minerva asked sharply.

'Nothing, Professor,' Hermione answered. 'What did she say?'

Minerva took a piece of parchment out of her pocket, cleared her throat and read:

The reign of Darkness approaches

For the light to prevail, the four elements must unite

The Four behind the Three

The Two behind the One

The Holly, Vine and Hazel against the Yew in love

The Seventh Child completes the Seven.

'She's excelled herself this time,' said Ron. 'What the bloody hell does that mean?'

The next few months passed by interminably slowly, with little progress in their hunt for the remaining Horcruxes. Hermione turned eighteen, which at least gave them all an excuse for a celebration. She managed to spend a few hours with her parents, although it was not an entirely happy occasion as Hermione decided to come clean about her current situation. The Grangers were, naturally, not very pleased that Hermione had chosen to leave school in her final year, but under the circumstances, they understood her decision and gave her their full support.

Three people cooped up in the same house were bound to get on each others nerves eventually, and so it proved. To let off steam, they cleared out the dining room and turned it into a duelling practice area an hour a day working up a sweat throwing and deflecting hexes soon took the edge of their restlessness. Remus stopped by to help out whenever he could, and Hermione made sure they practiced non-verbal spells, just as Severus had instructed.

To fill in time in the day and to keep her mind off Severus, Hermione decided to catch up with some of the course work she should have been doing that year. Potions and Herbology were out due to their practical nature, so she decided to concentrate on Charms, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes and Transfiguration. The boys, out of sheer boredom, allowed her to bully them into doing some work as well.

Although Hermione had had little success in discovering anything useful about Horcruxes, her research had led her off on various tangents, one of which she found particularly interesting. She found the whole subject of Curse Breaking increasingly fascinating and was beginning to seriously consider it as a career.

Assuming I live long enough to complete my education, she silently reminded herself.

In the evenings, they discussed battle strategies and the meaning of Trelawney's latest prophecy.

'I've often wondered,' said Ron one evening, 'what Voldemort's motives are exactly.'

'How do you mean?' Harry asked.

'Well, other than the fact that he's obsessed with being immortal and killing you, what does he plan on doing with the wizarding world afterwards? Is he going to rule by terror alone or does he intend to take over the existing government and turn his followers into civil servants.'

'I can just see Lucius Malfoy as a pen-pusher. It would be a fate worse than death for him.' Hermione laughed. 'Seriously though, you do have a point, Ron. Has Voldemort thought of taking over the government? If he has, it begs the question, are there any spies in place already? I think you should bring it up for consideration at the next Order meeting.'

'Okay, I will,' Ron agreed, sounding pleased. 'Now, what about this prophecy. The four elements are earth, air, fire and water, right?'

'I suppose so,' said Hermione, 'but it's not really an exact science, is it?'

'Oh, come on, Hermione,' Harry interrupted, 'you must have some idea.'

'Well, I think the elements represent Hogwarts' four houses earth is Hufflepuff, air is Ravenclaw, fire is Gryffindor and water is Slytherin,' Hermione conceded.

'Makes sense.' Ron nodded in agreement. 'The Sorting Hat's been banging on about the houses uniting for years.'

'How, though?' Harry pondered out loud. 'I mean, is it a symbolic union - a ceremony of some kind - or does it just mean that representatives of each house have to fight together on the day?'

'The last line speaks of *the Seven*,' Hermione offered. 'That suggests four individuals to me one representing each house. If we are *the Three* that makes seven.'

'So you and I,' said Ron, indicating Hermione, 'are the two behind the one, which is Harry.'

'My wand is made from holly,' Harry pushed on, 'and yours are?'

'Vine,' replied Hermione.

'Ash,' said Ron softly, 'so it looks like I won't be there, then.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Ron, of course you will. It's just a stupid prediction after all. The future is what we make it, nothing is set in stone.' Hermione was angry, not with Ron, but because she had been thinking along similar lines herself. She knew of only one Seventh Child who had a wand made of hazel, and neither Harry nor Ron were going to be happy when they realised who that person was.

It was early November before Remus finally discovered the spell to extract the soul fragment. Harry was delighted to be able to do something at last. Remus, however, still advised caution.

'Harry, the incantation is not complicated, and I think you have immunity to the curse that protects it. My only concern is that, once released, the fragment will seek out its other splintered parts. It might try to attach itself to you.'

'I'll have to take that risk,' Harry said immediately.

'We can't afford to lose you, Harry. It may be better if I attempt it.'

'No, Remus, absolutely not, I won't let you sacrifice yourself. I'm the one who has to destroy Voldemort, and I will, even if it means doing it piece by piece.'

'Remus,' Hermione interjected, 'could you use some sort of Banishing Charm after the fragment has been released?'

Remus gave it some thought. 'I don't think Harry would have time to cast the spell.'

'Then what about a team effort?' Hermione suggested.

'Too dangerous,' Harry replied. 'We don't know the extent of the magical backlash from the curse.'

'I think it could work.' Hermione wasn't going to give up easily. 'Harry removes the soul, Remus Banishes it, and Ron and I provide the defence shields.'

After much argument and deliberation, they decided that Hermione's plan, though not without risk, was the best course of action to take. There was no point delaying matters any further. Hermione, Remus and Ron stood back as Harry began the incantation. With no sign of the curse being activated, they moved closer and watched as wisps of green smoke began to spiral out of the locket. Once free, as Remus had predicted, the soul fragment made a bee-line for Harry's scar. Remus cast the strongest Banishing Charm he knew, which held long enough for Hermione to cast a defence shield around Harry. Ron stood by to protect Remus, if necessary, but there was no need. The green cloud simply evaporated.

'Well,' said Ron, clearly relieved, 'that was something of an anti-climax.'

'It didn't even harm the locket.' Hermione looked at the former Horcrux. 'Is it safe to touch, Remus?'

Remus passed his wand over the locket. 'It still has a strong magical signature, but the evil I detected before is definitely gone. It is safe.'

'What are you going to do with it, Harry?' Hermione asked. 'It must be worth a fortune.'

'I suppose we still have to keep it hidden for the moment,' Harry replied. 'But afterwards... Would you like to have it, Remus? I think you deserve it.'

'As tempting as that is, Harry, I have to ask you a question. If that was Helga Hufflepuff's cup or a Ravenclaw heirloom, what would you do?'

'I'd present it to the Head of House...'

'Exactly. When the time comes, you should present the locket to the Head of Slytherin, whoever that may be.'

'I suppose you're right,' Harry grudgingly agreed. 'Still, at least I won't have to give it to Snape.'

Christmas was fast approaching and their quest had not progressed any further. Other than doing some Christmas shopping, the trio had remained largely at Grimmauld Place. Despite the risk, they all decided that it would be too depressing to stay at number twelve for all of the holidays and so, on Christmas Eve, they Flooed to The Burrow.

On Christmas Day, as the Weasleys, Hermione and Harry were sitting around the Christmas tree opening their presents, an unfamiliar owl tapped on the window, carrying a small parcel. Mrs Weasley let it in. The bird flew straight over to Harry, dropped the package in his lap and flew out the window again without even waiting to see if it would be offered an Owl Treat.

Harry tapped the package gingerly with his wand. The aura of Dark Magic it exuded was unmistakeable. Everyone in the room felt it.

'Don't touch it, Harry,' said Arthur. 'It's dangerous, whatever it is.'

'It's all right, Mr Weasley,' Harry assured him, recovering from the shock of having a Horcrux dumped on his lap on Christmas morning, 'I think I know what it is, but I need to contact Remus before I open it.'

'He'll be here soon, dear,' said Mrs Weasley. 'He and Tonks are both coming to dinner.'

'What's that on top?' Hermione asked, pointing at a small scroll of parchment stuck to the parcel.

Harry carefully detached it with his wand. It seemed harmless enough. They all watched as the little scroll unfurled itself in front of Harry's eyes. He read out, 'The Old Crow loved diamonds.' As soon as he had finished, the parchment promptly burst into flames.

'What on earth is going on here, Harry?' Mr Weasley demanded.

'He can't tell you, Dad,' Ron interrupted. 'Please don't ask.'

'Well,' said Molly, 'whatever it is, it can wait until after lunch.' She started waving her wand to clear up the mound of wrapping paper on the floor. 'Oh, and Hermione, dear, I forgot to mention, I've invited your parents.'

There was yet one more surprise in store that Christmas. Just as they were tucking into the pudding, Kingsley Shacklebolt arrived at the Burrow to inform them that there had been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

Hermione barely had time to say goodbye to her parents before she was bundled towards the fireplace with Harry and Ron. In spite of her pleas for them to go into hiding, Mr and Mrs Granger decided to return home. Kingsley arranged an escort and assured Hermione that they would be protected.

'Mum, Dad, please listen to the Aurors,' she begged her parents. 'Do whatever they say. If they tell you to leave the house, don't ask questions, just go. Please, please be careful. Better still, come and stay with us. I know you'll be safe then.'

Her parents kissed her goodbye and told her not to worry. Hermione never saw them again.

Back at Grimmauld Place that evening, Harry opened the package. Inside, as they had hoped, was Helga Hufflepuff's cup. Once again, with Remus' help, they Banished another piece of Voldemort's soul.

'I wonder who could have sent it?' Harry pondered, staring at the little gold cup.

Hermione and Ron exchanged glances but said nothing.

'Ah, well. Four down, two to go.'

Ron yawned. 'I don't know about you lot, but I'm knackered. I think I'll turn in.'

It had certainly been an eventful day. They all realised that the escape of the Death Eaters earlier on could only mean that war was edging closer. Hermione was also convinced that the cup could only have been sent by Severus, which meant he was still alive and on their side. She hoped he was still safe after taking such a risk. Hermione had tried not to think about him too much the last few months. After all, she reasoned with herself, it wasn't like they had any kind of relationship, and there was precious little chance of seeing him again. Still, Severus had shown his loyalty today. Tomorrow, she would give his message her full attention.

Tired of Waiting

Chapter 7 of 18

Hermione's year of hell continues, and Harry receives help from an unexpected source.

Tired of Waiting

Disclaimer: Everything you see belongs to JK Rowling. I write for pleasure not for profit, and am not making a Knut out of this.

Many thanks to my Beta Snarkyroxy for her time, energy and trouble.

Harry was dreaming. Voldemort was in the room, trying to convince Harry to join forces with him.

'Think how powerful we would be together,' Voldemort hissed softly.

'No, go away.'

'It will be easier for you if you join me willingly,' he persisted.

'I said no.'

'So be it. Then I shall take you anyway.'

'NOOO!'

'Harry! Wake up, mate.' Harry awoke to find Ron shaking him. 'It's okay, Harry. It was just a dream.'

Hermione came into the room. 'Are you all right? I heard screaming.'

'Yes, I'm all right,' Harry replied wearily. 'It won't happen again tonight.'

'What do you mean?' Hermione asked, 'How long has this been going on?'

'A few months,' Harry admitted, 'but this is the first night he really got through to me. He wants to take over my body.'

'Harry, you must start doing your Occlumency exercises again,' Hermione said worriedly.

Harry rubbed his eyes and sighed. 'You're right, I should. Will you help me, Hermione?'

'Of course I will,' Hermione replied. 'Now try and get some sleep; we'll talk about it tomorrow.'

Over breakfast the next morning, the trio discussed the note that had accompanied the Horcrux.

'The Old Crow is obviously Rowena Ravenclaw,' said Ron. 'You don't have to be a genius to work that out.'

'Agreed,' said Hermione. 'Whoever sent the Horcrux took a risk that it wouldn't be intercepted. The note was cryptic enough for us to understand but would puzzle anyone else.'

'And diamonds?' Harry asked. 'Some sort of jewellery, perhaps?'

'Possibly,' Hermione agreed, 'although the only portraits I've ever seen of Rowena Ravenclaw show a rather severely-dressed, elderly witch. She was known for her intellect, not her ability to accessorise.'

The boys laughed. 'Well,' said Harry, 'looks like you'll have to hit the books again.'

Hermione feigned horror at the suggestion. 'The things I do for you, Harry James Potter!'

Now that they had some idea what they were looking for, Hermione took up the search for the Ravenclaw Horcrux in earnest. She quickly exhausted the material in the Black family library; every picture of Rowena Ravenclaw she located depicted her as a wise old witch with not a diamond in sight. There was nothing else for it. She would have to ask Professor McGonagall for permission to visit Hogwarts' library.

Minerva had been delighted to learn that her star pupil was keeping up with her studies and was only too happy to grant Hermione her request.

'Now, what's all this about, Miss Granger? Something to do with the schoolwork you're missing, no doubt?' Minerva smiled at the young witch sitting across the other side of her desk.

'Indeed,' Hermione lied. She glanced at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore. She could have sworn his eyes opened slightly. 'Has he...?'

'Not a word, I'm afraid,' Minerva sighed. 'I do wish he would wake up. I miss talking to the old goat.'

'We all miss him, Professor.'

'I know, dear.' Minerva smiled sadly. 'Now, off you go. Madam Pince will be happy to see you, I'm sure. She's always saying how empty the library seems without you'

curled up in a corner somewhere.'

Over the next week or so, Hermione searched the Hogwarts library. The Spring Term had already started, so she tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. Word soon got out, however, that Hermione Granger was in the school. She had deliberately avoided her old school mates, as she knew they would only ask questions she would be unable or unwilling to answer, but that didn't stop them from seeking her out.

Everyone wanted to know where Harry was, of course. The press had been less than kind, calling into question his loyalty and bravery particularly since the Azkaban breakout. Death Eater attacks were on the increase and Harry Potter was... where exactly? The public wanted to know. Hermione was, therefore, not surprised when Luna approached her.

'I can't tell you where Harry is, Luna.' Hermione thought a pre-emptive strike might be the best course of action to take.

'I know,' said Luna. 'What are you looking for?'

Why do you have an uncanny knack for asking perceptive questions? 'I'm just doing a bit of research, that's all.'

'I may be able to help,' Luna persisted.

Hmm. You are a Ravenclaw... 'Okay. I'm looking for information on the Founders' early lives portraits in particular.'

Hogwarts: A History? 'Luna offered.

'Fraid not. Nothing early enough,' Hermione replied.

'Oh, I see.' Luna twirled one of her radish earrings in thought. 'There's a portrait of Rowena Ravenclaw as a young woman in the Common Room. If that's any help.'

'Really? What's it like?'

'Sparkly,' said Luna dreamily.

'Are there any photos of it, Luna?' Hermione demanded.

'I've never seen one. But I'll take one if you like. I'm sure she won't mind.'

'Would you? It would be a great help if you could.'

'Where should I send it?' Luna asked innocently.

Hermione grinned. 'Nice try. Give it to Professor McGonagall. She'll see it gets to me. And thanks again, Luna.'

'You're welcome,' Luna laughed, 'but I want an exclusive interview for the *Quibbler* when the time comes.'

'You'll have it, Luna. I promise.'

* * *

After saying goodbye to Luna, Hermione made her way back to the Headmistress' office. She was in no particular hurry. She had spent the best years of her life within the castle walls; it was her second home. Hermione couldn't help but feel she was missing out on so much as she stepped onto the spiral staircase. She should be here, studying, planning a successful future, not worrying about some crazed would-be dictator trying to destroy her world. She knocked on the door.

Entering the office, Hermione could see that something was horribly wrong by the look on Professor McGonagall's face.

'Oh, my dear girl,' Minerva began. 'Sit down, please. I'm afraid I've just received some terrible news.'

Hermione remained standing. 'What's happened?' she asked, already fearing the worst.

'There's no easy way for me to say this. I'm sorry to have to tell you that your parents were killed by a Death Eater earlier today.'

Hermione said nothing for a moment, unable to take it in. 'Just one? Where were the Aurors?' she eventually asked as her eyes started to fill up.

'He disguised himself,' Minerva replied, 'Polyjuice Potion.'

'A p-potion?' The room seemed suddenly airless. 'Do they think it was Prof Snape?'

'There is that possibility, yes.'

Hermione couldn't breathe. If Severus had had any part in this... If he had so much as brewed the potion... She reached her hand out, frantically seeking some kind of support. There was none. She saw Minerva move towards her, and then everything went black.

The Disillusioned figure stood at a safe distance from the crematorium. The place was stiff with Aurors. This was as close as he dared get. Severus watched as the hearses drew up to the door of the chapel followed by the funeral cars. He didn't recognize the bearers.

Muggles, he surmised, *friends of the Grangers*.

Hermione got out of the first car flanked by Harry and Ron. Severus noted all the mourners in attendance and shook his head in disbelief. Half the Order was there, including the Weasleys, Minerva, various staff members, and an assortment of sixth and seventh years.

Merciful Merlin! Have they all taken leave of their senses?

Severus thought it was just as well the Dark Lord was a megalomaniac with delusions of grandeur. Voldemort had dismissed Lucius' idea of an attack at the funeral, not because it wasn't a sound plan, but because he had some grandiose vision of himself storming Hogwarts, and turning it into his seat of power. Voldemort did not want to go down in the annals of history as having commenced his reign of terror at a crematorium in Muggle London. But still, it was a pretty stupid move by Minerva et al to provide such a tempting target.

Severus looked at the small figure of Hermione walking behind the coffins as the procession moved towards the building. Voldemort had ordered him to observe the funeral, but he would have come anyway. He wanted to be there for Hermione, even if she wasn't aware of his presence.

Although she looked sad, Hermione did not look beaten. She held her head up as someone took her photograph. Harry and Ron moved towards the photographer, angry at the intrusion, but Hermione held them back. Severus took a risk and moved closer to try to hear what she was saying.

'No,' Hermione shook her head. 'I want everyone to see that this hasn't broken me, or driven a wedge between us.'

Severus watched as Ron Weasley put his arm around Hermione. He was glad she had the support of her friends, but there was something a bit too possessive about the gesture that made Severus uneasy.

That should be me, he thought jealously, *'she should be looking to me for comfort not Ron sodding Weasley.'* Feeling helpless and saddened by the whole affair, Severus Apparated to Voldemort's side to give his report.

Hermione sat on the sofa in the parlour at number twelve, only vaguely aware of the activity around her. Up until the funeral, she had managed to keep busy. There were the arrangements to sort out, solicitors to see, and the house to close up. She had barely cried. She felt numb. It seemed so unreal; even after the finality of the funeral, it still felt like some horrible dream. Hermione knew everyone meant well, but she wished they would all go now and leave her alone.

Harry sat down next to her and held her hand. Of all people in the room, he was the only one who could have any idea of what she was going through.

'We're worried about you,' Harry said.

'Don't be,' Hermione replied. 'I'll be all right.' She smiled at her friend. *Harry never knew his parents,* Hermione reminded herself, *I must try to be thankful that I had them for eighteen years.*

Molly Weasley was busying herself handing out the tea and ham sandwiches. She offered a cup to Hermione.

'No, thank you, Mrs Weasley, I'm not thirsty.'

Ginny took the cup and saucer off her mother and sat down on the other side of Hermione.

'I haven't seen you eat or drink anything since breakfast,' Ginny scolded. 'You'll make yourself ill. Now drink this. That's an order.'

Hermione didn't have the strength to argue with her. She noticed the look of gratitude Harry gave Ginny, and how she smiled back at him.

So, there is still a chance for those two. Good. I'm glad there's still some love left in the world.

Hermione sipped the tea. 'Blah! Sugar. Mum would have a fit...' And that was what it took to finally break the dam. With choking sobs, Hermione leant on Harry's shoulder and wept until she had no more tears left to cry with.

* * *

Hermione gave herself a good talking to the next day before she went down to breakfast. Molly had badgered her into taking a Dreamless Sleep Potion, and she had to admit that she felt better after a good night's sleep.

Although she accepted that her grief was not going to disappear overnight, Hermione was determined not to let it eat her up. This was no time to sit about moping. Her parents would not have wanted that. No, she had a life ahead of her, and there were things she intended doing with it. Firstly, she was going to help Harry rid the world of Voldemort and get justice for her parents' murder. Secondly, she was going to resume her education, and then have a glittering career in whatever field she chose. Oh, yes, she would show them. If it took a hundred years, the name of Granger was going to mean something in the wizarding world and woe betide anyone who got in her way.

She was, therefore, in no mood to put up with Harry and Ron fussing around her at breakfast, and she quickly lost patience with them.

'Harry, Ron, we have a job to do. I'll feel a lot better if I can just focus on finding the Horcrux. Now, as I told you, I was talking to Luna...'

'Oh, that reminds me,' Harry interrupted, 'she gave me something yesterday to give to you. *Accio Luna's envelope.*' The small packet flew through the open door and landed on the table. Hermione opened it.

'Wow. Look at this.' Sparkly was right. The photograph showed a young Rowena decked out to the nines in full dress robes. She had obviously never heard the expression 'Less is more.' She was dripping in diamonds.

'Scrubs up nice, doesn't she?' said Ron. 'I had no idea. I've always thought of her as an ugly old hag.'

'Ron,' Hermione said reproachfully, 'show some respect.'

'Sorry.' Ron looked at the photo again. 'She must have been absolutely *loaded.*'

'Hmm,' Harry pondered. 'What, if anything, would appeal to Voldemort?'

'Well,' Hermione said, 'take your pick.' She was dazzled by the display of opulence. As well as the jewellery, there were diamonds sewn into her robes and shoes. Her hair was sparkling with tiny gems, too.

Harry scrutinized the photo. Something stirred in his memory that he couldn't quite grasp.

Hermione started to think out loud. 'I doubt he would choose the bracelets, or the brooch, or the earrings. It could be the necklace, but my money's on the tiara.'

'Any particular reason?' Harry enquired.

'The tiara sort of crowns her, and she was famous for her intellect.' Hermione replied, 'I think it would be fitting to choose something she used to wear on her head.'

'Okay. That makes some sort of sense,' Harry agreed. 'Any ideas where to look for it?'

'I'll do another search of the library, and if all else fails, I'll ask Luna. There may be some legend attached to it that a Ravenclaw would know about.'

'Fine,' said Harry, 'but not today.' He held up his hands as Hermione protested. 'No buts. You're worn out; you need some time to yourself. One day isn't going to hurt.'

'All right,' Hermione gave in. 'I'll be in my room if you need me.'

Despite practicing his Occlumency exercises, Harry's nightmares had continued. Most nights, he managed to block Voldemort from pushing too far into his subconscious mind, but more often than not, he woke up screaming like a banshee. Ron and Hermione decided it would be a good idea to take it in turns to stay with him, and wake him up before it got to the screaming stage.

One night on Hermione's watch, Voldemort smashed through Harry's Occlumency shields. She watched as her friend started writhing around on the bed as he usually did,

leant over and put her hand out to shake him. Hermione became aware that Harry was not making the usual moaning noises; instead, he was hissing like a snake. In the nick of time, she realised what was going on.

'RON!' Hermione managed to scream at the top of her lungs just before Harry grabbed her around the throat and pulled her onto the bed.

Ron was there in a seconds. 'Harry! Let her go.' Ron tried to prise Harry's fingers from Hermione's neck, but they gripped tighter. Harry's eyelids opened. To Ron's horror, he saw two red eyes staring hatefully at him.

'HARRY! FOR GODS' SAKE, WAKE UP!' Ron yelled.

Harry kept his grip on Hermione and hissed at Ron.

Ron could see that Hermione was rapidly losing consciousness and that he had to act quickly. With all his strength, he punched Harry squarely on the jaw. It had the desired effect. Harry let go, cursing loudly. Hermione slid off the bed and crumpled to the floor like a rag doll.

Harry came to his senses, wondering why his jaw hurt like hell, and why his two friends were on the floor by the side of his bed.

'Ron?'

Ron looked up at Harry noticing with relief that his eyes were their customary green then turned his attention to the unconscious figure of Hermione beside him.

'You almost killed her,' Ron whispered.

'What?' Harry had no idea what was going on.

Ron told him what happened.

'Voldemort,' Harry said simply.

'Red eyes, Parseltongue. Yes, I'd say so.'

Hermione began to stir.

'Don't try and move, Hermione,' Ron said. 'You're going to be okay.'

'Water,' Hermione managed to croak.

Ron summoned a jug of water and gently supporting Hermione's head, held the tumbler to her mouth while she sipped from it.

'Hermione, I'm so sorry.' Harry was horrified at his actions.

'S not your fault,' she said hoarsely and tried to swallow. 'Can one of you... cast a... Healing Charm... on my throat, please?'

Harry reached for his glasses with one hand and grabbed his wand with the other. Hermione felt the constriction in her throat ease.

'Thank you, Harry.' Hermione smiled at him. 'Are you okay now?'

'He's gone for the moment,' Harry replied, 'but I don't know if I can keep him at bay much longer, and I'm scared I may hurt one of you again. I don't know what to do.'

'We'll think of something,' said Hermione, getting to her feet. 'Don't worry.'

Harry rubbed his jaw. 'That was some punch, Ron.'

'Sorry, mate,' said Ron sheepishly.

'That's okay. I'd have done the same thing. I don't suppose one of you could...'

Hermione picked up her wand and performed a Healing Charm. 'Better?'

'Much.'

'Good. Now get some sleep.'

Harry grinned. 'Yes, Mum.'

Hermione ruffled his hair in response then left the room, closely followed by Ron. Once they were outside, Hermione turned to Ron and burst into tears.

'Oh, God, Ron, I thought we'd lost him.'

Ron put his arms around her, 'It's okay, Hermione, it's okay.'

Hermione put her head on his chest and sobbed, 'When is this all going to end?'

'Soon,' Ron replied, holding her closer. 'You'll see.'

Hermione didn't know how much more she could take. Her parents, Severus, Dumbledore, maybe Harry who else was she going to lose before this war was over? Hermione leaned into Ron and took comfort in his arms. There he was again, as always, just when she needed him, as steady as a rock. She closed her eyes and listened to his heartbeat as he rocked her gently.

Safe.

Since her parents' murder, Hermione had tried to rein in her feelings for Severus, because although she hoped with all her heart that he was innocent, she knew she would never be able to forgive him if he had been involved in their deaths. On top of that, in the unlikely event he survived the approaching conflict, Severus would get a one-way ticket to Azkaban for the murder of Albus Dumbledore. She had to face facts. They had no future. It was hopeless. Whichever way she looked at it, Severus Snape was a killer and would be punished accordingly. She couldn't still love him, could she?

Ron was here. Severus was not and never likely to be. Hermione didn't want to be alone anymore. She turned her head to look at Ron and ran her hands over his chest, his broad muscular chest, admiring it as she did so.

When did Ron get a body?

Hermione put her arms around his neck. Ron did not object, so she pulled his head down towards her and kissed him softly on the lips.

'Hermione? What are... I mean, I... Are you sure?

'Yes, Ron, I'm sure.'

Ron looked at Hermione's puffy red eyes and blotchy, tear-stained face and thought he had never seen a more beautiful sight in his life. He knew he was being used, and he didn't give a toss. Given time, he was sure Hermione would forget all about Severus Snape and grow to love him instead. She was bound to come to her senses eventually, and he, Ron, would be there for her. Yes. That was all she needed. Time. Without saying another word, Ron lifted Hermione into his arms and carried her to his bed.

* * *

Hermione woke the next morning with the sun streaming through the window from the wrong direction. Momentarily disoriented, she turned over to see Ron already awake and smiling at her.

'Any regrets?' he asked.

'None. You?'

He kissed her by way of reply and grinned. 'I'm starving.'

Hermione smiled. 'I've never known you any different.'

'I thought of going to get some breakfast, but I didn't want to leave you,' Ron said.

'How considerate of you to put me before your stomach. I'm honoured.'

Ron grinned and got out of bed. 'What would you like, the Full Monty?'

Hermione looked him up and down. 'Tea and toast will do, thank you.'

Ron put on his dressing gown. 'I'll see you downstairs then.'

Hermione lay back on the bed. Last night had been... nice, reassuring, comfortable. There hadn't been any fireworks, but then again she hadn't expected any. *It will work*, she told herself. *Give it time. That's all it needs. Time.*

* * *

Half an hour later, Hermione went down to breakfast. It was obvious that Ron had already told Harry they had spent the night together. Harry gave Hermione a big hug, apologised again for hurting her, and then said how happy he was that she and Ron were an item at long last.

Hermione sat down at the table, and Ron poured her a cuppa. 'Thanks, Ron,' she said, reaching for some toast. 'Did you manage to sleep okay, Harry?'

'Eventually,' Harry replied, 'but I'm worried he'll try again tonight.'

Hermione buttered her toast. 'I have a suggestion; it may help, it may not.'

'What is it?' Harry was prepared to consider anything.

'Meditation.'

'What? How is sitting cross-legged on the floor chanting going to help?'

Hermione sighed and nibbled her toast. 'You don't have to chant; in fact, you don't have to sit on the floor cross-legged or otherwise.'

'O-kay,' said Harry, uncertainly, 'so how do you think it might help me?'

'It can help you focus your thoughts,' Hermione replied, 'That, in turn, may help to strengthen your ability to block Voldemort out of your mind.'

Harry mulled it over. 'All right,' he said finally, 'I'll give it a try.'

Which was how, late in the afternoon, Harry and Ron found themselves sitting opposite Hermione, cross-legged on the floor of the parlour.

'I thought you said we didn't have to sit on the floor,' grumbled Ron, stuffing a cushion between his back and the sofa to try and make himself more comfortable.

'You don't,' said Hermione, 'but you don't want to be too comfy either, at least to start with, or you'll just fall asleep.'

Meditation was something that had always been there in the background while Hermione was growing up, as Mrs Granger had been a regular practitioner. Although her mother had taught her the basics, Hermione had never really seen the benefit of stilling her young, active mind until fairly recently, as she could not see the point in wasting time thinking of nothing when there was so much to learn. The events of the past few months, however, had forced Hermione to reassess her life, and she had turned to meditation to help her think more clearly. Once she got into it, she had been pleasantly surprised to discover that it gave her a sense of peace and composure. It helped her relax when she was tense and helped her concentrate when she was faced with a weighty problem. It also brought Hermione comfort to be doing something that her mother had set such great store by, and so she had added it to her daily routine.

Harry was sceptical, but since he had nothing to lose, decided he would try to keep an open mind. Ron was there partly to give Harry some moral support and partly because he thought it would be a good move to show an interest in his new girlfriend's hobbies. Hermione had also told him that it might improve his chess game, so he was prepared to give it a go.

'Now,' Hermione began. 'Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths... Good. Now become aware of your breathing... Do not try to change it, just notice it... Notice the cool air entering your nostrils as you inhale... and the warm air leaving your nostrils as you exhale... just do that for a minute.' The boys dutifully followed her instructions. 'As thoughts enter your mind, notice them and let them go... If your thoughts wander off for any length of time, just come back to your breathing...'

After about ten minutes, Hermione opened her eyes. It was long enough for a first session, she thought. Harry was still sitting with his eyes closed breathing quietly. Ron had slumped against the settee and was snoring softly with Crookshanks, who had come into the room during the proceedings, curled up on his lap. Hermione's grief and despair over the last few months had not gone unnoticed by her half-Kneazle pet. Crookshanks was relieved that his mistress had managed to find herself such a nice young wizard to keep her safe. He liked Ron. Anyone who was ginger was okay by him.

'When you are ready,' Hermione said quietly, 'you can open your eyes.'

Harry slowly opened his eyes.

'How was that?' Hermione asked.

'I feel very relaxed,' Harry replied, 'though not as relaxed as Ron.' He gave his sleeping friend a shake.

'Try doing some Occlumency exercises now and see if you notice any improvement,' Hermione suggested.

'Okay,' Harry agreed, getting up, 'I'll let you know how it goes.'

* * *

Much to his surprise, Harry found that meditation did indeed help to improve his Occlumency skills. His nightmares continued, but Voldemort found it increasingly difficult to penetrate his sub-conscious mind. Harry practiced meditation with Hermione every day, and after each session his ability to focus his mind grew. Ron had given up after a few attempts. On the couple of occasions he had managed to stay awake, Ron had found the whole thing incredibly boring and decided his time would be better spent elsewhere.

Hermione had gradually increased the duration of the sessions from ten to twenty minutes. After two weeks, she decided to lengthen them to thirty. The first time he tried to go for longer than twenty minutes, Harry had the feeling that he was not alone in his mind. Thinking it was Voldemort, he quickly opened his eyes. As Hermione was still meditating, he decided to try again. This time he heard a voice, faint but unmistakable.

Don't be afraid, Harry.

'Professor Dumbledore? It can't be. It's not possible.'

You are neither dreaming nor going mad.

'I... I don't understand.'

You are learning to focus your mind at long last, Harry. That is how I can reach you.

'Are you saying I'm some sort of Seer?'

There was a muffled laugh. *No, my dear boy, I fear you have not been blessed with the gift of prophecy.*

'What then?'

Tom Riddle forged a link with you when he tried to kill you. By proxy, you are linked to those parts of his soul that are free - those parts that have 'passed beyond the veil,' if you will. While Tom lives, you will have a connection to the Otherworld. You will be able to communicate with me, and your other loved ones, if you so choose.

'Mum, Dad, Sirius?'

Yes. But while time is no longer of any importance to me, time for you grows short. There is still much for you to learn, but we must wait until you are stronger. I do not want to overtax you.

'No, wait, don't go. There is so much I need to ask you.'

Very well. You may ask one question.

'Only one?' Harry thought frantically, 'The Ravenclaw Horcrux. Where is it?'

There was an ethereal chuckle. *You already know the answer to that, Harry. You have held it in your hands.*

'I have? Where?'

But there was no response.

* * *

Afraid that Hermione and Ron would think he had finally lost it, Harry decided not to tell them about his chat with Albus for the time being. Instead, he tried to remember where he might have seen the Horcrux. He spent a lot of time staring at the photo of Rowena Ravenclaw and wondering where he could possibly have handled a tiara. The answer finally came to him during one of the trio's duelling practices. They had been discussing defence strategies against some of the nastier hexes.

'We're going to have to learn to cast some of the darker curses in order to defend ourselves against them,' Hermione said.

'Agreed,' said Harry. 'Although I don't much like the idea, I don't think we have a choice. It's not as though the Death Eaters are going to throw Jelly-Legs Jinxes at us, is it?'

'Okay,' Ron agreed with his friends. 'What about some Severing Charms? What was that one you used on Draco, Harry? *Sucusumpra* or something?'

'*Sectumsempra*,' Harry replied, 'but I don't know the counter-curse, so it's much too dangerous to practice.' He sighed, 'If only I had The Pri I mean *Snape's* book...' He trailed off, realisation dawning.

'Harry, are you okay? Hermione asked, seeing the strange look that had come over Harry's face.

'Yes, I'm fine. I think I know where the tiara is.'

'What? Where?' Hermione and Ron asked almost simultaneously.

'Hogwarts,' Harry replied. 'The Room of Requirement. I saw it, I'm sure, when I hid *Snape's* Potions book. I'll have to go and retrieve it.'

'No,' said Hermione, 'you'll attract too much attention. I'll go.'

'But you won't find it, Hermione. You should see the stuff in there. The place is enormous, and I'm not sure I could give you directions.'

'Harry,' Hermione said with a hint of sarcasm, 'am I or am I not a witch?'

'Your point being?'

'Well,' Hermione explained patiently, 'If I stand inside the door and shout *Accio!* Rowena Ravenclaw's tiara', what do you think would happen?'

'Ah,' said Harry, grinning. 'I suppose that could work.'

'Well,' said Remus, examining the tiara, 'that just leaves Nagini.'

'Nagini,' Harry pondered out loud. 'How do I deal with Nagini?' He had tried to avoid thinking too much about the destruction of the final Horcrux until now. How on earth was he supposed to get anywhere near a snake that rarely strayed from Voldemort's side, never mind kill it?

'Does anyone have any ideas?' Harry finally asked. There was silence. The others were equally stumped.

Hermione sighed. 'Even if we knew where Voldemort was hiding, we could hardly go charging in there, could we? It would be suicide.'

The others agreed.

'I think,' Remus said eventually, 'we've gone as far as we can on our own. It's time we told the Order about all this.'

Harry nodded. Now that all but one of the Horcruxes had been destroyed, there didn't seem much point in keeping it secret any longer.

'In that case,' Remus continued, 'I'll contact Minerva and bring her up to date. I'm sure she'll want to discuss it with you first, though, before calling a meeting.'

'Thanks, Remus,' said Harry. 'I'd appreciate that. She's less likely to shout at you than me for keeping this a secret from her.'

Remus chuckled. 'I wouldn't bet on it. She was my teacher, too, remember.'

* * *

Harry took off his glasses and lay down on his bed. He was tired, but dared not go to sleep without first preparing his mind for the inevitable onslaught. Concentrating on his breathing, as Hermione had taught him, he cleared his mind.

HARRY.

He jumped. 'Professor?'

YES, HARRY, ALTHOUGH UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES I THINK YOU SHOULD CALL ME ALBUS.

'There's no need to shout, sir, I can hear you loud and clear.'

Ah, in that case you must have destroyed another Horcrux. Am I correct?

'Yes, sir I mean, Albus. Only the snake is left.'

That is good news, indeed. Now to more pressing matters. Tom will arrive soon, I feel.

'Yes,' Harry said resignedly.

This time, Harry, you are going to drive him away for good.

'I am? How?'

With love, Harry.

'What? You're not serious.'

I am deadly serious.

This was not the first time that Dumbledore had told Harry about the power of love. Harry had not been convinced then, and he was not convinced now.

'How is love going to do that?'

Albus paused. *You must begin by putting aside all fear and hatred. To do this, you must firstly find it in your heart to forgive all those who have hurt and abused you in your life.*

Harry liked the sound of this even less. 'What? Forgive the Dursleys for what they did to me, forgive Malfoy, forgive Snape?'

Harry, Albus patiently explained, *I'm not asking you to condone their behaviour, but carrying around such hatred only harms you, not them. You must let it go. By forgiving, you are saying to yourself that you are not going to allow them to hurt you any more, and that you are ready to move on.*

Harry was still doubtful. 'But... but Snape? You trusted him and he killed you.'

I still trust him, Harry, and he killed me because I ordered him to Albus proceeded to tell Harry about Severus' Unbreakable Vow with Narcissa Malfoy.

I was dying, Harry. I could not allow Severus to sacrifice his life or Draco's soul just to extend my life by a few days.

'But he... he's a Death Eater, a... a traitor. He told Voldemort about the prophecy. My parents died because of him. I still don't understand why you trust him.'

Harry sensed another presence. He knew instinctively who it was.

Perhaps I should answer that question, Albus?

Yes, my dear, I think it is time young Harry knew the truth.

'Mum?' Harry asked although he already knew the answer.

Yes, Harry. Now you must listen for time is running out. This will be hard for you to understand, but Severus Snape was my first love. He came to Godric's Hollow that night to try to save my life. Severus pleaded with Voldemort to spare me, and he agreed, but I could not stand by and watch you be killed. I had the choice, you see, to live or to die trying to protect you. I chose the latter, and by giving my life willingly, the Killing Curse rebounded off you. I died in your place.

'You loved Snape?'

I did, Lily replied, very much, and if times had been different, I might have married him instead of your father. But that is of little importance now. Severus vowed to avenge my death that night, and he will not rest until Voldemort is dead. Try to understand, Harry, that when Severus looks at you he is constantly reminded that I chose to die to save you. He finds that hard to forgive me for dying and you for living. But Severus does not hate you, despite what you think, and he will do all in his power to protect you and ensure your victory over Voldemort when the time comes.

"You loved *Snape*? This was not a concept that Harry was going to grasp in a hurry.

Harry, Albus intervened, I realise we have given you much to think about, but for now I'm asking you to trust me. I sense that Tom is approaching. I want you to think about all the people in your life who you love and who love you and hold that feeling in your heart. This is the power you must harness, Harry. Put aside all hatred and fear - even of Tom himself - he understands those emotions only too well. He will feed on them and use them against you. He neither knows love nor understands its power. Show him the love in your heart and see what happens.

Harry soon felt the all too familiar and unwelcome presence of Voldemort creeping around the edges of his mind. Clammy fingers as cold as death began to probe his shields, searching for a way in. Instead of recoiling in fear from the invasion and mustering all the hatred in his power to keep Voldemort at bay, Harry followed Albus' advice. He thought of his parents, of Sirius, Ginny, Ron and Hermione. He thought of Albus, of the Weasleys, of Remus and his other friends. As he did so, Harry felt a strength flow through him that filled him with such raw power that he thought he would burst from the force of it. He saw the hatred and fear that he carried around with him for the useless burdens they were, and tossed them aside. Then he lowered his shields and let his unwanted guest in.

Voldemort was blinded by a light brighter than a million candles. It was his turn to scream in terror. He cowered as he felt a totally alien sensation engulf him, searing his mind with its virtue and purity of intention.

'Leave,' Harry said quietly, 'leave and don't come back.' He pushed gently eliciting another scream from his enemy. Harry watched as Voldemort backed away and retreated from his mind, never to return.

Well done, Harry, said Albus, well done, indeed.

Harry was exhausted from the effort but triumphant, 'It worked. I did it.'

Yes, you did. You have learned a valuable lesson tonight, my boy. Now I must leave you to get some rest. Remember what I said about forgiveness. We shall speak again before the battle.

'Wait, don't go yet. There is so much I want to ask you.'

What is it you wish to know?

Harry tried to think of a question. 'Um... um. What's it like there?' he asked eventually.

Where I am now? Albus replied, Oh it's grey, misty a lot like Scotland, really, only warmer.

Harry awoke at dawn, feeling refreshed from sleep for the first time in years. He became aware of someone in the room breathing softly. Hermione had fallen asleep in the chair, waiting to wake him from the nightmare that never came.

He put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. *How on earth am I going to explain all this to Ron and Hermione? Harry asked himself. Hey, you two, I had a long chat with Albus last night and guess what, I have to defeat Voldemort with love. Oh and by the way, Snape isn't really a traitor; in fact, he's still working for us and you'll love this bit - my mum says that if things had been different, I'd be calling him Dad.*

Harry shook his head. They'd have him in a full Body Bind and carted off to St. Mungo's faster than you could say *Accio straitjacket!*. He regarded the sleeping form of Hermione. *The greasy git one of the good guys? She'll never buy it. Never in a million years.*

The Battle Rages On

Chapter 8 of 18

Gains and losses. The Battle and its cost.

THE BATTLE RAGES ON

Disclaimer: All the characters portrayed belong to the wonderful imagination of JK Rowling. I'm just playing honest.

Thanks, as always, to Snarkyroxy for her marvellous Beta-ing skills.

Hermione stirred in the chair, and woke up with a crick in her neck and pins and needles down her arm. Stretching her stiff limbs, she uncurled herself and sat up yawning, wondering what time it was. Hermione smiled, mid-yawn, remembering the rather pleasant dream still vivid in her mind. She had been with Severus, standing in a grove of what looked like oak trees, barefoot and wearing white robes. Although it seemed to be winter, as the ground was frosty and she could see her breath, she didn't feel the cold. Severus was holding her hand, promising to love and protect her and to never betray her trust in him. Minerva was there, she remembered, Remus, Harry and Ginny, too. Severus looked older - in fact they all looked older. A lone tear trickled down her cheek.

Fanciful nonsense, she told herself sharply, rubbing her aching neck.

She glanced over at Harry's bed to see him staring back at her.

'I was just about to wake you and send you back to your own bed,' he said.

Hermione stretched again and yawned. 'Sorry for falling asleep, Harry. Are you okay?'

'Yes,' Harry replied, 'never better. I managed to drive him out - thanks to you.'

'Really? How?'

'Oh, I just focused my mind, like you taught me, and sort of pushed.'

'Harry, that's fantastic.' Hermione stood and walked over to him.

Harry smiled up at her. 'Thank you,' he said taking her hand and squeezing it. 'You know, you're an amazing person, Hermione. Ron's a lucky bloke.'

Hermione smiled at him. 'Think so?'

'Know so. Now go back to bed before he accuses me of trying to steal you off him.'

Hermione laughed at that. 'Get some sleep. It's still early.'

'Will do.' Harry yawned and snuggled into his pillow. 'See you later.'

At Hogwarts later that day, Minerva sat in her study, still shocked by Remus' report. Yes, she had been angry, and yes, she had shouted, but now she just felt weary, weighed down by the enormity of the task that still lay ahead. So much responsibility on such young shoulders. It simply wasn't fair. As for Tom Riddle, how could he have sunk to such levels of depravity? Splitting his soul? It was an insult to the Mother. Minerva stood up and walked over to Albus' portrait.

'Well,' she said, 'no doubt you heard all that. I hope you're satisfied putting those three children in such danger and leaving me to pick up the pieces.' Minerva paused as if willing the portrait to respond. 'So, tell me, Albus, *now* what am I supposed to do?'

Albus snored on. Minerva sighed in exasperation and moved to stand in front of the fireplace. What other secrets were being kept from her? She looked around at what, even now, she thought of as Albus' office. It was still much as he had left it - his inkpot and quill sitting on the desk, the strange whirling silver instruments on their tables merrily emitting puffs of smoke and, saddest of all, Fawkes' golden perch standing, forever empty, behind the door. For the first time it really hit her that she was no longer the Deputy Head just filling in for the Headmaster while he was away on business.

'Perhaps that's the problem,' Minerva mused. 'Everyone else thinks he's coming back as well.' Whether she liked it or not, the yoke of leadership had been very firmly placed on her shoulders for the forthcoming conflict. She was Headmistress now as well as the leader of the Order of the Phoenix, and the defence of the school would be in her hands. It was time to convince everyone else of that fact... a task, she thought, that would not be an easy one.

When faced with a dilemma such as this, Minerva often found it helpful to view the problem from a different perspective. Folding in on herself, she changed into her Animagus form. The bespectacled tabby flicked her tail before settling down on the hearth rug. Licking a paw, she dragged it over an ear. Yes, a cat's eye view of the world was very much simpler and guaranteed to help one focus on the pertinent facts. Minerva curled up and purred, taking pleasure in the warmth of the fire. She would have a nice nap first and then give the matter due consideration.

A day later, after conferring with Harry, Minerva decided to hold a small council of war to discuss the situation. Remus, the Weasleys - with the exception of Percy and Charlie - Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt were asked to attend. At Grimmauld Place, Harry and Ron started to rearrange the kitchen in readiness for the meeting scheduled to take place later that evening, leaving Hermione to sort out the refreshments. Next to the sandwiches on the dresser, Hermione placed a decanter of firewhisky for the men and some gillywater for the ladies.

Merlin knows they're going to need it, she thought as she summoned some glass tumblers from the cupboard.

The three former Horcruxes had also been put on display on the dresser. Hermione found herself inexplicably drawn to the locket.

Obviously meant for a man to wear, she deduced as she regarded the heavy, ornate piece of jewellery. She felt compelled to pick it up. Holding it in the palm of her hand, she traced the double 'S' that formed the snake on the front with her index finger. It was quite beautiful, she thought. Although it was not to her taste, the craftsmanship was undeniably of the finest. It seemed to thrum in her hand, calling to her. She unclasped the chain as if in a trance and went to put it around her neck.

'Stop!' Ron shouted across the kitchen. 'What are you doing?'

'I... I...'

'Don't you know *anything*? You should never, ever put on any jewellery, particularly something that old, without testing it for curses first.' Hermione looked shocked. 'That thing used to belong to the Snake King himself. It could be charmed to strangle anyone but the rightful owner!'

'I... I don't know what came over me,' Hermione stammered.

'Obviously,' said Ron more gently.

'No, really,' Hermione insisted, 'I don't remember picking it up.'

'Hermione?' Harry asked, his voice full of concern.

'I'm okay, honestly,' Hermione replied, still entranced by the locket. She put her hand out towards it again. Ron stopped her.

'I think you'd better move away from it.' Ron led her over to the table and pulled a chair out for her. 'Look, Bill will be over for the meeting later on. I'll ask him to take a look at it, okay? Maybe he can work out what's going on.'

'All right,' Hermione agreed, still feeling a bit shaken by the experience.

'Here,' said Harry, putting a glass of Butterbeer in front of her, 'have some of this.'

Hermione sipped the sickly drink and grimaced. What was it with wizards and sugar?

Ron sat down beside her and picked up the latest edition of the *Daily Prophet*. 'Have you seen this, Harry?' he asked. 'Apparently you've been spotted sunning yourself on a beach in Majorca.'

Harry smiled wryly. 'Yeah, I wish.'

Speculation as to Harry's whereabouts was becoming a national obsession. On one occasion, Rita Skeeter had gone so far as to suggest that he had been killed in a Death Eater raid and that the Ministry was too scared to admit it. This had caused widespread panic among the wizarding general public, forcing the Minister of Magic himself to give a statement to the contrary.

Hermione had noticed a subtle change in Harry. A few weeks ago, the rubbish that was being published in the newspapers would have angered him. Now it didn't seem to bother him at all. It was like water off a duck's back. Harry had become introspective; he was calm and focused - not like Harry at all, in fact. Hermione didn't think it could just be meditation that had caused this transformation.

'I'll tackle him about it after the meeting, she decided.

It wasn't very long before the pops of Apparition were heard, heralding the arrival of their guests. Minerva was keen to take charge and get everyone settled as quickly as possible. There was much scraping of chairs on the flagstones as they all took their seats.

'Thank you all for coming at such short notice,' Minerva began. 'We have a lot to discuss this evening, so we'll get straight on if you don't mind.' She turned to Harry. 'Mr Potter, if you would be so kind.'

Harry cleared his throat and began his tale. Those present who knew nothing about the Horcruxes sat in horrified silence until he had finished.

Molly, predictably, exploded. 'What was Albus *thinking* to involve you in all this?' she spluttered. 'Did *you* know anything about it, Minerva?' Minerva opened her mouth but was cut off. 'I've never heard the like... I mean, *Inferi*, for Merlin's sake! What on *earth* did you three think you were doing handling this by yourselves? I thought *you*,' she rounded on Hermione, 'would have had more sense. And as for you, Remus... well, you're no better. You could all have been killed or seriously maimed.' She glared at them. 'Well, what do you have to say for yourselves, hmm?' She turned to her husband. 'Don't just sit there. Arthur, say something!'

'Well, I...'

'And to think one of those... those *things* was actually in my house and at Christmas... I mean, *Christmas*.' She shook her head and shuddered. 'Wicked, wicked.'

As Molly drew breath, Arthur took the opportunity to try and placate her. 'What's done is done, Molly dear. Now, Harry, you say there is still one Horcrux left. Can you tell us what it is?'

'Yes, Mr Weasley,' Harry replied, 'it's Voldemort's snake, Nagini.'

'Well, that settles it,' Molly said emphatically. 'There's no way you'll be able to get near it.'

'But, Mum...'

'Don't you 'but Mum' me, Ronald Weasley. You may be seventeen but I am not going to allow you *any of you* to go after that snake. What did you think you were going to do? Apparate into Voldemort's lair and kill it under his nose?'

'I was about to say,' Ron replied as firmly as he dared to his mother, 'that I think we will have to wait until the actual battle to dispose of Nagini.'

'But, Ron,' Hermione interjected, 'you're assuming Voldemort will bring the snake with him and that Harry will have time to kill it first.'

'I know,' Ron replied, 'which is why I was about to suggest that, assuming he brings Nagini with him, someone else kills it.'

'Nagini hardly ever leaves Voldemort's side,' Harry offered, 'but there's still the problem of the curse.'

'Do you have an opinion on that, Bill?' Minerva asked.

Bill Weasley thought a moment before replying. 'From what Harry has said, I think it would be impossible to put the same sort of curse on a living creature without killing it. My guess is that Voldemort protects this particular Horcrux by keeping it close to him.'

'Hmm,' said Minerva, taking notes, 'in that case, we would have to come up with a plan to lure Nagini away from Voldemort. Ron, Bill, can I leave this with you?'

The brothers nodded in assent.

'Thank you. Now, Arthur,' she turned to Mr Weasley, 'do you have anything to report?'

Ron's suggestion that there might be moles in the Ministry had led to investigations being made, and certain people in key positions being put under discreet surveillance. One such individual, realising that he was being followed, confessed everything. It transpired that Voldemort had threatened to kill his family if he didn't cooperate.

'The man does not bear the Dark Mark,' Arthur informed them. 'There is no way of telling how many people like him there are. It's very worrying.'

'Does anyone have any idea how big Voldemort's army will be?' Hermione asked.

This was a very good question. Besides the known Death Eaters and those poor souls who had been coerced into service, it was impossible to estimate how many ordinary wizarding folk secretly supported Voldemort and, out of those, how many would actually fight. The wizarding community was basically conservative some would say stagnant and resistant to change. Voldemort wasn't the only one who saw the influx of Muggle-borns as a threat to their way of life. Amongst the purebloods in particular, there were quite a few people who, although they would not go so far as to advocate murder, would be a lot happier if there were fewer Muggle-borns in their midst. They viewed these outsiders with suspicion, coming into the wizarding world with their funny customs and strange clothing, acting like they owned the place. Who did they think they were? If Tom Riddle had been a little less right wing, not so scaly and had had a nice smile, he would have stood a good chance of being elected Minister for Magic.

'No one knows for certain, Hermione,' Arthur answered her, 'but then again, no one knows how many people will come out and fight on our side either.'

Hermione scribbled something on a piece of parchment.

'Any news on the werewolves, Remus?' Minerva asked.

Remus coughed as everyone turned their heads in his direction. 'From what I can gather, support for Voldemort among the werewolves is strong. He has made all sorts of promises in exchange for their loyalty. About half, I believe, will fight for him... in human form, of course.'

'Of course,' said Minerva. 'They would kill indiscriminately otherwise. Well, at least we know Voldemort will not want to attack during the three days around the full moon. Thank you, Remus.' She made a few more notes. 'Alastor, your report please.'

Moody gave his report. 'I have it on reliable authority that Voldemort will be stepping up attacks on Muggles in the next few months, in an attempt to distract the Aurors, while he refines his plans for an assault on Hogwarts. Halloween seems to be his most favoured day for that at the moment.'

Hermione scribbled some more notes on the piece of parchment and frowned. 'Not good,' she said out loud. Everyone turned to look at her.

'Miss Granger?' Minerva enquired.

'I have been doing some Arithmancy calculations,' Hermione explained. 'There are many variables, but from what has been said this evening, I've assumed we will be outnumbered three to one. If Voldemort does attack on Halloween, then by my reckoning he will have an eighty-five per cent chance of victory.'

There was much consternation around the table. 'Are you sure, Miss Granger?' Minerva questioned.

'Yes, I am,' Hermione stated, 'but you may ask Professor Vector to check my figures if you like.'

Harry wasn't listening to Hermione's observations. He was still mulling over Alastor Moody's report. There was only one person who could be his 'reliable authority'.

'Snape's your spy, isn't he?' he asked bluntly.

Moody did not reply. Harry sighed.

'Look,' he said, 'let's all put our cards on the table. There has been far too much secrecy. If I am to go up against Voldemort, I want to know exactly what I'm up against and who to trust. If Snape is still on our side, I need to know.'

Hermione sat bolt upright. *How could I have been so stupid? What's the point in being a spy if you have no one to report to? Moody must be Severus' contact.* She exchanged glances with Ron, who reached out and clasped her hand. Harry took note but said nothing.

'Alastor?' Minerva asked sharply.

'Before I answer that,' Moody replied, 'I want a wand oath from everyone in this room not to repeat what I am about to say.' The old Auror's doctrine of 'constant vigilance' was rising to ever higher levels of paranoia.

'Mr Moody,' said Harry, his voice filled with an authority that made them all jump, 'I trust every person sat at this table with my life. I will tell you what I know about Severus Snape, and then you will do me the same courtesy.' Harry told them all he knew about the Unbreakable Vow. You could have heard a pin drop. 'Well, Mr Moody?'

'Yes,' Moody grudgingly admitted. 'What you say is true. Snape is still spying for us.'

There was bedlam. Hermione gripped Ron's hand and bit back the tears. It took all her strength not to run out of the room. She couldn't begin to get her head around it. She needed to get away. She needed to think. One thing, though, did occur to her. If Dumbledore had told Harry about the Unbreakable Vow, then his attitude towards Severus didn't make any sense. She would have to ask him about it later.

'Order, order,' Minerva tried to make herself heard above the din. 'Please, everyone, I'm as shocked as you are, but we must try to discuss it sensibly.' She turned to Moody. 'Alastor, why was I not told of this?'

'I gave my word to Dumbledore that I would not tell anyone until it became absolutely necessary.'

Minerva sat back in her chair and raised her eyes to heaven. 'Meddlesome old goat!'

Harry got up from the table and stood by the kitchen sink with his back to the assembly. He needed to clear his head.

Trust, Harry. Severus will help you, but you must fight this battle on your terms not Tom's.

Harry knew that Albus was right. The longer they left it, the more people would die. They could not afford to wait until October. It was time to drag Tom Riddle into the light both physically and metaphorically. He turned around to see the others looking at him intently.

'We cannot allow Voldemort to dictate terms any longer,' Harry told them. 'He will undoubtedly want to begin the attack under cover of darkness. At Halloween, it will be dark early, which will give him the advantage. We must somehow take the initiative and bring the timetable forward to the summer, when the nights are shorter.'

'And how do you propose to do that?' Moody asked.

Harry hadn't thought that far. 'I don't know,' he said. 'Does anyone have any ideas?'

They were all silent for a moment. Then Hermione spoke. 'What if he knew we were looking for the Horcruxes? What do you think his reaction would be?'

'He'd be angry, worried and do everything in his power to try to stop us,' Ron answered. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

'Hmm,' Hermione mused, glancing at the *Daily Prophet* 'What if Harry gave an interview to the press saying something like he was on an important mission. He wouldn't have to be specific but, as they'd want to take a photo, we could make sure one of the Horcruxes is in the background.' She looked over to the dresser. To everyone's astonishment, the locket came flying across the room and landed in front of her. 'Alternatively,' she smiled, holding it up by the chain, 'I could be photographed with him wearing this.'

'Hermione...' Ron said warningly.

'It's okay, Ron,' she replied. 'Bill, would you take a look at this for me, please?' Hermione passed the locket across the table to Ron's eldest brother. After several minutes of intricate incantations and complex wand movements, Bill pronounced it safe.

'I can detect no Dark Magic,' Bill said, 'although it is obviously a powerful object.' He held the locket in his hand. 'Hermione, you said you felt something when you held it?'

'Yes,' she replied.

'Hmm. Interesting. I feel nothing. Here,' Bill passed the locket back to Hermione, 'put it on.'

Hermione fastened the chain around her neck. Almost immediately, she began to feel power surging through her. Strands of her hair began to stand up on end.

'I think you should take it off, Hermione,' Ron said worriedly.

'It's all right, Ron,' Bill assured him. He moved a spare piece of parchment towards Hermione. 'Cast *Incendio*,' Bill said, 'but gently.'

Hermione pointed her wand at the parchment, '*Incendio!*' Everyone leapt back as the resulting conflagration burnt a large hole through the centre of the table.

'Impressive,' said Bill, moving towards her.

'But I didn't put any force behind the spell,' Hermione said in amazement.

Bill tried to touch her but found he could not. There was an invisible barrier surrounding her. He stood back. 'I'm going to cast the tickling charm, okay?'

Hermione nodded.

'Rictusempra!'

Nothing happened. Bill tried a few other jinxes and minor hexes with the same result. 'It's very odd,' he said. 'The locket seems to have an affinity with you. If you were a Slytherin, or related to one by blood or marriage, I could understand it, but you're not.'

Hermione said nothing, although the implications were not lost on her.

'Try something stronger,' said Moody, his magic eye swivelling towards Hermione.

'NO!' Ron and Harry exclaimed together.

'Are you suggesting Bill should cast an Unforgivable, Alastor?' Minerva asked incredulously.

'You can try the Imperius Curse if you like,' Hermione offered.

'No, absolutely not,' said Bill.

'Very well,' said Moody, 'then I shall. *Imperio!* Put your hands on your head, Missy.'

Hermione's hands remained resolutely at her side.

'Were you fighting it?' Harry asked.

'No,' Hermione replied, 'there was no need.'

Moody raised his wand again, '*Cru*'

'*Expelliarmus!*' Harry yelled. Moody's wand flew into his hand. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

Moody was unrepentant. 'You'll have to become a lot less squeamish about using the Unforgivables, boy. You're going to need them.'

'Now you listen to me,' Harry said squaring up to him, 'No one, and I meamo *one*, is to cast an Unforgivable on the battlefield.'

'And just how do you expect to kill Voldemort otherwise?' Moody almost snarled.

'I'm not sure, exactly,' Harry replied, 'but I do know this. Voldemort feeds on negative emotions, particularly hatred and fear. The Death Eaters will be using the Killing Curse as it is. If we do the same, we will only add to his power.'

'The prophecy mentioned love,' Hermione offered.

Moody scoffed. 'What prophecy?'

Only a handful of people had been told about Sybill's prediction. Minerva repeated it for the benefit of everyone.

'Before we discuss it further,' Minerva continued, 'let me just say that since becoming Headmistress of Hogwarts, certain things have been revealed to me, some of which I am not at liberty to discuss. However, the combining of the elements referred to in the prophecy is a very ancient spell dating back to the days of the Founders and was designed to protect the school in times of great peril. This, incidentally, confirms to me unequivocally that the battle will take place on Hogwarts' grounds.'

There was a lot of muttering at this piece of information.

'What does the spell involve, Professor?' Hermione asked, unable to contain her curiosity.

'I was coming to that, Miss Granger,' Minerva replied. 'The spell requires a representative from each House, ideally the Head of House, to declare their allegiance while holding something symbolic representing the founder of that House. I intend to stand for Gryffindor. I was its Head a lot longer than I have been Headmistress, and Pomona Sprout and Filius Flitwick will stand for Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw respectively. Unfortunately, Professor Slughorn feels unable to fight and has announced he will be leaving his post at the end of the school year, which means we will have to find someone trustworthy to represent Slytherin.' She paused. 'In view of what has transpired tonight... Alastor, do you think we can trust Severus to do it?'

'A Nundu never changes its spots,' Moody replied.

'Is that everyone's opinion?' Minerva asked.

There was an uneasy silence. Then Harry spoke. 'Dumbledore trusted him and that's good enough for me.'

Hermione was amazed. Harry vouching for Severus? Was he ill? It was simply too weird.

'We must be very certain, Harry,' Minerva said. 'Our victory may very well depend on it. If Severus betrays us at the last minute... well, I don't need to spell it out.'

'I believe we can trust him, too, Professor,' Hermione said.

'So do I.' Ron backed her up.

'Anyone else?' Everyone except Kingsley Shacklebolt shook their heads. 'Kingsley,' Minerva asked, 'do you have any feelings on this matter?'

Kingsley answered carefully. 'Before he killed Dumbledore, I would have trusted Snape implicitly. The fact that he sent Harry one of the Horcruxes suggests to me that he wants Voldemort dead, so I believe we can trust him on that score, but beyond that, I'm not so sure.'

'Thank you for that, Kingsley.' She paused. 'Very well, unless anyone has any strong objections, I am willing to give Severus Snape the benefit of the doubt. But rest assured,' Minerva regarded Moody over her glasses, 'if he betrays us he will die... and by my hand.'

Moody grunted. 'All right, I'll go along with it but I must insist that this information does not leave the room.'

The others assented. The discussion moved on to the last part of the prophecy. Hermione, Ron and Harry had all long worked out that Ginny was the seventh child to which it referred, but it was Minerva who explained it to the others.

Molly broke down. 'No. Absolutely not. Ginny is only sixteen; I forbid it.' She turned to her husband who put her arm around her. 'Isn't it enough that we will be there, Arthur? That all our sons apart from Percy will be there? Do we have to risk sacrificing our only daughter as well? It's too much to ask, it's just... too much.' It was Molly's worst nightmare. In fact, none of the Weasleys were happy about it, and neither was Harry.

Ginny, who had been wondering all along why she had been called to the meeting, spoke up. 'I have always intended to fight in this war alongside my friends and family. After what Voldemort did to me, do you seriously expect me to stay on the sidelines and watch you all go off to do battle without me?'

'Ginny, love,' said Molly, 'you're too young.'

'Perhaps,' Ginny replied getting up and standing behind Harry, 'but if the prophecy is to be believed, that doesn't matter.' She put her hand on his shoulder. 'If Harry needs my wand and my love to defeat Voldemort, then he has them.'

Her family protested, but Ginny stood her ground. She knew she hadn't heard the last of it, either from her family or from Harry, but she was satisfied she had made her position clear.

The meeting continued late into the evening. Battle plans were drawn up and strategies discussed. In view of the fact that they were likely to be outnumbered, Fred and

George were put in charge of 'Diversionary Tactics' in other words, they were given carte blanche to cause as much mayhem and confusion as they possibly could. Hermione revised her figures as they went along, and announced towards the end of the meeting that the odds of victory had turned slightly in their favour assuming everything went to plan.

'Just one more thing before we finish,' Minerva concluded. 'Alastor, you must relay the outcome of this evening to Severus. He has to know what is expected of him and he needs to be warned that we intend on leaking information to the press. Also, I am making it his responsibility to kill Nagini if Voldemort decides to leave her behind.'

'Very well,' Moody agreed, 'I will arrange a meeting but you should know that it isn't easy for him to slip away these days. He is constantly watched by those who are jealous of his position. There are plenty in Voldemort's ranks who would happily betray him to improve their standing.'

After a moment's hesitation, Harry said, 'I think I may be able to help there. Would you excuse me one moment?' He left the table and walked quickly to his room. Once inside, he grabbed a piece of parchment picked up a quill and then stopped, suddenly at a loss as to what he should write. 'Take this as a token of my trust no, too poncy.' He tried again. 'I'm lending you this in good faith... nah, that doesn't sound right either.' Eventually, he settled on 'For your protection. My mother would have wanted you to have it. Use it well. H.P.' Opening his trunk he took out a velvet draw-string bag, placed the parchment inside then went back to the kitchen.

* * *

'Well,' said Ron, flopping down on the sofa next to Hermione, 'that was a turn up for the books. Are you okay?'

'Yes,' Hermione replied, taking his hand. 'A lot of things make more sense now.'

'Yeah,' he agreed. 'Did you see the look on McGonagall's face, though? I thought she was going to cough up a fur ball!'

'Ron!' Hermione giggled in spite of herself.

Harry came into the room, levitating a tray with three mugs of hot chocolate in front of him.

'Thanks, Harry,' Hermione took a mug gratefully. 'Now, are you going to tell us why you've changed your mind about Snape?'

Harry looked sheepish. 'I don't think you'd believe me if I told you.'

'Well,' said Ron, 'if it makes you feel any better, we've had our doubts from the start, but didn't want to say anything either.'

'All right,' Harry said, 'I'll tell you, but this is just between us three.'

So Harry told them of his conversations with Albus. For once in her life, Hermione was speechless.

'Wow,' said Ron, also at a loss for words. 'I mean... wow.'

Harry smiled ruefully. 'Are you going to have me locked up, then?'

'I don't know what to say, Harry,' Hermione eventually spoke, 'but I believe you.'

'Thanks, Hermione, that means a lot to me.' Harry drained the last of his hot chocolate. 'I'm going to my room. I need to do some thinking.'

Ron and Hermione sat in silence for a while after Harry had left. Ron knew he had to ask the question, but was dreading the answer. Where did all this leave them? Hermione, too, had been pondering the same question. Where *did* it leave them? She loved Ron, but it was a love born of friendship not passion. Hermione had suppressed her feelings for Severus, but they had not gone away. Now war was almost upon them and Merlin only knew where they would all be in a few months time. It was impossible to think of any kind of future with things being so uncertain, but she didn't want to use Ron just for her comfort either it wasn't fair on him. Hermione had never lied to Ron about her feelings, and so she told him the truth.

'I understand, Hermione,' Ron said in a small voice, 'but please stay with me until the battle. After that, whatever you decide... well, I won't stand in your way.'

The summer air was still, almost expectant, as if the world was holding its breath. Hermione stood on watch, a solitary figure at the top of the Astronomy Tower. She had volunteered for this duty, needing the time to gather her thoughts. In later years, it would be one of her strongest abiding memories of that fateful evening, those last few minutes of peace as the clock counted down to war. It was inconceivable, Hermione thought as she looked out over the grounds of Hogwarts, that the air would soon be thick with curses, the smoke of battle and the cries of the wounded and dying. It was so peaceful. In those last few seconds, Hermione faced her mortality knowing full well that she might not live to see the dawn, and yet certain that she would fight with her last breath for the cause, for herself and for all Muggle-borns.

As Hermione watched, she saw flames and smoke rising in the distance. Hogsmeade was burning. Voldemort had been incandescent with rage when he saw the photograph of Hermione wearing his locket in *The Quibbler*, but had not changed his strategy. It had taken an article appearing a few weeks later reporting the amazing rediscovery of Rowena Ravenclaw's tiara to spur him into action. Now, this Midsummer Eve, his Death Eaters were ruthlessly attacking Hogsmeade in a futile attempt to lure Harry Potter away from the castle. Aware of his plans, thanks to Severus, Harry would make Voldemort come to him.

The Dark Mark appeared in the sky. It was time. Hermione was by no means a religious person; her parents had been atheists, and for her father, science was the key to unlocking the secrets of the universe. Even magic, in Mr Granger's neat, compartmentalised view of the world, could be explained by science. It was just a question of finding the right box to put it in. Hermione had smiled at that. She knew that magic was as easy to pin down as quicksilver. It was more likely that there was a magical explanation for science than the other way around. And yet, at the moment when the glowing skull appeared over Hogsmeade, she looked to the heavens and prayed, 'Keep him safe. Please, God, keep him safe,' before turning and running down the steps to raise the alarm.

* * *

'It's time, Draco,' said Severus. 'Are you ready?'

'Yes,' Draco replied. 'Good luck, Severus. Be careful.'

Severus raised his wand. '*Petrificus Totalus!*'

Severus gently lowered Draco's rigid body to the ground, cast aside his Death Eater cloak and mask, and Apparated to the Shrieking Shack.

* * *

Hermione stopped to catch her breath on a second floor landing and waited as a convenient staircase swung into position. Hearing voices, she looked over the banister and saw the female members of staff, together with Molly and Ginny, gathered in a circle beneath her.

Minerva spoke. 'We ask for the Mother's protection this evening, and beg her forgiveness for the necessity of this battle and the deaths that will inevitably occur. We pray for the protection of our loved ones and hope that the light will prevail. May tomorrow bring a brighter future for us all, my sisters.'

* * *

'Draco?' Lucius knelt in the dust beside the body of his son. *Finite Incantatem*. What the fuck happened? Where's Severus? He's supposed to be with you.'

'Gone,' Draco croaked.

'What do you mean, gone?'

'Traitor,' Draco replied in a hoarse voice, '... gone... Hogwarts. Couldn't stop...'

'Fuck! I never trusted that bastard. Get up, boy. We have to find the Dark Lord *now*.'

Back at Hogwarts, Filius regarded Godric Gryffindor's sword with envy. 'Are you sure you don't want to swap, Minerva?' He put the tiara on his head. 'I don't think diamonds are me, somehow.'

Minerva's lips twitched slightly at her colleague's attempt at gallows humour, 'I'd love to, Filius; this thing weighs a ton, but you know as well as I do that it's the symbolism that counts.'

'Pity,' he replied, 'it might have come in handy.'

'I'm sure you'll manage fine without it.' Minerva knew that her diminutive Charms professor had more tricks up his sleeve than a wizard three times his stature and would fight with the tenacity of a terrier when push came to shove. 'Ready, Pomona?'

Professor Sprout pushed her hat firmly down on her head. 'Ready,' she replied determinedly. Like all badgers, she was slow to anger but, once enraged, you didn't get in her way if you knew what was good for you.

The three made their way through the crowd to the main doors. There was no sign of Severus.

'We'll have to take our positions without him,' Minerva said, 'and hope he catches up. Miss Granger,' she turned to Hermione, 'make sure he gets the locket.'

'Sonus! Minerva waited for the noise to die down before addressing the troops. 'I do not need to remind you all what we are fighting for or the consequences if we fail.' She opened the great oak doors. 'I can only wish each and every one of you good luck and a safe return.' They all watched Minerva as she put her hand on the wall. The stones rippled under her touch. 'The castle is now on high alert. No one will be able to enter or leave, once the doors are sealed, until victory is ours.' She nodded to Harry. 'Positions, everyone.'

Underground, somewhere between the Shrieking Shack and the Whomping Willow, Severus had run into a problem. Part of the tunnel had collapsed, blocking his escape. Impatiently, Severus blasted the pile of rubble only to have more loose rocks and earth fall on top of him. Cursing and fighting down a rising sense of panic, he began to move the debris more carefully using a combination of magic and his bare hands. He lost valuable minutes creating a space big enough for him to crawl through, but after what seemed like an eternity, Severus emerged the other side, panting and sweating, with his robes torn and his face and hands scratched and bleeding. His Dark Mark began to burn. Ignoring his pain and discomfort, Severus made his way to the exit.

The Death Eaters were already at the gates as Minerva and the soldiers of the Light left the castle and fanned out to take their allotted positions. She did not seem to be in any particular hurry as she led her small party to the higher ground.

'How long will the wards hold, Professor?' Hermione asked anxiously.

Minerva smiled. 'Those wards were created by wizards and witches far greater than Tom Riddle, my dear. They will not come down until I give the order.'

Filius began to weave complicated clouds of coloured smoke which wafted all around them. They could still see through it although it hid them from view. The ruse wouldn't fool Voldemort for long, but it would buy them a few precious extra seconds. Down by the lake, the Weasley twins were also preparing their smoke screens. Everything was in place. Deciding she could no longer wait for Severus, Minerva gave the signal and dropped the wards on the gates. Then all hell broke loose.

By the time Severus made his way around the lake, the battle was in full swing. The air was thick with curses and hexes as the two armies fought for supremacy. Severus could see that the castle's defenders were just about holding their own, even though they were severely outnumbered.

Ducking and diving, he made his way as quickly as he could in the general direction of the Quidditch Pitch. Even with his excellent sense of direction, Severus got a bit disoriented as he contended with the endless stream of smoke bombs, Wildfire Whiz-Bangs and various Confundus Charms that Fred and George were throwing in all directions. Disillusioned, the twins rode their broomsticks over the melee, causing as much havoc as possible and deftly parrying the occasional stray curse that flew their way they hadn't been Gryffindor's Beaters all those years for nothing.

Severus was momentarily taken aback to see a sizeable swamp suddenly materialize between him and the gates, sucking a contingent of Voldemort's supporters into its boggy mud. Severus grinned despite the pain. *Evil little bastards. How the hell those two ended up in Gryffindor, I'll never know.*

Voldemort cut a swathe through the throng, oblivious to the fighting going on around him. Flanked by Lucius on the one side and Draco on the other, he moved unerringly towards his adversary. Nagini slithered behind him.

'Parlour tricks?' Voldemort hissed, waving the smoke aside impatiently. 'Is that the besst they can do?'

A white rabbit hopped out of the cover of the smoke and nonchalantly nibbled the grass. Nagini spotted the movement and swivelled her head towards it.

Rabbit.

It's a trap, said the man's voice in her head.

Nagini smelt and tasted the air with her forked tongue. No, it was definitely a rabbit.

Freshhh meat. Juicccy plump rabbit. Sssucculent fleshhh.

The bunny turned tail and disappeared into the mist. Nagini followed.

'Go after her, Lucius,' Voldemort ordered, 'If anything happens to her, I will hold you personally responsible.'

Lucius bowed. 'Yes, my Lord.'

* * *

From their vantage point, Harry and the others could see that the battle was steadily creeping towards them. Kingsley Shacklebolt and a unit of young Aurors were valiantly struggling to keep a group of Death Eaters from getting any closer.

'We need Severus here, now,' said Minerva. 'Where the hell is he?'

'Here,' he said, removing Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

Hermione's stomach lurched as she turned towards the sound of his voice. *Severus*. She gasped at the sight of his bloodstained face.

Minerva put all her animosity aside. That was for a later time. 'What happened?' she asked seeing the state of him. 'Can you fight?'

'My injuries are superficial,' he replied, clutching his arm. 'I am quite all right.'

'Glad you could make it, Snape,' Harry said without any real malice.

'Potter,' Severus responded stiffly.

Hermione took off the locket and approached him feeling suddenly shy. 'Here,' she said, reaching up to fasten it around his neck. She stood back. 'Do you feel anything?'

'Pardon?'

Hermione reddened. 'The locket. Can you feel its power?'

Strands of Severus' hair began to coil like snakes around his head.

'Well, I think that answers that question.' Hermione smiled at him.

He did not return her smile. For one thing, she was stirring feelings in him he thought he had successfully quashed, and for another, he was astonished at the sense of power that was flowing through his veins. The pain in his arm ceased.

'It will protect you,' Hermione said simply and turned away, her heart breaking at his cold demeanour.

'Are you ready, Severus?' Minerva asked.

'I am.' He grasped the locket in his left hand.

He had never been more ready for anything in his life.

* * *

Where the bloody hell is Bill? Ron was starting to get worried. He wanted to get this over as quickly as possible so he could get to Harry. Prophecy or no, that was where he belonged. He intended to stand shoulder to shoulder with Harry and Hermione come hell or high water. *What if Nagini was too fast for him? I knew we should have used a real rabbit.*

Just then, Bill the Bunny scampered through the mist. Sighing with relief, Ron pointed his wand to Transfigure his brother back to normal. As he did so, Lucius Malfoy appeared in front of him.

'What have we here?' said Lucius raising his wand. 'A lone blood traitor?'

Nagini slithered through the mist, saw the rabbit and rose up to strike.

Ron didn't hesitate. '*Sectumsempra!*'

'*Avada Kedavra!*'

* * *

'Remember,' Harry addressed the others as they took their positions. 'We defend. We do not attack.'

Harry stood, calm and composed, waiting to meet his destiny. He sensed Voldemort's approach long before he saw him.

'We meet again, Harry,' said Voldemort. His red eyes appraised the strong young man in front of him. 'Such a pity,' he sighed, 'we could have accomplished much together.' He regarded the two witches flanking him. 'Ginny, my dear, you *have* grown up. We shall talk later.' Voldemort turned to the wizard at his side. 'Draco, you will dispose of the Mudblood.' He glanced briefly at Severus. 'The traitor, however, is mine.'

Draco did not move.

'Now, Draco.'

'No,' Draco said, tearing off his Death Eater cloak and mask, 'I will not.'

'You disssappoint me, Draco. *Crucio!*'

Draco fell to the ground, screaming in agony.

Voldemort ended the curse. 'I will deal with you, presently. As for you, Severus, your death will neither be quick nor pretty as befitss your treachery.' He faced Harry again. 'Now, where were we? Ah, yes...' He raised his wand.

'I, Minerva, stand for Gryffindor!' A fountain of red sparks shot through the mist and hung in the air. Filius, Pomona and Severus rapidly followed suit, sending volleys of blue, yellow and green sparks respectively to join the red ones above them.

'Pretty,' said Voldemort. 'Shall we get on?' He pointed his wand at Harry. *Ava* '

'*Protego!*'

The holly and the yew locked head to head in a struggle for dominance as they had once before. Simultaneously, Minerva dug deep inside herself and, gathering every last ounce of power in her possession, pointed her wand to the heavens.

'*Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus!*' she shrieked. Gold sparks shot from her wand and merged with the others in the sky. They spun in the air in a swirling vortex for a

moment then headed towards the lake.

Imperceptibly, the wind began to pick up as the ground trembled slightly underfoot.

Harry heard Albus' voice as he battled to fight off the venomous hate behind Voldemort's curse. *Your parents' love is your shield, Harry. Your friends' love is your sword. Use them now.*

The link was at its strongest. Harry realised instantly that Nagini must be dead and that Voldemort was now mortal. Concentrating hard, Harry drew on the love being conveyed to him by his parents, Sirius, Dumbledore and...?

'No, oh gods, no.' Harry faltered.

Voldemort, sensing a weakness, pushed his advantage, sending Harry sprawling on his back.

I said I'd be here, didn't I? said Ron. *Now, get off your arse and fight.*

Blinking back the tears, Harry got to his feet again and managed to block Voldemort's curse once again. Focusing on the love he was feeling, he let it fill his entire being with its power.

'NOW.'

Ginny and Hermione summoned up all the love they could muster and added their power to Harry's wand. Voldemort staggered backwards but managed to counter.

Meanwhile, down by the lake, the normal placid waters started to churn, then turned into a rolling boil as, from its depths, a great golden dragon rose up, unfolded its wings and, with a roar that shook the ground, took to the air. Friend and foe alike stared unbelievably at the enormous beast, then scattered in terror and confusion as the dragon, belching fire and smoke from its great mouth, began picking off the Death Eaters and their unfortunate supporters.

'MORE POWER!' Harry yelled.

Minerva, Filius and Pomona quickly gave Harry their support. Severus, although he knew what was expected of him, doubted that he could be of any use and hung back. Voldemort was really struggling now, but it was still not enough to finish him off.

'SNAPE, WE NEED YOU!' Harry shouted at him.

Hesitantly, Severus raised his wand. Blocking his hatred and revulsion for the wizard who had caused him nothing but grief and misery, he thought instead of the three women he had loved his mother, Lily and Hermione. Holding the locket again, Severus opened his heart.

For Lily.

The seventh wand was too much for Voldemort. With an unearthly scream, he succumbed to the searing, cleansing power flowing through his wand. The light engulfed him, shattering what was left of his body, gathered up the last fragment of his soul and took him home.

The seven collapsed to the ground with exhaustion and relief, but it was not over yet. As the remains of Tom Riddle scattered to the four winds, the Death Eaters that were still alive fell to their knees, clutching their left arms in agony.

'Severus!' Draco screamed, 'Help me!'

Severus, unaffected by the magical backlash, sat rooted to the spot, unable to comprehend why he was being spared.

'It's the locket,' Hermione yelled. 'Go to him!'

Shaken out of his stupor, Severus ran to Draco and pulled him close to his body. Draco stopped screaming. Severus held on to him until the death cries around them had ceased. Then there was an eerie silence. It was over.

Harry put his head in his hands and sobbed. So that was it. Voldemort was dead, but so was his best friend and Merlin knew how many others. Ginny and Hermione crawled over to him and put their arms around him. He held them both tightly, unable to explain why he was crying. Hermione glanced over to where Severus was sitting, wishing she had the courage to go over and comfort him.

Severus sat not quite believing that it was all over and that by some miracle he was still alive. To the east, the first rays of the sun were appearing over the horizon. It was a dawn he had never expected to see. What now? He looked up to see a young Auror pointing his wand at him.

'Severus Snape, I am arresting you'

'Put your wand down, sonny.' It was Moody.

'But he's a Death Eater, sir, and a wanted murderer.'

'Yes, and there will be an enquiry. Now put your wand away.'

'Enquiry, sir?' the young man asked incredulously. 'Don't you mean trial?'

'No, I do not.' Moody turned to Severus. 'Until the Wizengamot convenes, I'm placing you under house arrest, Snape, in the charge of Auror Tonks. I must ask you, however, to surrender your wand.'

Silently, Severus handed it over.

Moody pocketed it. 'For your safety, it would be better if you stayed at Headquarters.' He glanced at Harry, who nodded in agreement. 'Good. That's settled.'

'What about Draco?' Severus asked, indicating the young blond wizard at his side.

'You will have to be taken into custody,' Moody addressed Draco, 'but no doubt your family lawyers will have you out on bail in no time.'

'May I see my father first?' Draco asked.

'Well...'

'I think that's the least we can do,' Minerva intervened. 'He refused to harm Miss Granger, and I will testify to that if necessary.' She felt a tug at her robes and looked down to see a white rabbit trying to attract her attention. 'What on... Oh!' She waved her wand and Bill Weasley appeared crouched at her feet.

'Thank you, Minerva.'

'Bill?' Ginny asked. 'Where's Ron?'

Bill shook his head.

A great keening wail broke the silence. Molly Weasley had discovered the body of her youngest son.

Hermione shivered in the autumn air at the memory. She stared at the stone, wondering what would have happened if Severus had died that day and Ron had survived. Would she have married him? Probably. Would she have been happy? Probably not. Content perhaps but for how long?

Hermione remembered reading somewhere a long time ago that friendship was love without its wings. She had loved Ron and she still missed him, but her love for him had been grounding, safe and comforting. It was nothing like the all encompassing, all pervading kind of love she felt for Severus. The kind of love that was like jumping off a cliff, risking everything for a few moments of flight and not caring if you crashed to the rocks below, only to find yourself soaring like an eagle. There was simply no comparison.

It was getting late. The children would be home in a few hours, and she had some reading to catch up on. Standing up, Hermione kissed the tips of the first two fingers of her right hand and touched the stone before making her way back to the castle.

Sunday Kind of Love

Chapter 9 of 18

Frustrations of various sorts.

SUNDAY KIND OF LOVE

Disclaimer: Everything you recognise belongs to JK Rowling.

Many thanks to Snarkyroxy, beta moste excellent, for her time and support.

Warning for domination and humiliation.

Two-hundred-and-eighty-eight... two-hundred-and-eighty-nine... two-hundred-and-ninety... Severus stirred his experimental potion in a clockwise direction. Glowing an iridescent silver, the concoction was reaching a critical point but was still holding its form. It was coming along beautifully. He switched direction.

Another ten stirs should do it, he thought... three... four... five this was as far as he had got on previous attempts it was still holding together. Severus held his breath... six... seven... eight there was a sudden *pop* as the potion destabilised and ended up, yet again, as a gooey, grey mess at the bottom of the cauldron. Severus threw his stirring rod to one side and slammed his fist on the worktable in frustration.

Wiping his brow with his sleeve, Severus went over to his desk to go over his notes once more. It should have worked. He could see no reason for it not to. It didn't make any sense. Was his own ability to brew it in question? No, impossible. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. He would have to wait until next weekend to try again.

Voldemort's demise had given Severus both the freedom and the time to pursue his academic interests and investigate those avenues of research that had long fascinated him. Like many wizards before him, Severus had often wondered about the very nature of magic itself what it was exactly and where it came from. As a small boy, he had pestered his mother with these questions and more.

'Why aren't the other boys in the street like me, mum? Why can't they do magic?'

Eileen smiled. 'No one knows for sure, pet. It's just something you're born with.'

'So, I've always been a wizard?' Severus asked.

'Yes, always,' his mother replied. 'Even before you were born... well, I knew.'

'How?'

'Let's just say a mother knows these things.' She laughed. 'Now, put your books away before your father gets home.'

Even though life was to steer him onto a very different path, Severus' curiosity on the subject never abated. What, exactly, set wizardkind apart from the rest of humanity? How could a witch or wizard be born to a Muggle, and conversely, how could magical parents produce non-magical offspring? Was magic an external force or did it come from within? Was it a mixture of both?

Two years after the war ended, and quite by accident, he stumbled upon a clue. When Hermione cleared out her parents' house, she brought her father's extensive book collection back to Hogwarts with her. Mr Granger had had similarly eclectic tastes as Severus. He had been fascinated with the field of forensic dentistry and had had more general interests in medicine, genetics and biochemistry. When Severus eventually found the time to peruse these texts, he was astonished at the developments that Muggles had made in these disciplines. He was amazed by the Human Genome Project and DNA sequencing. Here was the key to unlocking the mystery, he realised. The answers to some of his questions, at least, must lie there in the genes.

Enthused by his discovery, Severus contacted St. Mungo's to establish whether or not any research was being done in this field. The medical establishment, he discovered, was well aware of the science of genetics and the advances that had been made by Muggles, but the 'magic' gene, if such a thing existed, was proving harder to pin down than anyone had anticipated. In due course, Severus offered his services to the research team, which were readily accepted.

It took several years, but the team eventually managed to isolate the 'magic' gene. It was hailed as a major breakthrough in magical medicine. There were high hopes for its practical application in the treatment of long-term spell-damaged patients. Severus, however, saw different possibilities in the discovery.

During the course of his research, Severus had examined the DNA of Squibs as well as wizards and, to his surprise, had found the gene responsible for magical ability present in all of the samples. In other words, genetically, there was no difference. Why, then, were Squibs unable to perform magic? It seemed that the science of genetics could only go so far to explain the mystery. Conventional wisdom on the subject prescribed that Squibs were the result of the parents' magic being incompatible. It seemed

logical, therefore, that somewhere along the line, science ended and magic took over.

After much deliberation, Severus put forward the theory that it was not so much a question that a child was born without the ability to do magic, but rather that that ability was blocked in some way. St Mungo's had shown interest in his findings and decided to back his research by awarding him a grant to develop a potion that would release a Squib's latent magic.

The Establishment had a sound reason for sponsoring this line of research. While the official line was that Squibs were rare, the reality was that the chances of a baby with no magical abilities being brought to full term were exceedingly small. For a lot of people, the social stigma of producing a Squib was simply unimaginable. There were spells bordering on Dark Magic that could detect the magical essence of a child early on in pregnancy and, if absent, the pregnancy was simply terminated. Although not in any way condoned by the wizarding world, the practice was not uncommon, particularly amongst the purebloods, where years of vigorous inbreeding had only compounded the problem. Consequently, Severus' research also had the discreet backing of the Ministry of Magic. Severus had great hopes that his discovery would not only reduce the incidence of abortions, but that it would also release the magical potential of those Squibs already born. There was still a possibility, of course, that there would be exceptional circumstances where the parents' magic was truly incompatible, but Severus hoped that in time, that difficulty, too, would be overcome.

Severus knew that if he could pull this off, the financial rewards would be enormous. More importantly, perhaps, it would give him fame rather than notoriety, recognition and a place in history that would overshadow his murky past. If ever there was a chance to brew glory, this was it. His theory, he was certain, was sound, and yet success continued to elude him. What in the name of Merlin was he doing wrong? The achievement of a lifetime was tantalisingly close, dangling like a carrot in front of him, just beyond his grasp. The gods, he thought petulantly, must be having a good laugh at his expense.

* * *

It was a tired, irate and grumpy Severus who returned to his chambers that Sunday afternoon. Hermione was sitting on the sofa, engrossed in the latest copy of *Charm Matters (International Edition)*, when he stormed into the living room. She could see by his thunderous expression that he was not in a very happy mood.

'No luck again, I take it?' she asked.

'No,' Severus replied, going over to the whisky decanter and pouring himself a large one.

'Oh, well. I'm sure you'll get there in the end,' Hermione said indifferently, going back to her magazine.

Severus sat down in the armchair by the fire and glowered at Hermione through hooded eyes. He sipped his drink. 'What are you reading?'

'It's a very interesting article by Bill Weasley on Curse Breaking in Egypt,' Hermione replied, not looking up. 'He's found runes comparable with those in ancient Mayan civilizations. It's a really exciting discovery. I'm so pleased for him.'

Severus swirled the whisky around in the glass and stared at her intently. *Fuck Bill Weasley. Fuck Curse Breaking*, he inwardly fumed. A lack of interest on her part in his work and an enthusiasm for a former career choice was not conducive to putting Severus in a better frame of mind. She had to be taught a lesson.

'Stand up,' he barked.

'I'm reading, Severus.'

'Stand up. I won't tell you again.'

Letting out a long sigh, Hermione put the journal down and did as she was told. There was no point arguing. She stood on the hearth rug, facing him.

'You're looking very pink, Hermione,' he said. 'Why is that?'

'I walked back from Hogsmeade,' she replied. 'I thought the exercise would do me good.'

'Indeed. Rosy cheeks are somewhat... endearing.' He smirked. 'Tell me, are you pink all over?'

'Probably.'

'I'd like to find out. Take off your robe.'

'Severus, the children...'

'Just do it. *Now.*'

Huffing in annoyance, Hermione tugged at the fastenings of her robe.

'Slowly, Hermione... seductively,' Severus almost whispered. 'As if it were the first time.'

Hermione did what was asked of her and dropped her robe on the sofa.

Severus settled back in his chair and took another swig of whisky. He held it in his mouth for a moment, savouring the burn on his tongue. He gazed at his wife of ten years, standing before him in a white cotton bra and a passion-killing pair of comfy old knickers. The furry slippers on her feet did nothing to add to the allure. Still, it was what was underneath that counted.

'Why aren't you wearing any stockings?' he asked.

'My feet were damp after the walk, so I took them off,' Hermione replied, rubbing her arms and shivering slightly.

'Cold?'

Hermione nodded. 'Yes.'

'I'll soon warm you up. Take your bra off and those *things* on your feet.'

Hermione complied without complaint.

Severus sighed contentedly and shifted in his seat to accommodate his burgeoning erection.

'Play with your breasts, Hermione.'

Hermione, not being particularly in the mood, circled her nipples with the tips of her fingers. Severus, however, was having none of it.

'Not like that. Lift them up and squeeze them together. That's better.' Severus took another gulp of whisky. 'Now... I want you to wet your thumbs and rub your nipples for me.' Satisfied that she was following his instructions, Severus put his glass down and steepled his elegant hands together. He rested his chin on his fingertips and peered at her. 'Do you find that arousing, Hermione?'

Hermione felt a delightful little tingle run down her spine. 'Yes, Severus.'

'Do you want more?' he purred.

'Yes.'

'Very well. Run your hands down your sides slowly, slowly, there's no rush and under your knickers.' His hands moved to cover the tent in his robes as she did so. 'Put your fingers in your pussy and tell me how wet you are.'

Hermione pushed her fingers deep inside herself and let out a small moan. 'I'm very wet, Severus.'

'I am very glad to hear it. You may stimulate your clitoris.'

Severus put his head back against the chair and regarded the woman pleasuring herself in front of him. He noted all the usual, subtle signs of her arousal the flush on her upper chest, the pulse point on her throat, the slight flaring of the nostrils as her breath quickened. Hermione had never faked it she had never wanted to but if she had, Severus would have noticed. He knew her body almost as well as he knew his own and would never have been fooled. He watched Hermione's hand moving inside her knickers, beginning to speed up as her orgasm approached. Head back, lips slightly parted, eyelids fluttering, she was almost there.

'Are you close, Hermione?' Severus asked, although he already knew the answer.

'Ye-ess.'

'Then stop.'

Hermione groaned in protest but stilled her hand.

'That's a good girl. Now, turn around and bend over.'

Hermione turned her back on him. As she bent over, she unconsciously put her hand between her legs, seeking some relief.

'Hermione, if I see you touch yourself again without my permission, you will be punished. Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, Severus. I'm sorry.'

'You will be if you disobey me again. Now, my lovely little slut, pull your knickers down not so fast slowly, slowly all the way down. Good. Very... nice. No, don't take them off. Leave them around your ankles.'

As Hermione obeyed his commands, Severus gathered his robes up to his waist and spelled off his underpants. Lightly tracing his fingers over his cock and balls, he let out little sighs of pleasure, delighting in the sensations he was creating. He ordered Hermione down on all fours.

'Keep your head up and arch your back. Legs further apart... That's fine.' *She'll be expecting me to get behind her and fuck her now* he thought. *Well, she's going to be disappointed.* She would feel as frustrated as he did by the time he'd finished with her. He grasped his cock more firmly.

'Now, what to do with you?' He kept her waiting a few moments while he pretended to think. 'Put two fingers in your pussy,' he finally instructed. 'No, not underneath, from the back.' It was an awkward position, but Hermione managed to do as he asked. 'Yes, like that. Now, move your fingers in and out. How does that feel, Hermione?'

'It feels... good,' she gasped. 'Very... good.'

'I suppose you would like to climax?'

'Yes. Please.'

'Unfortunately for you, I am not feeling generous. Continue what you are doing, but you are not to come under any circumstances. Do you understand?'

'I... understand.' Hermione was desperate to come but knew the consequences would be dire if she did. She heard Severus' breath hitch and looked back. He was languidly stroking his cock, observing her.

'I did not tell you to look at me.' His voice was husky, but still controlled. 'Keep your eyes *down*.'

Hermione looked away quickly.

'I suppose you want me to bury my cock inside you, Hermione?'

'Ye-es, very much.'

'Then beg me for it.'

'Please, Severus, fuck me. Oh, please... please. I want to come so badly.'

'Are you sure? Wouldn't you rather be reading about... Curse Breaking?'

'No... no...' she whimpered, 'please... I '

'I believe I shall... not.' He laughed quietly at her discomfort. 'Not now, at any rate.'

'Please... I need...'

'I said no.' He smirked at her howl of displeasure. 'You've been a bad girl, Hermione. Now, drag those fingers back and put them in your arse all the way in, as far as they'll go.'

It was fortunate that she was so wet. Using her juices for lubrication, she carefully stretched her anus and eased her fingers inside.

Severus groaned at the visual display of wantonness before him. His breathing grew more ragged as his hand moved faster over his cock.

'Pump them... faster... oh, yes... like that.' Severus pressed his head against the chair and arched his back as he felt the familiar rush. 'Oh, gods, you dirty little *bitch*.' He thrust his hips up, whole body jerking, and came, shuddering into his fist.

Taking in great gulps of air, Severus cast a quick Cleaning Charm over his groin and rearranged his robes. 'Come here,' he demanded hoarsely, still out of breath, 'and lick my fingers.'

Hermione turned around and crawled on her hands and knees towards him. Still hopeful that Severus would allow her to orgasm, Hermione maintained eye contact while she licked the palm of his hand clean. Eyes crazed with lust, she sucked each finger in turn, finishing with his thumb. Severus, however, remained unmoved by her silent

pleading.

'Lie over my knees.'

'But, Severus, the children will be back any minute.'

'Then you had better hurry up.' Severus drained the remainder of his whisky while Hermione climbed over his lap. 'Legs apart.' He Transfigured the whisky tumbler into a medium-sized butt-plug, parted her cheeks and inserted it firmly into her anus.

'There.' Severus tapped the end of the plug with his wand, charming it to slowly expand inside her. 'You should be nicely dilated for me in a few hours.' He gave her bottom a few light smacks. 'I'm going to fuck you hard tonight, wife, and I'm in no mood for foreplay. Once the children are in bed, I want you to go into the bedroom, disrobe and await my pleasure. Do not attempt to find release before then.' He pushed her roughly off his lap and onto the floor. 'Now, get dressed.'

* * *

Severus was true to his word. From the time he grabbed her by the hair and threw her on the bed, Hermione knew she was in for a rough night. He had been like a man possessed grabbing, clawing, biting using her for his own pleasure, then casting her aside like some unwanted toy, leaving her bruised and sore with a thumping headache. Severus had finally allowed her an orgasm, more for his gratification than for hers, rolled off her and gone to sleep.

Hermione lay on her back, listening to the rhythm of his breathing, and wondered if he'd mind if she took a potion for her throbbing head. She knew he would be annoyed if she healed her injuries herself, but surely he wouldn't notice the lack of a headache in the morning? Hermione had a nine o'clock class and desperately needed some rest. She decided to risk it.

Hermione got up, crept quietly into the bathroom, took a phial from the cabinet and downed it in one. It tasted foul, but she felt better immediately. Summoning a glass of water to take away the taste, she glanced at herself in the mirror. It was not a pretty sight.

'Gods, what a mess,' she muttered, staring at her reflection in horror. 'I really need to do something about this... this *Niffler's nest*. Hermione tried to run her fingers through her hair, but it was too tangled from all the twisting and pulling.

The mirror decided not to comment on the bruises, scratches and bite marks, or on her puffy eyes, red from crying. It had seen it too many times before.

'You need a good cut, dear,' said the mirror. 'I've been telling you for years.'

Hermione sighed. The mirror was right. Her hair was beyond redemption. She would owl Ginny during the week for the name of her hairdresser and make an appointment.

Later, still unable to sleep, Hermione lay on her side, staring at Severus' back. He was snoring softly. It was strange, she thought, that most people thought of her husband as a cold, emotionless man, when, in fact, he was quite the opposite. Severus was capable of tremendous extremes of passion he merely kept himself in check most of the time. In turn, he could be tender, rough, and sometimes sadistic. It just went to show, Hermione thought as she eventually drifted off to sleep, that one should never judge a book by its cover. Her husband was a complex man, of that she had no doubt. She knew when she married him that she was taking on a wizard with demons, insecurities, a dreadful past and a whole load of guilt, and yet she had loved him in spite of his faults and she still did.

It had taken a long time for Severus to open up to Hermione entirely, since life had taught him from an early age that emotions were something you kept hidden at all costs. As a child, his deceptively fragile-looking body and singular looks had made him a target for no end of bullying. Tall, pale and skinny, with silky hair and long slender hands, he endured a relentless onslaught of punching, kicking and name-calling. He had no friends among the boys his own age, as he had no interest in their games and preferred his books to football. Severus learnt not to show his feelings when they thumped him and called him a poof crying only made the punishment worse but it hurt just the same. As for the girls, well, they always seemed to want to kiss him, so he avoided them like the plague.

His mother was sympathetic but firm. 'Remember they are Muggles, Severus,' Eileen told him. 'Never be tempted to harm them. It is always better to keep out of their way.'

Heeding his mother's advice, Severus kept himself to himself as much as possible, preferring his own company or that of his mother, who told him tales of her own childhood and her time at Hogwarts. Then, one day, he came home from school with a black eye and a bloody nose.

'Severus, have you been fighting?' His mother was appalled.

'No, Mum.' He had been ambushed by a gang of much bigger boys. He burst into tears. Eileen set about drying his eyes and cleaning up the blood.

Severus' father, who happened to be home that afternoon, was not impressed. 'Stop mollycoddling the lad, woman. He's got to learn to fight his own battles.' He turned to his son. 'And you, Sev'rus, stop that snivelling before I really give you something to cry about.'

Tobias Snape was something of a man's man. He liked a couple of pints with his mates down the pub after work, a game of darts on Friday, and the occasional flutter on the horses. He enjoyed watching the sport on the telly, used to be an amateur boxer in his youth, and had been known to keep the odd whippet. How this pale, ethereal, peculiar child had sprung from his loins was beyond him. He simply could not understand it. One thing was for sure, though; the boy needed toughening up or he was going to get the shit kicked out of him on a regular basis.

'Come 'ere, lad,' he ordered. 'It's time you learned to defend yourself.'

Severus approached his father warily and with good reason. On the rare occasion his father took any notice of him, it was usually to yell at him or to be on the receiving end of the back of his hand. What followed became the only memory Severus ever had of his father paying him any positive attention.

'All bullies are cowards,' Tobias began. 'If they think you're weak, they'll always pick on you. If you fight back, they'll leave you alone. Watch me.' Severus gave his father his undivided attention. 'Put your fists up like this.' Tobias demonstrated. 'Now, protect your chin with your left hand and jab with your right, like so.'

Transfixed, Severus stared at his father before slowly raising his hands to mimic his movements.

'That's the way.' Tobias got down on his knees and put his hands out, palms facing his son. 'Now, hit my hands. Right... right... that's it. Now throw a left. Good.'

Severus' eyes lit up in wonder. His father was showing an interest in him and was actually praising his efforts. He determined to impress him.

Eileen looked on disapprovingly. This did not bode well. Their son was a wizard, for Merlin's sake! In a few years time, he would be able to take on the entire school with one hand tied behind his back and reduce them all to dust. Encouraging him to fight with Muggles was a really bad idea. Who knew where it might lead?

'Pretend my hands are those bullies now, son,' she heard her husband say, 'and put your weight behind them punches.'

Severus did so. *Take that... and... that... and... THAT.* He punched harder and started to sweat with the exertion. It felt good to imagine pulverising his enemies with his bare hands. All his pent up rage and resentment came to the surface as he sparred with his father. *Right, right... left. Right, right... left. Hate you... and... you... and... YOU.*

'Good lad. That's grand. Keep it up.'

Deep in his belly, Severus felt something surge. He wasn't sure what it was, but he knew if he didn't stop, something bad was going to happen. He didn't want to hurt his

father; he was only trying to help him. Severus firmly pushed his anger and frustration back down and stood still, panting.

Control.

'Well done, Severus.' Tobias ruffled his son's hair. 'That were a good effort, that were.'

Severus grinned at the rare show of approval.

'But remember, in a street fight the Marquis of Queensbury rules don't apply.' Tobias touched the side of his nose with his forefinger and winked. 'When in doubt, a well-aimed kick in the knackers is as good a defence as any.'

'Tobias!'

* * *

Eileen's worst fears were confirmed a few days later when, attacked by the same gang of boys, Severus retaliated. Lashing out with his fists against his tormentors, Severus let his anger go and held nothing back. The spectacular burst of spontaneous magic resulted in the hospitalisation of three of the gang and a visit from the Ministry for his parents. His father had taken his belt to him for that, but Severus never cried out once. It was worth it. He knew for certain now that he was going to be a powerful wizard. No Muggle boy would ever dare touch him again. But what about wizards his own age? What could he expect when he got to Hogwarts?

Severus decided to leave nothing to chance. By the time he received his letter, he had already memorised a few choice hexes, and it wasn't long after his arrival at Hogwarts before he had to put them to good use. He quickly realised that bullies were not confined to the Muggle world, only this time he was prepared for them. Most people soon gave him a wide berth once they had been at the wrong end of his wand, and generally left him alone. Severus was still a friendless misfit, but at Hogwarts he was a friendless misfit who was grudgingly respected. He could live with that.

The Marauders, though, were something else, and it wasn't long before he attracted their attention. Severus had been standing in the corridor just before his first Potions lesson, minding his own business, when Sirius Black deliberately shoved him into the wall. He looked up to see Potter, Lupin and Pettigrew laughing hysterically. From that day on, Potter and his cronies went out of their way to make Severus' life a living hell. They were always careful not to go one on one with him, however, and usually hunted as a pack. For the most part, Severus kept his cool, ignored them as much as possible, and treated them with the contempt they deserved.

Adolescence and the rampaging hormones that went with it brought its own problems. Severus put on a growing spurt that made him feel gangly and awkward. He knew he was not attractive, as girls giggled whenever he passed them in the corridors and huddled together, whispering. As a defence, he adopted a haughty air and a cutting way with words. While his voice was breaking, he didn't trust it to shout at them, so he developed a series of terrifying glares that usually sent them running. Love, he decided, was for the Sirius Blacks of this world.

But there was one girl who refused to be intimidated. Lily Evans. Nothing he did could shake her off. Whatever he did, she insisted on being nice to him. Severus found her actions suspicious. She was an intelligent witch she didn't need his help with her homework what was she after? He got his answer when she pinched his bum one day in the Potions storeroom. He turned around, mouth open, to give her a piece of his mind only to find himself drowning in a soul-sucking kiss worthy of a Dementor.

It was just his luck, of course, to fall for a Muggle-born witch and a Gryffindor to boot.

With Lily, Severus felt a different kind of magic swell inside him, a kind that made him feel good. In her arms, he knew joy. Yet again he had to repress his feelings, even though he wanted to shout his love for the girl with the red hair and green eyes from the top of the Astronomy Tower. There were no romantic interludes in Hogsmeade or moonlight broom rides for them. They had to keep their dangerous liaison a secret, snatching a few stolen moments here and there whenever they could, looking forward to the time when they would leave school and House loyalties would no longer matter. Then came the fateful day when Severus called Lily a Mudblood, and drove her straight into the arms of James Potter.

If Severus thought he had felt pain in the past, it was nothing compared to that. But as his was a love that had never officially existed, he couldn't even show how much his heart was breaking. Watching the girl he loved wrapping herself around his archenemy almost drove Severus over the edge. Severus wished a thousand painful deaths on James Potter as his magic boiled inside him. Gods, how he hated that bastard.

Control.

In his rage and self-pity, Severus cast aside any romantic hopes and dreams he may have had. Love was for fools; it made you weak. He was a powerful wizard, he could do without it. Cynical and embittered, Severus locked his heart away where he thought nobody would find it, and turned to a madman who made him all kinds of promises in return for a vow of undying loyalty. Severus thought that taking the Dark Mark would serve him well and secure him a prominent place in the New Order. Instead, it started a chain of events that led to twenty years of misery, remorse and self-loathing.

By the time he became a double agent, repressing his emotions had become second nature to Severus. It was one of the reasons why he was such a superb Occlumens and probably accounted for how he managed to stay alive and fool Voldemort for as long as he did. But it had come at a price. He had taken an oath to avenge Lily's murder. Everything was secondary to that. Work, ambition, relationships, Severus abstained from all emotional involvement in order to apply himself zealously to his self-appointed mission. That was not to say he chose to live like a monk. He took his pleasure of women whenever he felt the urge, using their bodies as he saw fit, but other than Magenta, he rarely had sex with the same woman twice.

As the years passed, Severus grew more insular and detached. He hid behind his 'Bat of the Dungeons' persona terrifying the children in his charge and keeping his colleagues at arms length, biding his time until he could avenge Lily's death. Severus looked for no future beyond that. He deserved none. So, sealed up in a tomb of his own making, Severus prayed for the downfall of Voldemort and looked forward to the day when he would be released from his miserable existence.

The Fates, however, had other plans. Bottled up emotions have a nasty habit of making their presence felt and demanding your attention when you least expect it. At a time when he could least afford it, Severus found himself infatuated with a Gryffindor girl once more, only this time, he was her teacher and she was young enough to be his daughter. Forbidden fruit again, more guilt again, more feelings to stifle again. Even when he realised his feelings were reciprocated, he could not bring himself to consider that there may be a chance of a long-term relationship. Hermione was young; she would leave him, just like Lily had done. Severus tried to convince himself that his feelings for her were nothing more than lust, but it was in vain. At thirty-seven, Severus Snape may have been more sexually experienced than the average wizard, but in matters of the heart, he was still an inept seventeen year old.

Knowing the dreadful task that Dumbledore had set him, Severus could only despair at the irony of it. The gods were showing him a glimpse of paradise, knowing full well that they were going to snatch it away from him again. Would they ever allow him to atone for his sins? How much more was he expected to take?

When he fled Hogwarts, Severus took his love for Hermione and kept it safely hidden away. He was careful to clear his mind in Voldemort's presence, but allowed himself a little time every night to think of her before he sank into troubled sleep. With Dumbledore dead, he was even more convinced that he wouldn't survive the final conflict, but now, as well as seeking revenge for Lily, he would be fighting for a world that would be safe for his beloved Hermione to live in. That thought alone gave him great comfort.

As war approached, Severus suppressed all thoughts of love and concentrated on the task in hand. Then Moody informed him of the final battle plan and gave him the bag containing Potter's Invisibility Cloak. He was stunned, to say the least. Severus had resigned himself to an ignoble death as befitted a traitor and murderer. He had never trusted Moody even though Albus had assured him that he would leave testimony regarding Severus' orders to kill him, he had expected Moody to hide the evidence once Albus was dead. Now Potter, of all people, was extending him a hand of friendship, and Minerva was asking him to stand beside her to represent Slytherin. A tiny spark of hope ignited in his soul.

On the battlefield, Severus had to hold back when he saw Hermione standing at Harry's side. She looked like some Celtic warrior princess. Although it filled him with pride to see the determined look on her face as she stood ready to defend Lily's son to the death, all his instincts told him to sweep her up in his arms and carry her out of

harm's way. Then, when she reached up to put the locket around his neck, his feelings for her threatened to overwhelm him. He noticed the fleeting look of hurt cross her face when he reacted coldly towards her, but she had turned away before he could say anything. For the first time, he realised that he actually wanted to survive the battle, that there was something no, *someone* to live for. With that liberating thought, Severus felt a shift in him that gave him the final impetus to relinquish the burden of hatred he had carried for so many years. He felt a tremendous surge of unconditional love fill his body as he added his wand to the others; a sense of connection and a feeling of peace. Then it was all over; he was alive. Now what?

* * *

Severus sat at the kitchen table at Grimmauld Place, staring at the untouched, rapidly cooling mug of tea in front of him. He had not asked for it, but Tonks had made it just the same. She sat down opposite him without saying a word. She had no idea what to say. Moody had not told her why Snape was not taken into custody, and she didn't think Severus would tell her if she asked. Instead, noticing the state he was in, Tonks took out her wand. Severus flinched.

'It's okay, Sev,' Tonks said. 'I just thought I'd tidy you up a bit. Don't want people to think you got those cuts and bruises from me.'

Severus nodded curtly.

Tonks got to work cleaning him up and healing his wounds, finishing with a flourish and a quick *Reparo* to fix his torn clothing.

'There,' she said briskly. 'Good as new.'

Good as new was not exactly how Severus felt, but he thanked her anyway.

They sat in silence again until the unmistakable *pop* of Apparition was heard upstairs. A few moments later, Harry entered the kitchen, supporting a weeping Hermione. He nodded to his guests.

'Just thought you'd like to know that Remus was hurt, but he's going to be okay.'

Tonks' shoulders slumped in relief.

'Remus' room is made up as is the room next to it. Hermione and I will be in Ron's room if anyone wants us.' And with that, they turned and left.

Severus stared at their retreating backs. *So, he thought bitterly, history repeats itself. First Potter, now his... whelp.* He felt his newfound peace of mind rapidly evaporate as his magic burned inside him.

Control.

A/N 'The Marquis of Queensbury Rules' were laid down in the late nineteenth century to govern the sport of boxing. Named after the 8th Marquis of Queensbury who endorsed them, they still form the basis of the rules that govern the modern 'sport'.

Changes

Chapter 10 of 18

Severus struggles to come to terms with life after Voldemort.

Disclaimer: Anything recognisable belongs to JK Rowling.

Many thanks to Snarkyroxy for beta-ing and for her time and encouragement.

Changes

Alone at last, Severus leaned back against the bedroom door, his mind and emotions in turmoil. Closing his eyes, he stood motionless for a moment, contemplating the night's events. Against all the odds, he had somehow managed to come through the battle unscathed. 'I am alive,' Severus said out loud for the first time, still not daring to quite believe it.

Alive, but with his fate in the hands of the Wizengamot. Severus had never envisaged such an outcome. He had been fully prepared to forfeit his life to atone for his many sins, yet death had been denied him. Now his future hung in the balance. Was there really any hope for clemency and the freedom at last to live his own life? Severus thought it unlikely. No, he had killed Albus Dumbledore. There was no getting away from that fact, and he would readily admit it to save everyone the time and expense of a trial. In all likelihood, he would be in Azkaban by the end of the week.

Opening his eyes, Severus fleetingly looked around the unfamiliar room he had been allocated. Unlike most of the bedrooms in Sirius Black's old house, this one was pleasingly decorated and remarkably devoid of clutter. Sparsely furnished by Grimmauld Place standards, the room was dominated by a large, but not overly ornate, bed. The rest of the furniture comprised a wardrobe and dressing-table in the same style, a small writing desk and straight-back chair, a comfy looking, if rather chintzy, armchair by the window with matching footstool, and an old-fashioned wash-stand complete with china bowl and water jug.

Severus walked wearily over to the bed, sat down and took his boots off. It was already morning and he hadn't slept in what seemed like an eternity, yet Severus was still very much awake. Although physically exhausted, his mind refused to slow down as the same images flashed through his mind over and over again. Hermione smiling, Voldemort dying, Death Eaters screaming, Hermione crying. Severus sighed and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He had to calm his mind and put his chaotic thoughts in some sort of order before he could attempt to sleep.

All right, Severus reasoned with himself, let's go over the facts. I did not expect to survive, but I did. More importantly, I have achieved my objective. Apart from Draco, I am the only Death Eater left standing. The Da He inhaled deeply.

'*Vol-Voldemort* is dead,' he said aloud, trembling slightly, 'Tom Riddle is dead. I am no longer his slave.' He gripped his left arm instinctively, as if expecting it to burn for his impertinence but, of course, it did not. Severus allowed himself a small smile at that. The bastard was dead, and this time he would stay dead. He had avenged Lily, and

Hermione was safe. Right now, that was all he could bring himself to care about.

Reluctantly, he turned his thoughts to Hermione. Severus put his head in his hands and groaned. It pained him to think about her. During the battle, Severus had been certain that she had been glad to see him, but in retrospect, he considered it more likely that she was just being her usual kindhearted self. *She did look dismayed when I was cold towards her, though*, he thought briefly, before quickly dismissing the possibility, *but in all probability it was merely annoyance at my ingratitude.*

Those few precious months Hermione had spent working at his side now seemed like something from another life. Severus stroked his cheek, recalling her tender caresses. Hermione had been genuinely concerned for his welfare then, of that he was certain. She had offered him her assistance out of the goodness of her heart at a time when he had been close to breaking point. Her quick thinking had undoubtedly saved his life, and afterwards she had tended to his injuries with unwarranted care and compassion.

A decent man, he thought, *would have responded with affection and treated her with the respect and admiration she deserved. Instead, I chose to abuse her and take her up against a wall like some common tart!* It was no wonder she wanted nothing more to do with him. Hermione had moved on, and who could blame her?

Severus got up and began to pace the room. It was to be expected, he supposed. He had been a fool to think they could have had any kind of future together, and, in any case, what could he have possibly hoped to offer her? He had no job, no prospects. He was an embittered ex-spy with blood on his hands. He *had* no future. Potter was young, wealthy, famous and would have the undying gratitude of the wizarding world for killing Voldemort. How could he compete with that? He had to face facts. He was no great catch. Furthermore, he had outlived his usefulness. Severus stopped his pacing abruptly, realising he had finally hit on the crux of the matter.

There is no longer any point to my existence. Severus suddenly felt lost, empty and very much alone.

The dressing-table caught his attention. The only mirror in the room rested upon it, hidden behind a fringed, dark green velvet cloth. Since Albus' death, Severus had barely glanced in a mirror, unwilling to look himself in the eye. It was time, he decided, to take a long, hard look at himself.

Severus regarded the cloth with some trepidation. It was unwise to approach unfamiliar magical mirrors without taking the proper precautions, as they could serve a variety of functions and no two were exactly the same. Some mirrors were friendly, some were not, and some were downright dangerous. There were mirrors that would show you as you really were on the inside, mirrors that would flatter, mirrors that would show you your ideal self or what you could be if you put your mind to it. Some showed your darkest desires; some showed visions of the future. Others would tempt the unwary into an alternate universe with promise of wealth and all manner of worldly delights. The possibilities were virtually limitless. Unfortunately, the only way of finding out what sort of mirror you had in front of you was by looking into it. It was always a risky business, and, for Severus, as he was no longer in possession of his wand, even more so. Looking around for an alternative weapon, he spotted a heavy cut-glass paperweight on the writing desk.

That will do. Very few mirrors were shatterproof, even though most could magically repair themselves. It would give him a few moments to get out of the room if anything untoward happened.

Holding the paperweight in his right hand, Severus grabbed hold of the cloth with his left, tugged, then stepped back quickly. The mirror appeared fogged, which was not unusual in itself, but he kept a safe distance nonetheless. After a few seconds, the fog cleared to reveal Severus' normal reflection. He stared at it expectantly. The reflection blinked a few times before squinting at its alter ego through the mirror.

'Ye gods, man! What happened to you? You look like you've been...' It trailed off and took a step closer, peering at him. 'Is that nose real?'

Severus gripped the paperweight tightly, ignoring the insult. It seemed harmless enough, no worse in fact than his old mirror at Hogwarts, but there was only one way of finding out for sure. Feeling ridiculous, as he always did on these occasions, Severus faced the mirror squarely, cleared his throat and recited the standard incantation.

'Mirror, mirror on the table,

Tell me true if you are able,

What purpose serve you, good or ill?

What secrets guard, what dreams fulfil?

Tell me now, for time is pressing,

Spit it out, don't keep me guessing!'

To Severus' mortification, instead of making the formal response he expected, his reflection reached into its sleeve, whipped out a white lacy handkerchief with a dramatic flourish and dabbed its eyes daintily.

'That was beautiful,' it sniffed, 'simply... beautiful.' Seeing the murderous look in Severus' eyes, it quickly added, 'Forgive me. It's been simply *ages* since I've heard that, you see and... ah, well, what's passed is passed.' It sighed wistfully before regaining its composure. 'But, don't you have a *wonderful* voice.' Severus' image smiled brightly. 'Tell me, have you ever thought of going on the stage?'

Severus clenched his fists. 'State your purpose,' he hissed through gritted teeth, 'this *instant*.'

'Oh, very well. Keep your hair on. That is... your own... Yes, yes, of course it is!' Mirror Severus pulled out the stool from under the dressing-table and sat down. 'Oh, but I'm forgetting my manners.' He waved his hankie in Severus' general direction, 'Sit, sit and *please* put down that paperweight. You're making me *terribly* nervous.'

Severus huffed loudly but kept his temper as he pulled out the corresponding stool and sat down. 'Well?'

The reflection put its elbows on the dressing-table, rested its chin on the backs of its hands and studied the man in the mirror before speaking. '*I am a confidante looking-glass*,' it stated proudly.

Severus looked puzzled. 'A confidant looking-glass? What in Merlin's name is that?'

His reflection looked hurt. 'Not a confi-*dant* looking-glass, a confi-*dante* looking-glass. A lady's confidante looking-glass to be precise.'

'Explain.'

'You mean you don't know?' Mirror Severus was appalled. 'No lady's boudoir is complete without a confidante looking-glass.'

'I am not in the habit of frequenting ladies' boudoirs,' Severus said icily.

His reflection tilted its head to one side and regarded the dour, haggard-looking wizard intently. 'No,' it said solemnly, 'I daresay you're not.'

It was probably a measure of Severus' extreme fatigue that he did not hurl the paperweight at it, or maybe it was due to the fact that the events of the last twenty-four hours made the jibes of a clearly insane mirror fade into insignificance. Whatever the reason, Severus did not have the energy to respond.

'Anyway,' the mirror soldiered on, 'my purpose, since you ask, is to provide a friendly ear, a shoulder to cry on and to give sound advice when asked for.'

'Advice?'

'Yes,' his image replied, 'you know the sort of thing the latest fashion trends, jewellery, hair styles...'

'Just what I need,' Severus muttered under his breath.

The mirror ignored him. 'Over the years, I have been party to the innermost secrets of generations of daughters of the House of Black. I have listened to their most intimate hopes and dreams, shared their triumphs and their tragedies. The tales I could tell... but then I wouldn't be much of a confidante, would I?' it laughed. 'And in any case, I'm enchanted to secrecy. But, oh, the parties, the balls... such finery, such... glamour.' It sighed heavily. 'Ah, happy days.'

'So,' said Severus tersely, 'in essence, your function is to engage in idle chitchat with empty-headed, vacuous young women!'

His reflection was affronted. 'I resent that! I'll have you know my advice was always greatly appreciated by my ladies, and proved invaluable on numerous occasions.' The reflection leaned in closer to the mirror and murmured conspiratorially, 'But then, of course, I do have other uses.'

Severus scoffed. 'Oh, please, do enlighten me.'

His image looked around as if expecting to see someone behind it before turning back to Severus. 'I am also a spy,' it whispered.

Severus raised a quizzical eyebrow. 'Continue.'

Mirror Severus pointed to the bedroom door in his reality. 'I can walk out of that door and go to any room in this house. If there is a looking-glass, I can take a peek into your world and see what's going on.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really,' the mirror replied. 'The young ladies in my charge had me watch their many suitors to establish their intentions. I used to sneak into the guest rooms and eavesdrop on the young men's conversations with their valets. Very often, they would let slip that they were only interested in the inheritance of the young lady in question.'

'I see,' said Severus, mulling over the possibilities. 'That does have its merits.'

'Yes,' the mirror continued warming to its theme, 'and while their latest beaux were in a state of... *dishabille*, it didn't do any harm to inspect the size of their '

'I get the picture,' Severus interrupted hastily. 'So, in addition to serving as a gossip monger for indolent young women with too much time on their hands, you are a peeping Tom as well!'

The mirror was unrepentant. 'I am rather proud of the fact that I have saved many a young lady of this house from a most *disappointing* alliance. But enough of me.' His reflection shifted on its stool and leaned in until its nose was almost touching the mirror. 'Now,' it said in all seriousness, 'it's your turn. You tell me, Severus Snape, what pray is *your* purpose?'

Severus leapt from the stool as if it had ignited beneath him and staggered backwards. 'What how do you know my name?'

'I am your reflection,' the mirror replied. 'I know all there is to know about you.'

'Impossible.'

'I beg to differ,' it said sternly. 'I know that you *were* a teacher, a Death Eater and a spy. You are no longer any of those things. So, what, exactly, are you now?'

Severus sank to his knees in defeat. 'Nothing,' he admitted miserably, 'I am nothing.'

'Nonsense,' said the mirror more gently. 'I see a man who has made mistakes, but who had the courage to make amends for them at great personal cost. From what I can gather, you're a hero. But...' The mirror paused. 'I sense you are more concerned about the actions of a certain young lady than the good opinion of the Wizengamot.'

Severus remained silent.

'Well,' his reflection said, standing up, *that* is something I may be able to help you with.' It walked towards the bedroom door on its side of the mirror. 'I'll just go and find out what she's up to. Back in a tick.'

'No!' Severus protested. 'You will not snoop on Miss Granger. I forbid it!'

But it was too late. By the time Severus got to his feet, his counterpart had already left the room.

* * *

Crookshanks found his mistress sitting on the bed with the Scarred One. What was going on? Why was she so upset and what was the Dark Man doing back in the house? He hadn't seen him in a while.

'Oh, Crooks,' Hermione cried, lifting her pet onto the bed, 'Ron died last night.'

Died? Her mate was dead? No wonder she was distressed. Crookshanks put his paw on her knee to offer his condolences. The Scarred One seemed upset, too. The half-Kneazle watched intently as Harry gave Hermione a tissue and put his arm around her. They sat in silence a little while before Harry finally spoke.

'Hermione, there is something you should know.' Harry relayed to her the part Ron had played during the duel with Voldemort. 'I'm sorry,' he said, his voice breaking. 'I should have told you sooner but... I just couldn't.'

'It's all right, Harry,' Hermione said gently. 'I understand.' She wiped her eyes. 'Thank you for telling me. It makes me feel a lot better.'

Neither of them heard the soft click of a door opening, but Crookshanks did. His head whipped around to locate the source of the sound.

'Is the link gone?' Hermione asked.

'I'm not sure,' Harry replied. 'Probably, but I haven't tried since... well, you know.'

Mirror Severus entered the room in his reality. Keeping close to the wall, he crept around to the dressing-table and stood, out of sight, by the side of the mirror. This was such fun. Just like old times. A female voice spoke.

'Is there any point trying again?'

'I dunno,' a male voice answered. 'I suppose it's worth a go.'

There was a long silence.

'Anything?'

There was much sighing.

'It's no good, Hermione. This isn't working.'

'Is there anything I can do to help?'

'No, it's no use. I'm sorry to disappoint you... No, it's definitely gone.'

Oh, dear, Mirror Severus thought, *'I don't much like the sound of this.'*

'Never mind, Harry. You tried your best.' Hermione blew her nose. 'But you must tell Mrs Weasley when you see her next and Ginny, of course.'

What?

'I will,' Harry agreed. There was a pause. 'I wish Ginny were here. I miss her.'

'I know, but she needs time to grieve with her family and ' There was a low growling noise. 'Crookshanks, what on earth's the matter?'

Unable to contain his curiosity any longer, Mirror Severus had peeked into the room. He was surprised to see a young man and woman sitting, fully dressed, on the edge of the bed. He was even more surprised to see a large ginger cat staring at him, hackles raised. It began to hiss. Mirror Severus retreated quickly.

'There's nothing there, Crooks. Hush, now.'

Crookshanks knew better. He leapt on the dressing-table and began to claw at the glass.

Blasted animal! Mirror Severus pressed himself back against the wall.

'Crookshanks, stop that at once! It's only your reflection, you daft old thing. Oh, honestly.'

Mirror Severus was relieved to hear the ruckus stop as Hermione removed her cat from the dressing-table.

'Well,' Harry said with a yawn, 'I suppose we should at least try to get some sleep. Are you sure you don't want me to stay with you?'

'No,' Hermione replied, 'I'll be all right. You go.'

'Okay, see you later.'

Mirror Severus heard the door open and close. He was about to make his own exit when Hermione spoke again.

'Oh, Crooks, Severus is back, and he looks so tired and defeated. I wish I could just go to him, but I'm afraid he'd only turn me away.' She sighed heavily. 'This is all such a mess.'

Oh? This sounds more promising. Mirror Severus decided to stay a while longer, but she did not say anything else. It was only when he heard her begin to snore softly that he finally left the room.

Crookshanks noted his departure. Satisfied that the threat to his mistress had gone, the half-Kneazle curled up by Hermione's feet and nodded off to sleep.

* * *

Mirror Severus returned to Severus' bedroom to find his counterpart sitting on the dressing-table stool, awaiting his return. 'Well,' he told an expectant Severus, 'have I got news for you...'

Severus couldn't believe his ears. So, Hermione and Potter weren't lovers after all, and she was thinking about him. Feeling a little less despondent, he thanked the mirror, walked over to the bed and collapsed, face down, on the pillow. He was asleep in seconds.

While wizarding Britain partied and the Order quietly buried their dead, the Wizengamot convened to consider the case of one Severus Snape, spy and Death Eater.

During this time, Severus remained in his room, refusing to see anyone. Tonks brought him his food, which he barely touched, together with a copy of the *Daily Prophet* each day. The paper's accounts of the battle were largely accurate with the expected emphasis on Harry Potter bringing down Voldemort virtually single-handed. With all but two Death Eaters eliminated, however, the paper quickly shifted its attention to Severus and Draco. Soon, they reported the news everyone was waiting for.

'You're not going to like this, Sev,' Tonks said as she handed him the newspaper.

Severus said nothing as he glanced at the headlines.

DEATH EATER DECISION

MALFOY TRIAL DATE SET

Draco Malfoy, son of the late notorious Death Eater, Lucius Malfoy, will appear before the Wizengamot on the 3rd of August. Eighteen-year-old Malfoy, of Malfoy Manor, faces charges of attempted murder and conspiracy to commit genocide. (*Opinion: page 3*).

No announcement was made regarding the other remaining Death Eater, Severus Snape. A former schoolmaster and trusted member of Voldemort's Inner Circle, Snape, aged forty-two, of no fixed abode, has not been seen since the battle at Hogwarts. A decision is expected tomorrow. (*Former pupils speak out: page 5*).

Severus scowled and threw the paper down in disgust. 'Filthy rag.'

'Try not to let it get to you,' said Tonks, picking up the breakfast tray.

Severus glared at her. 'How can Draco expect a fair trial with all the rubbish they're printing? These people want blood.'

She shrugged. 'Understandable, I suppose.' She walked towards the door.

'Do you know if it's true?' Severus asked hesitantly. 'Will they decide tomorrow?'

Tonks stopped and turned to face him. 'It's very likely,' she replied gently. 'Moody says they've almost finished examining the evidence.'

'Good,' he said gruffly. All this waiting was getting to him. Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

* * *

While Severus sat brooding in his room, Hermione grew increasingly worried about him and she wasn't the only one. His state of mind was the main topic of conversation in the house as members of the Order came and went enquiring after his health. Minerva, in particular, wanted to see him. Albus' portrait had recently woken up and given her his version of the events leading up to his death. She had waited patiently until he had finished and then given him a good ear bashing for not making her a party to the secret and for putting Severus in such an impossible position. Minerva felt that, at the very least, she owed Severus an apology for doubting his loyalty. She also wanted him to know that he had her full support, whatever happened, and that she would fight to clear his name if the need arose.

Mirror Severus was in his element, flitting from room to room, keeping abreast of everything that was going on and reporting it all back to Severus.

'These people care about you, you know,' Mirror Severus told him in an effort to shake him out of his gloom.

Severus harrumphed at the very notion.

'At least speak to Hermione,' his reflection cajoled. 'She's really very worried about you.'

'I do not wish to see anyone until I know where I stand,' Severus declared emphatically.

This was not strictly true, of course, as he desperately wanted to see Hermione, but his pride would not allow it. Days of forced introspection had brought him to the conclusion that, should the Wizengamot give him his freedom, he would have to go away, maybe even leave the wizarding world altogether. Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater; that's what people would think. He believed that he would always be reviled by the public at large as Dumbledore's murderer, whether he was exonerated or not.

Perhaps he should move abroad and make a fresh start? He wasn't sure. He did know, however, that wherever he went, he would go alone. Whatever his feelings for Hermione, he couldn't wouldn't pursue them. Besides, just because she was worried didn't mean she still felt any romantic inclinations towards him. Her concern could be born of compassion or worse, pity. No, for once in his life he was determined to do the honourable thing. Hermione had a bright future ahead of her. He would only sully her reputation by association, and he would not allow that to happen.

Now, with the Wizengamot's decision only hours away, Severus had to make a decision of his own. Should he take the coward's way out and leave without saying goodbye without apologising for his behaviour? In the end, he decided he could not. He had to see her one last time. Tonight, he decided; he would see her tonight.

* * *

It was past midnight. Hermione lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Tomorrow, she thought. They would know tomorrow. For the hundredth time that day, she went over all the things she wanted to say to Severus when she saw him. She would apologise for doubting him ask for another chance. Then there was Ron. She would have to tell him all about that. No more secrets, Severus, she would say. She would have to ask him about her parents as well gods, she was dreading that and then

There was a soft knock on the door.

Hermione reached for her wand and unwarded it. 'Come in,' she said, sitting up. *'Lumos!'*

And there he was, standing at the foot of her bed. 'Severus?'

'Please do not be alarmed, Miss Granger,' he said, noticing the wand in her hand. 'I-I mean you no harm. I merely wish to speak to you.'

Crookshanks raised his head up to see what all the noise was about. It was only the Dark Man; nothing to worry about. He settled down again.

Hermione was momentarily struck dumb. All that stuff she wanted to say, and she couldn't remember any of it. Her mind was a complete blank. Severus, too, it seemed was similarly afflicted. They stared at each other, the gulf of silence widening between them.

It was Hermione who made the first move. 'Go on,' she said tentatively. 'What is it you want to say?'

Severus swallowed. 'One way or another, I shall be leaving tomorrow,' he began.

Leaving? What's he talking about? He can't leave.

'I wanted to say goodbye and to... apologise for the way I behaved towards you at Hogwarts.'

'Apologise?' Hermione asked in bewilderment, 'Whatever for?'

'I did not... It was not appropriate behaviour. I am sorry.' He hung his head, feeling disgusted with himself.

'But, I started it.' Hermione was trying not to panic. A cold fear had gripped her heart.

Severus looked up. 'Yes, but I was your *teacher*,' he almost snarled. 'I should have known better. I should not have allowed it to continue.'

'But... but I wanted you to,' Hermione said, a hint of desperation in her voice. Was he trying to say that he wanted nothing more to do with her?

Severus gripped the footboard. Why was she being so obtuse? 'I threw you against a wall and *raped* you, for gods' sake!' he said, suddenly infuriated. 'I could have impregnated you. You could have been a virgin, and I couldn't have cared less!'

Raped? He thought he took me by force? So that's what all this is about. Ignoring his angry outburst, Hermione hugged her knees into her chest and thought fast. She knew she had to choose her words carefully. 'Look,' she said, 'granted that wasn't the way I imagined our first time would be, but I wouldn't change it for the world.' She smiled in an effort to placate him. 'You didn't rape me, Severus. I gave myself to you of my own free will.'

His face seemed to crumple. He looked so forlorn standing there, she thought, so lost she could have cried for him, but was that a glimmer of hope she could see in his eyes?

'You can... forgive me?' he asked uncertainly.

'Severus, there is nothing to forgive. I wanted you; you wanted me. It was that simple.' She searched his face. 'And I still do... want you, that is. Please, Severus, don't go.'

Severus couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had come to beg forgiveness but hadn't expected to get it. He had assumed she would tell him in no uncertain terms to bugg off and not come back. She still *wanted* him? No, it wasn't possible, not after all he had done. She should be furious with him, afraid even. She should detest him; she should be hexing him that he could understand, he was used to being despised. Instead she was just sitting there, looking like an angel ready to enfold him in her wings. This was not how it was supposed to be. Was the girl mad? Had she no idea of what he was or of what he was capable? It was all too much for him.

His anger surfaced again. 'You do not know what you are saying, girl,' he growled. 'Do you think me some kind of romantic hero?'

Hermione gave a wan smile. 'No, Severus. I do not.'

Severus walked slowly around to the side of the bed. He had to make her see sense.

'Take a good, long look at me, Hermione. I am a burnt out wreck of a man. I am old for my years, I have done terrible things, I have blood on my hands, I deserve no peace or redemption. If there were any justice in this world, I would be dead.'

'Severus, please I'

'*Look. At. Me.* Better yet...'

To Hermione's astonishment, he tore off all his clothes and stood before her naked.

'This is all I am, Hermione, all I have to give. Tell me, how can you want *this*?'

Hermione did look at him then it would have been hard not to. She regarded him with a combination of genuine curiosity and aching desire. He needed feeding up, certainly, as his ribs were poking out, but that in itself was not off-putting. His body was pale and thin, sinewy and not overly muscular. His chest was virtually hairless and criss-crossed with scars, the sight of which did nothing to deter her. She allowed her eyes to scan down his body and drank in the sight of his semi-erect cock nestling in its thatch of black pubic hair. A pair of long legs made up the rest of what she thought, all in all, was a rather appealing package.

'Very easily,' she said simply.

The last of Severus' resolve crumbled. He fell on his knees by the side of the bed. 'I do not deserve this,' he said.

Hermione reached towards him and cupped his cheek with her hand. 'It will be all right, Severus. It will be all right. You're not alone anymore.' She threw back the covers. 'Come.'

This wasn't happening. Beautiful young witches did not invite the likes of him into their beds. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Get in.'

Severus climbed onto the bed and fell into her waiting arms. He clung to her like his life depended on it, fighting back long buried emotions that were struggling to break free. Hermione held him close, stroked his hair and murmured nonsense into his ear until she felt him relax.

'Just sleep now, my love,' Hermione whispered. 'We'll talk again in the morning.'

Severus snuggled into her warm embrace, finding her brushed cotton nightie rather comforting. Nuzzling her neck, he inhaled her scent, wanting nothing more than that. Tomorrow, he told himself, he would still have to leave, but he would allow himself this small pleasure tonight, just for tonight. That decided, Severus drifted off contentedly into the most peaceful sleep he had had in years.

Hermione kissed the top of his head absentmindedly. She had been right to be worried. The man lying in her arms was a mere shadow of his former self. In time, she was sure he would recover. She would help him through this. Severus had kept them safe all these years, after all; now it was her turn to take care of him. She couldn't let him leave he was in no fit state to go anywhere. She would have a word with Minerva in the morning. Yes, between them they were sure to come up with something. Hermione gave him one last kiss and then joined him in sleep.

Good Morning

Chapter 11 of 18

A new day and a fresh start.

Disclaimer: All characters depicted belong to JK Rowling.

A/N. First of all, apologies for the delay in posting this update real life stuff, illness and a computer under the Imperius Curse all contributed. On the plus side, this chapter originally ran to over ten thousand words, which meant I had to split it. Hopefully, this should mean the next update won't take nearly as long.

As always, hugs and a year's supply of Chocolate Frogs to Snarkyroxy for her prompt beta-ing, help and encouragement.

The early morning sun was streaming through the gaps in the curtains, nudging Severus' mind towards consciousness.

Hmmm... what? Something was tickling his nose. Instantly alert, Severus feigned sleep whilst he rapidly assessed the danger. Something warm, sweet smelling; someone breathing beside him. He relaxed, remembering.

Hermione.

Removing the offending wisp of hair from his face, Severus carefully propped himself up on his elbow and gazed at the sleeping witch lying next to him. It wasn't a dream, then; she was there, really there, asleep by his side. That Hermione trusted him enough to relax so completely in his presence was in itself miraculous to Severus. It was a touching show of faith, and one he had no right to expect. His eyes scanned the length of her body the bedclothes having been long since kicked off during the warm summer night. She was more or less as he remembered her, perhaps a little less puppy fat around the middle and a little more muscular, but essentially unchanged.

The minutes ticked by but Severus did not move, content just to look at the young woman who had melted his cold, shrivelled-up excuse of a heart. He stared, captivated, at Hermione's sleeping form, motionless apart from the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest. How in Merlin's name had he come to be blessed by such good fortune?

Severus smiled. It seemed strange to see such a fiery and vibrant girl lying so... so *still*. Hermione looked almost childlike as she lay there, snoring softly; nothing at all like

the warrior he knew her to be. This young witch had seen more tragedy and evil in her young life than anyone her age should ever have to encounter, and yet, there was something... untouched about her; a purity if not an innocence, something that held out a guiding hand to the darkness in him with the promise of salvation should he choose to grasp it.

Hermione stirred and Severus held his breath, hoping that she would not wake just yet. This was a memory he wanted to cherish for a very long time. Carefully, he picked up a tendril of her hair and wound it around his finger, delighting in its texture. It was amazing, he thought, how something that looked so coarse and frizzy could feel so soft.

Hermione sighed and turned away from him, causing her nightie to ride up and expose a haunch of hip and thigh in the process. Severus stifled a gasp as she moved back against him, unconsciously rubbing his morning erection. It would be so easy, he thought, to lift her leg and slip her one indeed his cock was adamant that it wanted to be buried somewhere warm and wet and *now*. Trying his best to ignore it, Severus put his arm over Hermione protectively and pressed the length of his body against her. He would go no further without her permission. Besides, in the cold light of day, she might regret allowing him to stay the night. Severus buried his face in her hair, not caring that it made his nose itch, and prayed that would not be the case.

Somewhere along the line he had capitulated. There were no more thoughts of breaking all contact with Hermione; Severus could no more do that now than he could sever his own wand arm. If Hermione wanted him, and she had said that she did, then he was hers. He would fight it no longer. But that did not mean he could come to her as a beggar Severus still had some pride left.

If I am granted my freedom, then I shall have to find employment although Merlin knows where He held Hermione closer, hoping by all that was holy he would be given the chance to prove himself worthy of her in the not too distant future.

* * *

Almost an hour later, Hermione awoke in the iron embrace of a very aroused Severus Snape. Hermione craned her head and half squinted at the man who was holding her as if she might make a sudden run for the door.

'Still here then, I see.' She grinned at him.

Severus stiffened. 'Would you like me to leave?' He loosened his grip.

'Of course not.' She wriggled around to face him, mentally kicking herself for being so insensitive. 'I was only teasing, Severus. I'm very glad you decided to stay.'

'I am not accustomed to being teased,' he said unsmilingly, although his eyes softened a bit. 'Do you make a habit of it?'

'Only with those people I care about,' Hermione replied, noticing the change. 'How long have you been awake?'

'About an hour,' he admitted.

'An hour? Why didn't you wake me?'

Because you looked so enchanting. 'I... I was enjoying watching you sleep.' He averted his eyes, embarrassed at making such a confession.

'Oh... What could she say? *That was really sweet of you?* Could she call Severus Snape 'sweet' and live? She decided not to risk it.

There was an awkward silence as both wondered how to proceed. Hermione, realising Severus' usual self-confidence was notably absent, thought it important for his morale to make the first move. That said, a few words of reassurance wouldn't go amiss.

'I... um... it was nice waking up with your arms around me.'

Severus found himself tongue-tied. In spite of the fact that he was naked in bed with a scantily-clad and very willing witch, Severus was filled with anxiety and self-doubt. How many times had he imagined this scenario? How many times had he crushed her to his body and ravished those delectable-looking lips with his own? Now that the moment had actually arrived, he felt a lot less confident. It had been a long time since a woman had welcomed his advances. He was out of practice. What if she didn't like his kisses? What if... *Get a grip man. You're behaving like a Hufflepuff on a first date. She said she wanted you. Get on with it!*

'Severus?'

Severus swallowed hard and lifted his gaze. 'May I... kiss you?' he asked, a little uncertainly.

At last, Hermione thought with relief. 'Yes. *Accio* wand.'

Severus looked alarmed. 'What?'

'Tooth Cleaning Charm,' she said. 'Open your mouth.'

Severus, though a little perplexed, obeyed without protest. Hermione cast the charm then turned her wand on herself. 'Sorry, you know... dentists daughter and all that.'

'Now may I kiss you?'

With her other hand, Hermione stroked the stubble on his chin. 'Here,' she said, handing him her wand, 'I can't stand having my face grated either.'

Severus took the wand and dutifully performed a shaving spell. 'Do you have any further objections?'

'None whatsoever.'

'Good.'

Hermione sighed and closed her eyes in hungry anticipation of a fierce, crushing kiss. She was somewhat surprised, therefore, when Severus merely brushed his lips very gently and fleetingly against her own. *Now* what was the matter? Opening her eyes again quickly, she caught Severus looking at her with such an expression of tenderness and something... *else*, it took her breath away. Before she had a chance to analyse it, however, Severus' mouth settled on hers again for another brief, if slightly more forceful, kiss. Bemused by his gentleness, Hermione threaded her fingers through his hair, grasped the back of his head and tried to pull him towards her. Severus was having none of it.

'Patience.'

Hermione's whimper of protest was muffled as Severus' pressed his lips to hers once more, only this time there was no retreat. A tongue was teasing her, tracing the outline of her mouth, restrained, biding its time; nothing hurried or demanding but a request, a plea of supplication. Hermione met his first tentative foray and returned the compliment, sweeping her tongue over his lips, desperate to explore the texture and taste of him. In response, Severus languidly deepened the kiss. Hermione moaned, experiencing a sensation not dissimilar to a Portkey activating as her body confirmed what her mind had long suspected. *Call off the search. You've found him. He is The One. It doesn't get better than this.* Her heartbeat quickened as she felt Severus brush his hand lightly along her arm, sending cascades of shivers down her spine. Dear

God! He'd barely touched her and she was already turning to jelly.

Severus contented himself with stroking Hermione's arm between her elbow and shoulder. Much as he wanted to, there was no need to progress beyond that just yet. Besides, he was enjoying himself, lost in the almost forgotten intimacy of a simple kiss. This was going to be more than a quick fuck. Indeed, with their frantic coupling in the library at Hogwarts still very much on his mind, Severus was determined to take things slowly this time, determined to show Hermione that he could be a considerate and gentle lover. Hermione's obvious eagerness wasn't doing anything to help his resolve, yet he persisted in fighting the urge to get between her legs and bury himself inside her. He was going to do it properly if it killed him. This was for her; his needs could wait.

There was no longer any doubt in Severus' mind that Hermione wanted him. There was no way she could be faking this; she had meant what she said. The last twenty years of his life seemed to dissolve away, washed clean by that greedy little mouth beneath him and his heart soared with the joy of it. He was a teenage boy again albeit a lovesick, randy teenage boy, who wasn't going to last very much longer if the growing damp patch on the sheet beneath him was anything to go by. Sweet Circe, she tasted divine; like all that was good in the world, like everything he could ever need or hope to have.

Hermione's impatience at Severus' agonisingly slow pace was increasing. The tug in her belly had turned into a burning ache: a need to be filled by that rather impressive feeling erection that had all too briefly pressed against her leg. She raked her hand down his back and squeezed a buttock. Severus moaned into her mouth, reached for the offending hand and placed it on the pillow above her head. Keeping it there with one hand, he dragged the other down her arm to her waist and up as far as her ribcage; close, oh so close to her breast, but not quite... *there*. Hermione squirmed on the bed, trying desperately to get his hand where she needed it. Panting, she broke the kiss and pushed her head into the pillow, baring her throat to him.

Severus groaned. Such a submissive act done in all innocence she could have no idea of the effect such a gesture could have on a man like him. Severus accepted the offering, kissing the column of her throat down to her collarbone, occasionally nipping the smooth delicate skin. He could not help but notice a nipple straining through the material of her nightgown, and suddenly it was too much to resist. He covered it with his mouth and sucked.

Hermione arched into him and cried out with the sudden, sharp pleasure of it. 'Oh, gods, Severus, that feels so good.'

Severus continued to lavish all his attention on that one spot on her body until the sensation became almost unbearable. Hermione couldn't decide whether she wanted to pull his head against her or push him away. Unfortunately, she could do neither, since one hand was still pinned above her head and the other was trapped at her side by his body. She tried wriggling her hips, desperate for some sort of relief. Severus held her still with his free hand, giving her no choice but to endure. Torture? Agony? Bliss? It was impossible to decide.

As she wondered if it was possible to go mad with pleasure, Hermione became vaguely aware of a voice calling her name somewhere in the distance.

'Hermione, are you up yet?' *Knock-knock*.

'Mmm...'

'Moody's here. It's good news.' *Knock, knock knock*. 'Hermione? Are you decent? Can I come in?' The doorknob rattled.

'Yes. Ohhh, yesss. Hmm?' *Oh, shit! 'Harry!'*

Severus hastily grabbed a sheet as Harry stuck his head around the door.

'Herm... WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?'

'Harry, calm down.'

'CALM DOWN?' Harry yelled, 'RON ISN'T COLD IN HIS GRAVE AND YOU'RE SHAGGING SNAPE?'

'I am not '

'Really? Well it doesn't look like that from where I'm standing.'

'I can explain '

'I DON'T WANT TO HEAR IT!'

Slam.

Hermione covered her face with her hands in horror. 'I'm so sorry, Severus. I forgot to ward the door.'

Severus said nothing. He would have been rather amused by the incident the look on Potter's face had been priceless only there had been something about his tone that had bothered Severus, something that nagged at the back of his naturally suspicious mind. There was only one rational explanation he could come up with, and he didn't like it he didn't like it at all.

Severus removed Hermione's hands from her face. 'Were you involved with Ronald Weasley?' he asked.

Hermione inwardly cursed Harry. She had wanted to tell Severus about Ron in her own time. Now he was looking at her accusingly. 'Ron was... my friend, Severus.'

Severus knew evasive tactics when he heard them. Stomach churning, he tried again. 'That was not my question, Hermione. Did you sleep with him?'

Hermione sighed. 'Yes. I did.' It was pointless denying it.

Biting back his anger, Severus moved quickly away from her. Hermione put her hand out to stop him.

'Severus, don't go,' she pleaded. 'I was going to tell you all about it today. I never had any intention of keeping it from you, I swear.'

Pulling the sheet around him, Severus sat up on the edge of the bed with his back to her.

'Were you... in love with him, Hermione?' he finally managed to ask.

'No,' she replied, 'I-I loved him but I was never *in* love with him.' Hermione scrambled over the bed and sat up next to him. 'Will-you let me tell you what happened?'

Severus hung his head so his hair curtained his face. He nodded.

Where to start? Hermione let out a long sigh. 'Ron was always there for me, Severus,' she began. 'It happened not long after my parents were... killed.' She told him all about Harry's nightmares, and how Ron had come to her rescue the night Harry had tried to strangle her.

'Afterwards, he held me and it was... comforting. I felt so alone. I had given up all hope of ever seeing you again and ... oh, gods, I don't know how to say this, but you were a suspect in my parents' murder.' Hermione looked for some reaction, but there was none, so she continued. 'Ron felt big and safe and strong, so I-I kissed him. He was surprised I'd told him about us, you see '

'You did *what*?

'Well, actually, he sort of guessed. I was beside myself after you left. I didn't know where you were, whether you were alive or dead. I remembered what you said to me, though, and told Ron that things may not be what they seem. Ron, being Ron, had already realised that things just didn't add up and he saw straight through me. I saw that I had feelings for you, so I told him everything. It was such a relief to be able to tell someone... I think I would have gone insane if Ron hadn't have been there.'

'I take it Potter knew nothing of all this?'

Hermione snorted. 'God, no. He would never have listened even when the Horcrux arrived at Christmas, we kept our suspicions to ourselves.'

Severus' mind was reeling. Intellectually, he knew her actions had been perfectly understandable. He had no right to expect her to have waited for him. He had as good as told her that they could not have a relationship before he left Hogwarts. This, however, did nothing to quell the jealous rage gnawing at his insides. The thought of her being with Potter had been bad enough, but *Weasley*? And her parents? Had she really thought him capable of murdering her parents?

Hermione put her hand on Severus' arm. 'Ron and I clung to each other for comfort, Severus; we knew it was nothing more than that. The future looked bleak; I took what solace I could in the present. Besides, I made it perfectly clear to him that in a battle situation protecting Harry was paramount and that he could not allow any feelings for me to jeopardise any decision he might have to make.'

Severus turned his head to look at her. 'Answer me this, Hermione. If Weasley had survived the battle, would you be with him now?'

She shook her head and gave him a wan smile. 'No, Severus, I would not. I have no regrets, but I am so very sorry for doubting you and for hurting your feelings. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.' Hermione worried her bottom lip, praying she hadn't well and truly blown it. 'Well,' she sighed when there was no response forthcoming, 'I suppose I'll have to go and appease Harry.'

'You're not going anywhere.'

In a heartbeat Hermione was flat on her back, pinned to the bed by the body of a surprisingly heavy wizard. Dark eyes filled with anger bored into her own. A lesser woman would have recoiled in terror but Hermione did not flinch.

'Severus, you're squashing me.'

Severus adjusted his weight but remained on top of her while he battled with his emotions. Despite his injured feelings, things had not really changed. How could he be jealous of Ronald Weasley? The boy was dead. He was being ridiculous. Besides, who the hell was he to judge her behaviour? His anger slowly ebbed away.

'Hermione,' he said eventually, 'you must understand. I am not some... adolescent youth'

'I'm well aware of that, Severus.' She grinned sheepishly at him.

'Insolent witch,' he said, trying to sound stern but failing miserably. 'I do not exist for your amusement.' Severus traced her cheekbone tenderly with his thumb. 'Hermione, you are so young. Are you really sure this is what you want?'

'Yes, how many times?'

Severus touched her lips with his forefinger. 'Think, please. You saw Potter's reaction. There will be much opposition from your friends not least because of our age difference.'

Hermione kissed the tip of his finger. 'I don't care what other people think.'

Severus smirked. 'Always the Gryffindor.'

'You're not going to bring House rivalries into this, are you?' She smirked back.

Severus rolled off her and lay on his back staring at the ceiling. 'Fire and water, Hermione,' he said. 'Opposites. Always attracting yet always in danger of extinguishing, or being extinguished by, the other unless a careful balance is maintained.'

Giggling, Hermione turned onto her side and kissed his cheek. 'That would explain the steam coming out of your ears, then.'

Severus chuckled and kissed her back. 'You, madam, are incorrigible.'

'Would you have me any other way?'

'No, I would not.' He wrapped his arms around her. 'Now, lie with me a moment. Before we go any further, I wish to tell you of my exploits during the past year. You need to know the truth.'

Hermione put her head on his shoulder and waited, heart pounding, for him to begin. Hesitantly at first, Severus gave his version of the events leading up to his flight from Hogwarts. His voice faltered when he spoke of Albus' death, but with Hermione's encouragement he found the strength to continue. Voldemort, naturally, had been overjoyed and had rewarded Severus by elevating his position amongst the Death Eaters. Draco, however, had not been so lucky. His incompetence had almost cost him his life. Severus had intervened, not without risk, and offered to train Draco himself in order that he may better serve his master. Voldemort had granted his request and given Draco over to his charge.

'Thereby owing you a life debt,' Hermione interrupted. 'Is that why Draco changed sides?'

'Not entirely,' Severus replied, 'although it certainly helped. Draco is not a killer, Hermione. He tried to hide it, but he was distraught at Albus' death, and with the use of Legilimency, I could see that he wanted to make amends. It was he who located and sent Potter the Hufflepuff Horcrux, by the way.'

'What?'

'Although... Voldemort,' Severus still struggled to say the name, 'trusted me, in so far as he trusted anyone, the others still regarded me with suspicion. On top of that, my expertise to brew the potion that stopped his body deteriorating was constantly required, and so I rarely left the house.' Severus paused. 'Potter was right. Voldemort did want to take him over. The body he had was rotting away literally.'

Hermione wrinkled her nose up. 'Yuck.'

'Indeed,' Severus continued, 'it was not a pretty sight. However, whenever I administered the potion when he was at his weakest thoughts would... leach out of his head. He did not seem to be aware of it.'

'Is that how you found out about the Horcruxes?' Hermione interrupted yet again.

'In... part,' Severus replied. 'I first learned about the existence of the Horcruxes from Albus. He had to tell me about the ring and the nature of its curse in order for me to help him. He hinted that there were others, but for my own safety decided not to give me any details.'

'In case Voldemort used Legilimency?'

'Precisely,' Severus concurred, 'but, presumably because Vo-oldemort's own mortality was very much on his mind, thoughts about his soul fragments were very close to the surface. I saw the cup and its location very clearly, but I only got a vague impression of diamonds for the other. I sent Draco to retrieve it, and the rest you know.'

Hermione said nothing, bracing herself for what was coming next.

'Now,' Severus said gently, 'are you ready to hear about your parents?'

Hermione squeezed him in response.

'After the breakout from Azkaban, Lucius Malfoy and the others were, as you can imagine, keen to re-establish their positions in the Da Voldemort's favour.'

Hermione bit her lip and nodded.

'The raids on the families of Muggle-borns were planned and carried out by Malfoy and Avery.' Severus held her tightly. 'Please believe me, Hermione, I knew nothing about it until after the event. It was Lucius.'

Hermione's eyes started to fill up. Severus stroked her hair while he told her the rest. 'It was quick; they did not suffer. Malfoy only had seconds to cast the Killing Curse twice and Disapparate out. He had no time to torment them.' Severus remembered Lucius taking great pleasure in boasting how he had evaded the Aurors guarding the Grangers and gained entry to their house. He saw no reason to share this information with Hermione.

She began to sob quietly in his arms as he went on. 'If I had known, Hermione, I would have done everything in my power to stop him, please believe that.'

'I do, Severus, I do,' she gulped, raising her head. 'Thank you for telling me. I'm s-sorry for crying. I tried to put my g-grief on hold with the war and everything, you see and well, I-I haven't had time to m-mourn properly yet.'

'There is no need to apologise,' Severus said, kissing the top of her head, 'take all the time you need, my love. Take all the time you need.'

Hermione laid her head on Severus' chest, taking comfort from the steady thump of his heart. She remained there a little while longer, smiling through her tears.

Am I really his love?

As if reading her thoughts, Severus said hesitantly, 'I think I ought to warn you, Miss Granger, that, as from today, I intend to... court you, in order to get to know you better.'

Still smiling, Hermione turned her head towards him. 'I think we flew straight past *courting*, Severus.'

'I am being serious,' he admonished. 'You must also understand that if our relationship is to continue, I will not share you with anyone. You will be mine and mine alone. Do I make myself clear?'

'Perfectly,' Hermione replied equally seriously. 'I won't cheat on you, if that's what you mean.' She kissed his chest above his heart and sighed. 'Am I your love, Severus?' At the shocked look on his face, she added hurriedly, 'Oh, I don't expect you to say *I love you* every five minutes, or anything. It's just that... well, I think we need to be completely honest with each other and um... I'd like to know where I where we stand.'

Severus had often wondered how he would ever find the courage to tell Hermione exactly how he felt, whether he could take the risk of being rejected, or worse laughed at. In all his imaginings, he had never expected her to ask him straight out. Panicking slightly, he swallowed hard, knowing he was laying himself open for all kinds of hurt, but that it was a chance he had to take. 'Yes, Hermione, I I love you,' he stammered, 'I love you very much.' Severus pulled her head towards him and kissed her forehead. 'And I cannot bear the thought of you with another man.' The words slipped out before he had time to think. Gods, he hoped she wouldn't laugh at him for sounding so pathetic, so *needy*.

The vulnerability in his voice was heart wrenching. 'I'm glad,' Hermione said, stroking his cheek, 'because I love you too, Severus. You are all I want. There is no one else I want to be with, no one else that makes me feel the way you do. Please don't ever leave me again. I don't think I could bear it.'

'I won't,' Severus replied, 'I promise.' He was too choked up to say anything further, so he smothered her with kisses instead.

She loves me. Me. Not Potter or Weasley, but me. She loves me.

Hermione pulled away from him, gasping for breath. 'Make love to me, Severus. Now. Please. We've wasted far too much time as it is.'

'Very well,' Severus murmured, nuzzling her neck. 'If you insist.' He tugged at her nightie. 'Off. I will attend to the door.' He picked up Hermione's wand to ward it. 'There will be no more interruptions.'

Hermione sat up and slipped off her nightdress, giving Severus an all too brief glimpse of back, shoulders and neck before her hair tumbled down and covered them again. Then she was lying beside him, looking at him expectantly. Severus pushed himself up and knelt beside her, feasting his eyes on her nakedness. Silently, reverently, he savoured the sight this second time, noting every curve and indentation of her proportions, the creamy colour of her skin, her freckles. He scanned down her legs to her slim ankles and her feet. Such beautiful feet. How had he never noticed them before?

Hermione blushed under his intense scrutiny. This was different from the first time she had bared herself for him more intimate, almost intrusive somehow. Then, she had been in control. Now, she most definitely was not. Feeling self-conscious, she crossed her hands defensively over her stomach.

'You are perfection, Hermione,' Severus said, taking hold of her hands and planting kisses on her inner wrists. 'Never hide from me.' He placed her hands above her head. 'Stay like that. Do not move.'

Severus smoothed his hands down the full length of her body from wrists to ankles. Sliding his hands under her knees, he pushed her legs up and out to the side then sat back on his heels. The evidence of her desire for him was all too plain to see. He wanted to delve his fingers into that wetness, taste it, smear it over his cock and then... The thought almost paralysed him. How could he do any of those things without losing control and making a complete fool of himself? Maybe she would no, he couldn't ask that of her, not this time.

She loves me, he assured himself.

-*Yes, but for how long?* said a nagging voice at the back of his head. *How long before she tires of you and goes off with someone else. Someone her own age?*

He pushed the thought aside. *She will not.*

'Severus?'

Hermione was feeling uncomfortably exposed, spread out as she was like some sacrificial offering, awaiting Severus' pleasure. Not being a submissive person by nature, Hermione found all this passivity rather disconcerting.

Am I supposed to just lie here?

Apparently, she was. Well, okay, if that was what he wanted then she could do this; she would play along at least for the time being. Hermione shifted her hips wantonly,

watching Severus' face as she did so.

'Please, Severus,' Hermione whispered, 'I want you. Now, please.'

Oh dear gods, on top of everything else she was begging. 'I won't last, Hermione,' he said ruefully, 'it's been too long.'

'Please,' Hermione tried again. 'It doesn't matter '

'It matters to me.'

'Then let me'

'No,' he said, 'I'd rather if you just watched. Would you mind?'

Hermione shook her head slowly. Wide-eyed, she watched as Severus cupped his balls with one hand and started to slowly stroke his cock with the other. It was a mesmerising sight, but why wouldn't he let her do it? Hermione wanted to touch him, taste the liquid that was seeping out of the tip. Instead, she watched as instructed, unconsciously noting for future reference just how he liked to please himself; she watched as his breath hitched and his hand pumped faster. He was going to come. Hermione moaned and moved her hips to match his rhythm, thinking he might like it. In seconds, it had the desired effect.

Severus sat, head bowed, recovering his breath, afraid of what Hermione's reaction might be. Small fingers gently lifted his hand and a tongue tentatively licked his palm. Incredulous, he looked up in time to see Hermione taking his index finger into her mouth.

'Mmm,' she said, 'you taste so good.'

'Oh gods, Hermione.'

Hermione dipped two fingers between her legs and offered them to Severus. He grabbed her hand and sucked greedily.

'More,' he begged, 'Please. I want more.'

'Soon,' Hermione promised, 'but I want to taste myself on you first.'

The kiss was ferocious, possessive. They tumbled backwards, gorging themselves on the flavours mingling on their lips. Severus broke away to quickly kiss, lick and nibble his way down her body, before stopping to make himself comfortable between her thighs. He looked up at Hermione and smirked.

Hermione held her breath as Severus gently parted her labia and began his explorations. *He's certainly thorough*, she thought, writhing in pleasure at his gentle lapping. *Ooh, yes... I could easily get used to this.* Suddenly, he sucked hard on her clit, and she shrieked. Oh shit, she couldn't take much of *that*. Hermione glanced down to see Severus slurping up her juices like a man dying of thirst.

He's enjoying this, she thought in astonishment, *He's enjoying this and...oh... what's he doing with his nose?* 'Oh, Severus!'

'Gods, you taste like heaven.'

'Don't stop...! *How can I ever hope to keep this man?* Don't stop... so close, so close.' Hermione grabbed his head and ground herself against his face. 'Coming... '

Severus licked her clit delicately until the aftershocks subsided, and she slackened her grip on his head. He was hard again. Carefully, he inserted one then two fingers into her pussy. She was more than ready for him.

Hermione squirmed on his probing fingers. She wanted more. A lot more. 'I need you inside me. Now.'

'As my lady commands.' Severus crawled up her body and kissed her tenderly. 'Guide me in, Hermione.'

Hermione reached down and rubbed the head of his cock against her entrance. With infinite care, as if it were her first time, Severus inched his way slowly into her body, searching her face all the while for any sign that he may not be welcome, but there was none. It was all right. Everything was going to be all right. He was home and it was *glorious*.

Hermione let out little gasps of delight as Severus slowly stretched and filled her, replacing her urgent need with a sense of peace. This was what she wanted. Just this, only this. It felt so incredibly *right*, so perfect she could barely breathe with the pleasure of it. Hermione wrapped her arms and legs around him and held on tight.

'Don't move just yet.' She could have stayed like that forever. Severus twitched inside her, and she clenched her muscles in response.

Severus groaned, willing himself to keep still. 'I won't last five seconds if you keep that up.'

He had that look on his face again, that breathtakingly loving, tender look of... hope? Yes, hope, and in a split second of intense clarity, Hermione saw and understood the terrible anxiety of this fragile soul she had been entrusted with.

He's scared, she realised. *He's inside me and he's still terrified I'll reject him!*

All his defences were down now. Severus was looking at her with what could only be described as undisguised devotion. He was beautiful. How could she ever have thought him ugly? Hermione touched his cheek and smiled. 'My love,' she whispered, 'my beautiful Severus.'

His face clouded as if she'd slapped him.

'Oh, Severus,' Hermione sighed, 'I'm not mocking you. Come into my mind and see for yourself if you don't believe me.'

Severus only hesitated a moment before slipping easily into her mind. Looking around quickly, he was slightly taken aback to be greeted by a small, somewhat dumpy woman with a mass of frizzy hair and overlarge teeth.

Dear Merlin! Severus thought, *Is this how she sees herself?*

'Yes, it's me,' Hermione said, 'now, look.' Hermione pointed to a large mirror.

If Severus had been astonished at Hermione's representation of herself, he was stunned at the sight that greeted him in the mirror. Before him stood a tall, imposing man with a rather regal looking bearing. She had not over-romanticised his appearance by any means, but it was nothing like the reflection he was used to. His prominent nose, though still big, did not dominate his face as he would have expected. In fact, it was his eyes that commanded his attention. Severus had always thought them rather beady, but to Hermione they were evidently deep, dark, entrancing and smouldering with integrity and intelligence. He had never given much thought to his eyelashes either, but Hermione obviously found them attractive. While he still would not have described himself as handsome by any stretch of the imagination, the overall impression was of a powerful and striking looking wizard.

'This is how you see me?' he asked, still staring at his reflection.

'Yes,' Hermione replied, 'like I said. Beautiful.' She placed her hand on his arm. The resulting jolt of electricity as their minds touched sent their senses reeling.

'Severus, I can feel.'

'Yes,' he said. *'I know. I feel it, too.'*

'Oh Severus, is this what it's like for you?' Hermione gasped as Severus moved inside her. 'It's too much. How do you bear it?'

'I can't,' he replied. 'At least, not for long. Quickly, take my hand.'

With a gentle tug, Severus grasped Hermione's hand and pulled her into his mind. Hermione had a brief impression of a Potions laboratory before she was ushered through a door into a small library.

'Look,' Severus said, indicating a portrait.

Hermione stared at the vision before her. 'Severus, I'm not a'

'Goddess? You are to me. Look again.'

Kneeling at her feet was a hunched, emaciated man with an enormous, crooked nose. Black, fathomless eyes chiselled into a gaunt and exhausted face looked up at her in adoration.

Hermione could have wept. 'Oh no, my love,' she protested. 'You are not like that. You were never like that.'

She kissed him, unleashing all the love she had so longed to give him. Severus shrank back slightly from the intensity of her feelings but there was no hiding place. Hermione's love swept through him, permeating every atom of his being. There was nothing he could do but open his heart to her and respond in kind.

The result was explosive. A dazzlingly bright light suddenly blazed around them, engulfing them, lifting them up and sending them flying to a place where time ceased to exist. Hermione felt Severus' orgasm building, fuelling her own burning need, spiralling ever higher out of control towards a peak where body, mind and soul fused together. Then they were falling, as wave after wave of pleasure broke and rolled over them. Hermione opened her eyes with a start just as Severus collapsed on top of her, fighting for his breath.

Words were useless, meaningless. Severus rolled onto his back, pulling Hermione with him. He hadn't a clue what had just transpired, but something had shifted. He felt different and so in all likelihood would Hermione.

'Severus,' said a small voice, 'what the hell just happened?'

'I have no idea,' Severus admitted.

'I'm tingling all over.'

'As am I.' Severus struggled to get his scattered wits into some kind of order. 'Whilst it is not unpleasant, I do not think we should attempt that again until we can be sure its effects are harmless.'

'I agree,' said Hermione, 'It was... weird mind blowing, but weird. Next time I might not want to come back to earth!' She laughed, glancing at the clock. 'Good grief, look at the time! We've already missed breakfast and I'm ravenous. We'll miss lunch as well, at this rate.'

'I would much rather stay here,' Severus said, nibbling her ear lobe, 'wouldn't you?'

'Stop that!' Hermione giggled, 'I need to eat and so do you.'

'I am not hungry,' he said, investigating a rather interesting spot on her neck, 'not for food, anyway.'

Hermione broke away and prodded him in the ribs. 'Oh, no you don't. You need to get some meat on those bones, Severus Snape, and I intend to see to it that you do.'

Severus chuckled. 'Are you always this bossy?'

'Yes,' she grinned, 'I am. You may as well get used to it.'

On the landing, Severus clasped Hermione's hand and gave it a squeeze. 'Ready to face the music?' he asked.

'Yes,' she replied, 'but are you sure about this? I didn't think you were the hand holding type.'

'I think a united front is called for.' Severus smirked. 'I will allow it. Just for today.'

They descended the stairs in silence. As they reached the bottom, the door to the library flew open, and Alastor Moody appeared in the hallway.

'Ah, there you are at last, Snape.' Moody's magic eye gave Hermione the once over. 'Managed to tear yourself away, I see.'

'Moody,' Severus acknowledged.

'A word.' Moody looked pointedly at Hermione. 'In private, if you don't mind.'

Severus turned to Hermione. 'Do you wish to wait a moment?'

'I'll be fine,' she replied, 'you go.'

Severus followed Moody into the library. The old Auror handed him a scroll of parchment.

'Well, Snape,' he said, 'you managed to pull it off. The Wizengamot in its infinite wisdom has granted you clemency.'

Severus tried to appear indifferent. 'Indeed?' He kept his face carefully neutral as he unfurled the Wizengamot's verdict.

'Yes, indeed,' Moody replied. 'There were a few dissenters who still thought you should rot in Azkaban for Albus' murder. It was his portrait pleading your 'innocence' that swung it.' Moody reached into his sleeve and produced Severus' wand. 'Here, take it,' he said, holding it out towards him, 'but know this. I'm going to be watching you, Snape. One step out of line just one and you'll be in chains faster than a Bowtruckle with its arse on fire.'

Severus grasped the precious length of wood and held it next to his heart, feeling its power surge through him. The relief on his face was palpable.

'My spying days are well and truly over, Moody,' he said, 'I swear on my wand that I will give you no more cause for concern. You have my word...' Severus nodded curtly to

the man who had, in spite of his paranoia, been instrumental in ensuring his survival after Albus' death, '...and my thanks. If that will be all, I believe I am required elsewhere.'

'I'll come with you,' said Moody.

'That won't be necessary.'

'Oh, but I insist.' Moody's ravaged face contorted into an evil grin. 'I wouldn't miss this for the world.'

The Road to Hell (Part One)

Chapter 12 of 18

Good intentions, bad decisions and some differences of opinion.

Disclaimer: Nothing's changed. It still all belongs to JK Rowling.

A/N: Firstly, I'd like to convey my heartfelt thanks to Snarkyroxy for beta-ing 'Epiphany' thus far and for all her help and encouragement over the last few months. As you may be aware, Snarky has dropped out of the fandom and so no longer felt able to continue. Much to my relief, WickedlyWanton has stepped into the breach and kindly agreed to Beta for me in Snarky's place. Secondly, therefore, I would like to thank her for taking me on and for beta-ing this chapter.

All in all, Hermione thought as she strode purposefully towards the kitchen, it was probably for the best that she tackle Harry alone. Severus' presence would no doubt only serve to inflame things further, and Harry was going to create enough of a fuss as it was. After such a lovely start to the day, Hermione wasn't really in the mood for a slanging match. She hoped she would be able to calm Harry down without getting angry herself, even though she knew the chances of that happening were pretty slim. Somehow, she just had to think of a way of making him come to terms with the situation.

He's got no choice other than to accept it, anyway, Hermione thought grimly. *Severus is non-negotiable.*

Rounding the corner, the sound of raised voices coming through the open door to the kitchen slowed her progress. She stopped to listen.

'How *could* she...'

'The bastard...'

'Little trollop...'

'I'll kill him...'

'After all he did for her...'

'She was like family...'

Oh, God. Hermione's heart sank. It sounded like the entire Order was present, and from the snatches of conversation she could hear, Harry had evidently been unable to keep his mouth shut. Still, she had done nothing to be ashamed of. Taking a deep breath, Hermione stuck out her chin and marched into the kitchen. She glanced around accusingly at the sea of faces that quickly turned towards her and, just as quickly, turned away again. There was a lot of embarrassed coughing and much shuffling of feet as the discussion came to an abrupt halt.

Harry opened his mouth as if to say something but shut it again when he saw the expression on Hermione's face. Hermione waited, arms folded, for someone to speak. No one, however, seemed prepared to look her in the eye.

'Well,' she challenged, 'is there something anyone would like to say to my face, that is?'

There was an awkward silence before Ginny, finally, found her voice. 'Is it true, Hermione?' she asked tentatively. 'Are you really having an affair with Snape?'

'I'd like to see her deny it,' said Harry.

An affair? This precious, beautiful thing... How dare they make it sound so cheap? Hermione would have been furious with Ginny if she hadn't looked so distressed. As it was, she could only feel pity at her lack of understanding. Hermione hesitated a moment while she considered how best to answer the question. She would be nothing less than honest, although the brutal truth would be hard for the Weasleys to take. Nevertheless, she had to at least try to soften the blow for their sakes she owed them that much.

'First of all,' Hermione said, ignoring Harry and turning to Molly, 'I want you to know that I had no intention of hiding this from you and that I'm sorry you found out about us this way.' Hermione gave Harry a withering look.

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself,' Harry interrupted.

'I'm not, Harry,' Hermione retorted. 'Far from it.'

'Well, you should be. It's disgusting,' Harry said accusingly. 'He's old enough to be your father.'

'Age has nothing to do with it!'

Harry shook his head. 'How could you so soon after Ron...? I thought you loved him?'

'I did, Harry,' Hermione replied. 'Of course I did. You know that.'

'Do I? All I know for certain is that you got over him pretty fast.' Harry's voice almost broke. 'You know, Ron told me once that there was someone else, but *Snape*? For fuck

sake, Hermione'

'What do you mean?' Hermione asked sharply. 'What did Ron tell you?'

Harry took a few steps closer. 'He told me that there had been someone else, someone you... *cared* about.' He sneered. 'But he was sure you'd get over it sure you'd come to love him as much as he loved you.'

'Wha ? No, no... It wasn't like that. Honestly. We tried... but...'

'For someone so bright, Hermione, you can be incredibly thick at times.' Harry looked around the room as if seeking confirmation. 'Do I have to spell it out? Ron. Was. In. Love. With. You. And all the time he fretted over you, looked after you, *you* were just using him. *You* were in love with that... *thatgit!*

Hermione stared at him in shock. 'I-I had no idea,' she admitted. Had she been so caught up in her own misery not to notice the true depth of Ron's feelings for her? He had never said anything. Why hadn't he said anything? She felt rather small, stupid and suddenly in need of some fresh air. Just as she was about to turn and run, she felt a reassuring presence move up behind her and a supporting hand laid upon her shoulder. Gratefully, Hermione covered Severus' fingers with her own and took comfort in the strength he was offering her. It was all right now. She would get through this.

'Harry... ' Hermione said slowly, 'I want you to try and imagine something.' She paused. 'If I had died on the battlefield, would you have grieved for me?'

'Of course I would have,' Harry replied, glaring at Severus. 'What's that got to do with anything?'

'You would have mourned a friend and then got on with your life?'

'I don't understand.'

'What if Ginny had died, Harry?' Hermione pressed on. 'How would you have felt then?'

Harry looked at his feet and said nothing.

Hermione smiled wanly. 'That's the difference, Harry,' she said softly. 'Now can you understand how I feel?'

While this interchange was taking place, the others looked on with a combination of horrified fascination, outrage and bewilderment. Molly Weasley, in particular, had initially reacted badly to the news and had worked herself up into a right old state long before Hermione had set foot in the room. Filled with self-righteous indignation, she had been itching for the moment when she could tell Hermione just exactly what she thought about her appalling behaviour. Molly, however, had counted on dealing with a shame-faced, apologetic girl. What she had not expected was the calm, self-assured young woman that had defiantly walked into the kitchen with her head held high.

Perplexed by Hermione's demeanour, Molly held back. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but the girl was different somehow. It was only when Severus entered the room and stood behind Hermione like a sentinel that she finally understood what it was. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled.

Well, I never!, she thought. *So that's it.*

Molly tilted her head and half-closed her eyes. Yes, there it was, blatantly obvious to anyone with eyes in their heads who cared to look. She watched their auras dancing around each other, hearts connected by a single strand of light. Above their heads, Molly saw, as she expected, little flecks of golden light. Severus and Hermione had been Blessed just as she and Arthur had been. She smiled. Nothing anyone said or did was ever going to come between those two, so they had all better just shut up and learn to live with it.

By the time Hermione had gently but firmly explained her feelings to her irate best friend, Molly had made her mind up. This had gone far enough. There had been enough suffering and loss; her boy had not died for this. Ron would not have wanted to see his two best friends at each other's throats. It was time to intervene before any more damage was done. Not waiting for Harry's response, Molly went over to Hermione and put her arms around her.

'I'm very happy for you, Hermione, my dear,' Molly said, her eyes brimming with tears. 'You have been like a second daughter to me, and yes, I had hoped that you and Ron would... Well, it wasn't to be.' She sniffed and wiped away her tears. 'But I want you to know that you will always, always be a part of my family.' She looked up at an astonished Severus. 'You, too, Severus, are welcome at the Burrow at any time. For what it is worth, you have my blessing. Both of you.'

'Thank you, Mrs Weasley,' said a bemused Hermione, hugging her back. 'That means an awful lot to me.'

Molly's unexpected acceptance of the situation had a knock on effect as the other Order members came forward to congratulate Severus on the Wizengamot's decision. It was a novel, and rather unnerving, experience to be suddenly at the centre of so much attention. People he regarded as acquaintances, people who he had always been careful to keep at arms length, were now treating him like a long lost friend, shaking him by the hand and thanking him. Lupin had gone so far as to pat him on the back! Feeling cornered and slightly panicked, Severus looked around for Hermione in need of her calming presence, but she was talking, rather animatedly, to Bill Weasley. What was all that about?

'Well, Severus,' he heard Arthur Weasley say, 'there could be a medal in all this, you know.'

Severus was horrified. A medal? Had they taken leave of their senses? There had once been a time when he had secretly craved such recognition for the sacrifices he had made, but that time was long past.

'Arthur,' he said, 'I am flattered, but please, I deserve no such honour.'

'Nonsense,' Arthur replied, 'if anyone deserves '

'I really must insist.'

'Well, all right,' Arthur conceded, 'if that's your final word on the subject '

'It is.'

Arthur nodded. 'Then, I'll pass on your feelings to the Minister.'

'Thank you. I would be... grateful.'

'Very well, consider it done. Now,' Arthur said gravely, 'about this business with you and Hermione '

'Did I hear my name mentioned?' Hermione asked, coming over to join them.

'Yes, well, the thing is,' Arthur blustered, 'we want to know how you... er, that is to say how, *er>this* started. You must still have been at school.'

'Yes and no,' Hermione answered. 'The thing is, Mr Weasley, we were attracted to each other, but even though I wanted to, Severus wouldn't... you know, *do* anything because he was my teacher. He refused to even kiss me. I hope that puts your minds at rest.'

'That's all very well '

'Come along, Arthur,' said Molly, gathering her things. 'We're leaving.'

'Yes, but '

'Now, Arthur.'

'Oh, all right.' Arthur sighed in defeat. 'I'll get me cloak.'

Severus looked admiringly at Hermione. 'You, my dear,' he said in a low voice, 'were sorted into the wrong House. Tell me, have you ever considered a career in politics?'

Hermione winked then noticed Harry and Ginny standing, a little apart from the others, watching them. She gave them a small smile.

Taking her cue from her mother, Ginny gave Harry a nudge. 'Go on,' she said, 'apologise.'

'What?'

'You heard me,' Ginny replied. 'If my mother can forgive her, then so can you.' She sighed. 'Look, if you don't want to lose your other best friend, you had better just swallow your pride, go over there, and say something.' She gave him another shove.

Dragging his feet, Harry went over to Hermione and gave her an awkward hug.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I shouldn't have yelled at you like that, but I did have rather a shock.'

'I know.' Hermione hugged him back. 'And you're forgiven.'

Harry broke away and hesitantly offered Severus his hand. Even more hesitantly, Severus shook it.

Harry cleared his throat. 'I think we all owe you our lives, Snape,' he began. 'Without you, I doubt any of us would be here right now.'

Severus remained silent, so Harry continued. 'I don't know if we can ever be friends or anything, but Hermione means a lot to me and ... well, I think we should at least try to be civil with each other for her sake.'

Hermione squeezed Severus' elbow and gave him a smile of encouragement. He inclined his head towards her.

'Very well, Potter,' he agreed, 'for Hermione's sake. Now, if you'll excuse me, I will make preparations to leave. I have imposed upon your hospitality long enough.'

'Where will you go?' Hermione asked.

'I have a small house,' Severus replied. 'I will go there for the time being.'

'Then I'm coming, too,' Hermione insisted.

'It is not exactly... habitable.'

'There's no need for you to leave,' Harry interrupted. 'There's bags of room here.'

'I would have thought you would be glad to see the back of me, Potter,' Severus said dryly.

Harry grinned. 'I've seen more of your back than I ever wanted to, believe me, but really, it's the least I can do.'

Severus smirked. 'Very well,' he said. 'Again, for Hermione's sake, I shall stay until I can put my affairs in order. But I insist on making a contribution for our board and lodgings.'

'I don't want your money, Snape,' Harry replied. 'You're my guest, but perhaps... perhaps in exchange, one day, you might like to tell me about my mother?'

'I beg your pardon.'

'Oh, nothing personal or anything,' Harry added hastily. 'It's just that... Well, you're the only person left who really knew her, and I know she held you in high regard, but... I'll understand if you don't want to.'

How could Potter possibly have known that he and Lily...? Severus suddenly remembered the note that had accompanied the Invisibility Cloak. He looked at Hermione. Had Potter said anything to her?

'It's all right,' Hermione said. 'I know about you and Harry's Mum. It's okay for you to talk about her.'

Severus had never considered doing anything of the kind. 'It is in the past, Hermione,' he said emphatically, 'and that is where I should like to leave it. Perhaps... one day.' He turned to Harry. 'Your mother was a remarkable, talented and beautiful witch. She loved you enough to sacrifice her life for you, and she did it without hesitation. I will always remember her with great affection. Now, if that is all '

'Sorry to interrupt,' said Minerva, 'but may I speak to you for a moment? In private.'

'Of course you may, Minerva,' Severus replied wearily, 'but please, no more congratulations.'

Minerva was undeterred. 'I owe you a big apology, my dear. Albus should never have put you in such an untenable position.'

'You owe me nothing of the kind, Minerva,' Severus replied. 'The position was one of my own making. I am entirely to blame.'

Minerva pursed her lips. This was not going to be easy. 'Albus disagrees. He wants to see you. He also wishes to apologise.'

'See Albus?' Severus was appalled. 'No, out of the question. I cannot.'

Minerva ignored his protests. 'I need you to come back to Hogwarts, Severus. I need a new Potions master and Head of House for Slytherin. The job is yours if you want it.'

'Minerva, that is very kind of you but, really, I cannot '

'At least think about it,' Minerva continued regardless. 'It is what Albus wanted, after all. Besides, if you don't take the job, I'll still need your chambers for Horace's replacement, and I must ask for your assistance to help me locate them.'

Severus raised a quizzical eyebrow.

Minerva smiled innocently. 'Albus, in his infinite wisdom, gave instructions that in the event of his death and you leaving the castle, your rooms were to be sealed. Well, the castle did such a good job, not even the house-elves can find them. They've completely disappeared.'

What? Oh, Merlin! That could only mean... 'My possessions are untouched?' he asked, not daring to believe it.

'I assume so,' Minerva replied, shrugging her shoulders. 'Since no one has had access to your chambers, then everything should be just as you left it.'

Severus clutched the back of a chair for support. The thought of strangers rifling through his belongings had been too awful to contemplate. Had Albus really made such a thoughtful gesture, knowing how much he valued his privacy? It seemed too good to be true. A familiar hand rested on his shoulder.

'I'll come with you if you like,' Hermione offered.

Swallowing a lump in his throat, he said softly, 'Thank you, Hermione. Yes, I would... appreciate that very much.'

'Good. I'm glad that's settled,' Minerva said briskly. 'I shall expect you both after lunch, then.'

Severus stared at the blank wall where the entrance to his chambers should have been. Not knowing what kind of spell Albus might have used, he raised his arm and gingerly tapped the stone with his wand. At his touch, the castle seemed to heave a great sigh of relief at being able to give up its secret at long last. A door shimmered into view. Hardly daring to breathe, Severus entered his chambers closely followed by Hermione and Minerva.

Hermione quickly glanced around the room, trying not to look too curious. She had imagined countless times, of course, what his sitting room might look like, and for the most part, it was much as she expected. Austere, like the man himself, devoid of ornament, with books and periodicals piled up everywhere. The furniture, though old and worn, looked comfy and inviting. Two armchairs faced each other at either side of the fireplace, one of which looked more sat upon than the other. It appeared that Severus had received few visitors into his inner sanctum, a thought which saddened Hermione. She assumed he had not invited his Slytherins into his private quarters the same way Professor McGonagall did. It struck her then just how solitary and, probably, lonely his life must have been. She scanned his books with a covetous eye and vowed to change all that. It was easy for Hermione to picture herself in that lesser used chair, sipping hot chocolate by the fire and discussing all manner of things with him. Severus would never be lonely again if she had anything to do with it.

Other than a thick layer of dust, everything was indeed just as Severus had left it. It was as if he had just stepped outside for a moment. A house-elf arrived, lit the fire, and discretely started dusting. Severus looked around, reacquainting himself with the place he had called home for most of his adult life. It was all so sodding *normal*. Absentmindedly, he poked around the papers on his desk and picked up a handful of unmarked essays. So much water had flowed under the bridge, and yet here, within these familiar rooms, it would be all too easy to fall back into the old routine, pretend that everything was all was right with the world and that nothing unpleasant had ever happened. It was all very tempting.

Suddenly, Severus felt the walls closing in around him. He needed to get out of the dungeons. He needed some air. Fast.

'Excuse me,' he said.

He was out the door before Hermione had a chance to stop him. Minerva put her arm out to prevent her following him.

'Give him some space, Hermione,' she said. 'He needs time.'

'I know,' Hermione replied. 'Thank you so much for offering him this chance it's just what he needs.' Hermione sighed in frustration. 'He's just so stubborn he can't see what's best for him.'

Minerva laughed. 'Is it only now you're realising that?'

Hermione laughed in turn, then fell silent. 'I suppose,' she said eventually, 'I should thank you for not giving me a lecture.'

'About you and Severus?' Minerva replied. 'Och, lassie, you're not the first teenage girl to fall in love with a teacher, and I doubt you'll be the last. And, in war... well, the bounds of propriety, shall we say, are often blurred. I am in no position to judge either of you. Besides, you're both adults, and I am in no doubt whatsoever that you are mature enough to know your own mind. *However,...*'

Here it comes, thought Hermione.

'...that doesn't mean I have no opinion on the matter.' Minerva hesitated, wondering just how much she should say. 'Hermione, I've known Severus a long time and... Oh, look, why don't we sit down, and I'll order us some tea.' She indicated the chairs by the fireplace.

Hermione settled herself in the chair that she was already beginning to think of as hers whilst Minerva sent an order down to the kitchen. A pot of tea and some biscuits arrived almost immediately. Minerva poured and sat back.

'As I was saying,' she continued, 'I've known Severus since he was a first year and a scrawny, scrap of a thing he was.' Minerva stirred her cuppa. 'When the Hat put him in Slytherin, I didn't think he'd last five minutes, but survive he did mostly due to the fact that he has a backbone of solid steel and the hide of an Erumpent. I watched him grow up, largely friendless and often bullied. Then, a Gryffindor girl fell in love with him'

'I know,' Hermione interrupted, reaching for a chocolate digestive. 'Harry's Mum.'

'Quite,' said Minerva. 'And... Well, you know what happened.' She paused. 'The thing is, Hermione, I have become very fond of Severus over the years as did Albus. We were probably the only two people he ever opened up to. But, you know, just because he chooses to shield himself in several layers of armour from the world at large, it doesn't mean he doesn't have a heart underneath it all.'

'What are you trying to say, Professor?' Hermione sipped her tea, wondering where all this was leading.

'I don't want to see him hurt,' Minerva replied. 'While I am concerned for you, too, my dear, I know you will bounce back should this relationship end you are young, you have your whole life ahead of you. Severus, however...' Minerva trailed off and gazed into the fire.

'Professor McGonagall, I'

'Just promise me, Hermione,' Minerva cut her off, 'if this is just some dalliance on your part, you make sure Severus is aware of that fact from the outset. I don't think I could bear watching him get his heart broken twice once was bad enough.'

'I won't. I promise, I wouldn't couldn't do that.'

'I'm glad to hear it.' Minerva sighed in relief. 'In that case, I wish you all the very best. Severus is not an easy man, make no mistake about that, but he is a good man. I think, in the long run, you could do well by each other.'

'I appreciate your support, Professor,' said Hermione. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome.' Minerva nodded and smiled. 'Oh, and please, after all we've been through together, isn't it about time you called me Minerva?'

'I should like that... Minerva.'

'Good. I'm glad that's out of the way. Now, were there any other matters you wanted to discuss?'

Even on such an overcast afternoon, the white marble of Albus' tomb stood out in stark contrast against the backdrop of the Forbidden Forest and the placid waters of the lake. Severus stared at the structure from the top of the Astronomy tower, its solid presence serving to anchor him to reality whilst his thoughts raced. There it was, the irrefutable symbol of his guilt. Freedom, Hermione, a future; they were but a dream. He wouldn't be at all surprised to wake up any minute now on the cold stone floor of a cell in Azkaban.

Staying or leaving made little difference when all was said and done. In his heart of hearts, Severus knew that wherever he went in the world, this place would always call to him like a siren song. He would never get away from here, however hard he tried to run. And yet staying, and facing this permanent reminder of his culpability on a daily basis, would require more strength of character than he thought he possessed. Maybe Potter had been right, maybe he was a coward. It would be poetic justice though, he supposed, to be condemned to teach countless generations of dunderheads, only to end up like Binns, haunting his classroom for all eternity. Perhaps it was a fitting penance.

Damned if I stay, damned if I go.

Severus closed his eyes. So, Albus wanted him to come back to this torment, did he? Even now, from beyond the veil, he could feel the old bastard manipulating him.

Well, no more, old man, Severus thought. *It's time to cut the strings.*

His contemplation was interrupted by the clatter of feet running up the stairs.

'Do not concern yourself,' Severus said without turning around, 'I have no intention of jumping.'

Panting, Hermione snaked her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek against his back. 'I'm very glad to hear it.'

'She sent you, didn't she?' Severus asked. 'The old hag wants you to try to change my mind.'

'I'm here because I was worried about you,' Hermione said, still trying to catch her breath, 'and Minerva is not an old hag. She means well, my love. She thinks offering you your old job back is the least she can do after all you've been through. She cares about you, you know and she's not the only one here who does.'

Severus snorted. 'Who, for example?'

'Well,' Hermione replied, 'I know Madam Pomfrey, for one, has a soft spot for you, as does Professor Sprout. Professor Flitwick has been asking after you even the ghosts want to know if you're coming back. And...' she hugged him tighter, 'and then there's me. I suppose I count.'

Severus froze. 'You?'

'Yes, me,' Hermione replied. 'I'm coming back to do my N.E.W.T.s. You didn't think I'd leave school without any qualifications, did you?'

In all honesty, Severus had never given Hermione's plans for her future the slightest thought until that moment. Of course she would want to come back. He removed her hands and turned to face her.

'Then that settles it,' Severus said. 'Naturally, you must finish your education, and I shall find employment elsewhere. I cannot be your teacher and your lover. It would be most inappropriate.'

Hermione sighed patiently. 'I've already raised the issue with Minerva. In fact, I offered to rent a house in Hogsmeade, but she wouldn't hear of it. She said that what we do outside school hours is our business. As long as no one catches us snogging in the Great Hall'

'I cannot imagine Minerva McGonagall ever using such an expression,' Severus said scornfully.

'I know, I know.' Hermione grinned. 'I was paraphrasing. It was more like...' She coughed. 'So long as you don't *flaunt* your relationship in front of the whole school, Miss Granger, I shall have no cause for complaint.'

Severus chuckled. 'That was the worst imitation of a Scottish accent I have ever heard.'

'It was pretty bad, wasn't it,' she agreed. 'Oh, Severus, would it be so awful for us to be together here? We would have separate quarters, of course, but I think Minerva might be persuaded to give us a Floo connection if you ask her nicely.'

'You've got it all mapped out between the two of you, haven't you?' Severus took Hermione's hands in his. 'Hermione, I appreciate your concern, but the answer is still no.'

'Then what will you do?' she asked.

'Something, anything,' he replied. 'After all, we have to live. You will need textbooks, equipment and other supplies.'

'You needn't concern yourself with that, Severus,' Hermione said. 'I have my own money. My parents left me well off.'

Severus dropped her hands. It suddenly occurred to him just how little he really knew Hermione. What other surprises was she going to spring on him? There was obviously a lot they needed to discuss. 'I see,' he said. 'And just how "well off" are we talking about?'

'Well,' Hermione replied vaguely, 'I haven't sold the house yet - or the holiday home in France. There's the Practice, of course, life insurance policies, endowments, shares... It's difficult to calculate a precise amount but, um... I don't think I'll ever have to work if I don't want to not that I want to be idle or anything, and I have to finish my education at any rate before I finally decide what I want to do...' She trailed off seeing the look on his face.

'I cannot live off your money,' Severus said quietly.

'I wasn't suggesting that you did,' Hermione said hastily. 'I didn't mean to wound your masculine pride, Severus, I just want to make it clear that you don't have to provide for me or anything. It's one less thing for you to worry about.' She paused. 'Do you have a problem with that?' she asked uncertainly. 'It's only money after all. It's not going to come between us, is it?'

Severus pulled her into his arms. 'No, it is not, but I will not have anyone saying that I am scrounging off you. I have to find my own way in the world.'

'Then why won't you consider coming back to Hogwarts?' she asked.

'Hermione'

'Listen to me, Severus. Hogwarts needs you. Slytherin needs you. Who but you could rebuild its reputation influence a new generation to be proud of their House? You could show the world that Slytherin was capable of producing more than just Dark Wizards.'

Severus turned away from her to look over the grounds again. Could he do it?

'I have memories of this spot too, Severus,' said Hermione, pushing her advantage. She put her hand on his shoulder. 'The evening before the battle I stood here and prayed that you would be spared not me, not Harry, not Ron, but you. You are the most precious thing in the world to me, and I want you to be happy.'

Severus shook his head. 'I do not share your faith in me, Hermione. What parent would want me teaching their child? I doubt I could inspire respect ever again.'

Hermione huffed in frustration. Well, at least she'd tried. If he was too proud and pig-headed...

Of course, I could...

In what was probably a moment of madness, Hermione forgot that she was dealing with one of the most powerful, not to mention, dangerous wizards in the country. All she saw was someone she loved very much, too down and dispirited to act in his own best interest. Indeed, if she had thought a bit longer about the drastic action she was about to take, Hermione's life may have turned out very differently. A few years down the line, and she would have appreciated that a man in his late thirties was quite capable of making his own decisions without any interference from her. But, she did not. Instead, with the best of intentions and with all the arrogance of youth, Hermione made an error of judgment that would have unforeseen consequences for them both.

'Severus,' she began, 'I believe in you and in your abilities. I know that you can do anything you set your mind to, but I also believe you need time to rest, to heal, and to take stock of your life.' She took a deep breath. 'Severus, I'm calling in my wizard's debt. I want you to take up Minerva's offer and come back to Hogwarts as Potions master and Head of Slytherin, starting next term.'

Where do we go from here?

Chapter 13 of 18

Severus gets a tempting offer in the 'Three Broomsticks' while Hermione learns her actions may have consequences.

Disclaimer: All characters depicted belong to JK Rowling.

Thanks to my beta WickedlyWanton for all her help and encouragement. If you're wondering where 'The Road to Hell (Part 2)' went, it will be along shortly.

For a brief moment, Severus stood like a statue whilst the magic of his obligation took hold of him, then shivered as he felt it subside. Inhaling deeply, he drew himself up to his full height, turned his head and looked down his long nose at Hermione.

'Remove your hand from my person,' he said icily.

'Severus, I'

'Now!'

Whatever it was Hermione was about to say, Severus did not wait to hear it. Seething with rage, he turned his back on her. With three long strides, he reached the top of the stairs and disappeared from view.

How dare she. How fucking dare she.

He moved so fast it took Hermione a few seconds to register that he had left her abruptly for the second time that day. She pelted down the stairs after him. By the time she reached the bottom, he was halfway down the corridor.

'Severus, wait.'

He took no notice.

Hermione sprinted after him. Severus made no effort to slow down when she caught up, so she had to jog by his side.

'Please wait. I haven't finished.'

'There's more?' Severus stopped and turned with such rapidity that Hermione bumped into him. He pushed her away roughly. Using the full advantage of his height, he loomed threateningly over her, fists clenched in anger at his sides.

Hermione could feel the rage coming off him in waves. She ignored it. 'Yes,' she panted. 'I didn't mean come back for ever, Severus. Just a year, perhaps two two at most.'

'Oh, and I'm supposed to be grateful for that reprieve, am I?' he spat. 'Well, I suppose it's marginally better than a life sentence.'

'Would it really be that awful?'

Severus stepped into her personal space, making Hermione shrink back until she was up against the wall.

'Did it ever occur to you, *Miss Granger*,' he hissed in her face, 'that I do not actually *like* teaching, hmm? That being a teacher was the last thing I ever wanted to do with my life?'

'No, it-it didn't,' she stammered. 'I-I didn't think'

'No, you didn't *think*, did you, Miss Fount-of-all-knowledge? It would be too much to expect you to actually *use* that brain of yours for a change instead of stuffing it full of facts. You didn't *think* because in your perfect little world, Hogwarts is still Fairyland, isn't it? Well, let me tell you, madam, to me it's bloody Purgatory! In fact,' Severus threw back his head and roared at the ceiling, startling the ghosts who had stopped to listen, 'I FUCKING HATE IT HERE.'

He set off at a breakneck speed once more with Hermione hot on his heels. Severus just wanted to put some distance between them, but she was buzzing around him

again like a bothersome insect a bothersome insect he would dearly like to swat. His fingers itched to go for his wand.

'Okay, okay, so it was wrong of me to interfere,' Hermione puffed, trying to keep up as Severus swept down the next flight of stairs. 'It was a really bad idea. I take it all back. Satisfied?'

'It is not that easy, Miss Granger,' Severus replied over his shoulder, increasing his pace. 'I am honour bound to repay my debt.'

'I was only trying to help. I'm sorry.'

Severus spun around. '*HELP?*' he cried. 'I neither want nor need your *help*. I am not a house-elf! I am not some *cause* for you to champion! You cannot fix me, you stupid girl, IT IS BEYOND YOUR CAPABILITIES!'

That did it. He had insulted her intelligence once and she'd let it go. Hermione wasn't about to let him get away with it a second time.

'*STUPID?*' she shrieked. 'Who are you calling stupid, you arrogant, ungrateful *pig*? I'm not the one too blind to see what's best for him. I'm not the one throwing away a perfectly good job opportunity because he's too proud to accept help from a friend'

Severus stopped in his tracks. 'I am *not* some-some *charity* case,' he spluttered. 'And furthermore, Miss Granger'

'STOP CALLING ME *MISS GRANGER!*' she screamed.

Taken aback, Severus could only stare. No one shouted at him ever. Who the hell did she think she was? And yet... She did look rather endearing, standing there with her hands on her hips, out of breath, face flushed pink in fury and exertion. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to hex her or kiss her. Uncomfortable with that thought, Severus spun on his heel and strode off again.

'Don't walk away when I'm talking to you!'

Severus ignored her, leaving Hermione with no choice other than to run after him again.

'Minerva isn't offering you this chance out of pity,' Hermione said, gasping for breath. 'She wants you back because you're the best man for the job. Anyone with an ounce of common sense could see that. But nooo, you'd rather cut off your big nose to spite your face than admit it, wouldn't you!'

Severus clenched his jaw and remained silent. What pissed him off the most was that, deep down, he knew Hermione was right. Under the circumstances, this was the best job he was likely to get, and that within Hogwarts' protective wards, he wouldn't have to be constantly looking over his shoulder. Given a few more minutes on the Astronomy Tower and he would have undoubtedly arrived at the same conclusion of his own free will.

In spite of his anger, therefore, Severus' Slytherin mind was already trying to turn the situation to his advantage. While it was certainly true that he had been reluctant to return to the place where Albus had died, he was keenly aware that it was mostly his stubborn pride that had kept him from accepting Minerva's generous offer. By forcing his hand, Hermione was unwittingly allowing him to save face. He was not about to tell her that, though.

'And what about me?' Hermione panted. 'Do you care about how I feel, hm? Do you think I could stay here and study without a care in the world, knowing that you run the risk of being hexed by some rogue supporter of Voldemort every day? Do you think I could rest easy in the knowledge that any day I might get an owl telling me you've been found dead in a ditch somewhere? Well, do you?'

'Twenty years,' Severus remarked bitterly, stepping onto the moving spiral staircase. 'Twenty years and two masters. I thought I was finally free of all that, but no such luck. Now, it would appear I have a new Mistress.' He turned to Hermione and bowed mockingly. 'Well, Madam, is there anything else you require of your servant?'

Hermione leaned over, clutching her side. 'Oh, for heaven's sake, it's not like that. I just want you to be happy.'

'*HAPPY?* Are you mad, woman?'

'Come in, both of you,' Minerva called. 'The door's open.'

Severus turned the knob and pushed the door, looking back towards Hermione. 'If you think you can just'

'Ah, there you are at last, my boy. It's about time you showed up. And Miss Granger, too. How lovely to see you, my dear.'

'Good afternoon, Professor Dumbledore,' said Hermione.

Severus stopped dead. Transfixed by Albus' portrait, his anger melted away.

'Come, Hermione,' said Minerva, ushering her towards the fireplace, 'let's leave them to it.' She threw some Floo powder into the grate. 'Join us in my sitting-room for tea once you've finished, Severus.'

Hermione received no sympathy from Minerva for her behaviour and, feeling like an eleven-year-old up in front of the headmistress, decided not to wait for Severus to join them. Giving the excuse that she had to feed Crookshanks, Hermione Flooed back to Grimmauld Place, startling Harry and Ginny in the process, who were having a snog on the settee at the time. She barely noticed them. Muttering to herself, she began to pace up and down on the rug.

The couple exchanged glances.

'Hi, Hermione,' said Harry. 'Anything the matter?'

Hermione stopped pacing, started to say something then thought better of it. Instead, she collapsed into a chair, put her head in her hands and groaned.

'Okay,' said Harry. 'What's he done to you, and do you want me to hex him for it?'

Hermione shook her head and wailed, 'He hasn't done anything to me. It's what I've done to him.'

Harry motioned to Ginny.

'I was just about to open a bottle of wine,' Ginny said. 'Would you like a glass?'

Hermione nodded.

'So,' said Harry, after Ginny had left the room, 'what's this all about?'

She told him.

Harry ran his hands through his hair. 'Good gods, Hermione, what on earth made you go and do a thing like that for?'

Hermione stared at the floor. 'I know, I know. There's nothing you can say that Professor McGonagall hasn't said already.'

'Read you the Riot Act, did she?' Harry asked. 'I can't say I'm surprised.'

Hermione sighed. 'It wasn't very clever of me, was it?'

'Stupid, Hermione, stupid. The word you're looking for is 'stupid.'

Hermione didn't argue.

'It's not like you're dealing with me or Ron, you know,' Harry went on. 'This is Snape we're talking about. Remember him? Tall, scary bloke? Big nose? Likes black? You can't boss him around and expect him to thank you for it.'

'I realise that now.'

'Still,' Harry said, 'look on the bright side. He can't hex you for demanding repayment, *although...*' He grinned. 'He probably knows a few untraceable poisons...'

'Harry...'

Harry stopped smiling. 'Does he know I'm coming back, too?' he asked worriedly.

Hermione shook her head miserably. 'I didn't get that far.'

'Great,' said Harry, leaning his head on the back of the settee. 'Bloody great.'

* * *

Severus did not stay very long with Minerva either. After the day he'd had, he was in need of something a bit stronger than tea. Being a balmy summer's afternoon, he decided to walk to Hogsmeade both to get some much needed air into his lungs after being cooped up in Grimmauld Place for so long, and, quite possibly, to drink himself into oblivion at the Three Broomsticks.

Seeing Albus in portrait form had been a painful experience for Severus. In fact, his mind was so occupied with the memory of the encounter that he could think of little else Hermione included. Severus had expected words of forgiveness, even though it was the last thing he had wanted to hear and, ye gods, had Albus laid it on thick, but nothing could have prepared him for the reality of seeing his old mentor like that, or of being able to talk to him again. It made Severus realise just how much he'd missed the old sod.

Crossing the railway line, Severus was shocked out of his reverie by the scene of devastation that greeted him. The battle had taken its toll on Hogsmeade. Some familiar landmarks had disappeared entirely while others were being extensively repaired. It was evident that some of these structures were only being held up by magic, presumably awaiting more permanent renovations. Elsewhere, there were piles of rubble where houses had once stood. Severus reflexively pulled his hood up, not knowing what sort of welcome to expect.

Entering the pub, Severus went up to the bar, stood in the corner with his back to the wall and waited to be served. His eyes automatically scanned the room, looking for any signs of trouble.

A rather tipsy middle-aged wizard approached the bar and slammed his tankard down on it. 'Another pint of that Doxy's piss you call ale, Rosmerta.'

Rosmerta scowled at him. 'If you don't like my beer, Archie McTavish,' she said, flicking her wand towards the barrel, 'you can go and drink somewhere else.'

'And where else would I find such charming company?' Archie slurred, leering at her cleavage.

Rosmerta rolled her eyes at him. Then she noticed Severus.

'Prof Mr. Snape!' she exclaimed.

A deathly hush descended as everyone turned to look at him.

Hesitantly, Severus pushed his hood back. 'A pint of heavy please, Rosmerta and for Merlin's sake call me Severus. You've known me long enough.'

'Of course, of course.' Rosmerta beamed at him.

There was a loud crash as a glass hit the floor and Archie lunged across the bar towards Severus. 'Death Eater scum!' he cried, going for his wand.

Rosmerta disarmed him easily. 'OUT!' she yelled. 'And don't come back until you've learned some manners!' She looked around at the rest of her clientele. 'Well? Haven't you all got something better to do than sit around like goldfish! I'm sure Mr. Snape didn't come in here to be gawped at!'

'I'm sorry about that, Severus,' she said, putting his pint down in front of him. 'Archie's not normally violent. It's just... Well, he lost his home during the battle, you see.'

Severus held out a Galleon in payment. 'It is understandable,' he said.

Rosmerta closed his fingers around the coin with her hand. 'It's on the house. If half of what they've said about you in the *Prophet* is true, it's the least I can do.' She gave Severus a look that left him in no doubt there was more on offer than free beer.

Extricating his hand from her grasp, he inclined his head and thanked her. Rosmerta smiled coquettishly and sashayed off to serve another customer. Severus watched as she went about her work, effortlessly pulling pints and measuring spirits with a flick of the wrist, and sending the empty goblets, glasses and tankards to wash themselves in the sink with a casual *swish*. Gods, she was a handsome woman, and that figure-hugging robe she was wearing was showing off her assets to their best advantage particularly when she bent over like that. Severus sighed. It wasn't that long ago when he'd have paid good money to sample the delights of that particular bosom, but now? He downed his pint.

It had been one hell of a day. In twenty-four hours he had been reunited with Hermione, had the most amazing sex, been given his freedom, turned down a medal, got his job back and been absolved of murder by a portrait. On top of that, one of the most sought after witches north of Glasgow was plying him with alcohol and offering him the comfort of her not inconsiderable charms. The thought struck him that, for the first time in his life, he had his choice of women. He smiled to himself. There was no competition, really. Still, there was no harm in looking. He was a man; he wasn't dead and Rosmerta's knockers were hard to ignore.

Rosmerta noticed Severus' appraisal of her. 'Same again?' she asked. 'Or... would you prefer a dram of firewhisky? I've got some 50-year-old Old Ogden's I've been keeping for a special occasion.'

'That would be most... acceptable,' Severus said silkily.

Rosmerta winked at him and bustled off to the cellar.

Severus glanced around the bar once more and noticed a copy of the *Evening Prophet* on a nearby table. Curiosity getting the better of him, he picked it up and, not

knowing quite what to expect, began reading.

SNAPE ACQUITTED!

Sensational Revelations at Wizengamot

Full Report *page 2*

Severus Snape: Hero or Villain. An in depth profile by Rita Skeeter *page 3*

His eyes widened in amazement as words like 'brave,' 'courageous' and 'heroic' leapt off the page. Sensing he was being watched, Severus looked up quickly and caught several people averting their eyes. Embarrassed, he hastily folded the paper and placed it on the bar. A smaller article on the back page caught his attention.

In The News This Week: Harry Potter. Hero turned Benefactor.

Harry Potter is to set up a widows and orphans trust in memory of his late mother, Lily Evans-Potter. Accompanied by close friend, Hermione Granger, Mr. Potter announced to a small gathering of Ministry officials and other dignitaries that he wished to 'repair some of the damage done by the war.'

Hogsmeade, Scotland, will be the first to benefit from Mr. Potter's generosity by the establishment of a 'Primary School.' Mr Potter explained this Muggle concept. 'All children from all walks of life will be welcome,' he said, 'whether orphaned or not. The curriculum will offer basic reading, writing and Arithmancy skills, together with some Muggle studies. I want our children to be taught that people, Muggle or wizard, deserve equal respect and that there is no room for prejudice in a modern society.'

Can such an ambitious scheme succeed? Only time will tell.

When questioned by this reporter if there was any truth in the rumour that he and Miss Granger would make an announcement of a more personal nature in the near future, Mr Potter denied they were involved romantically. 'We are just good friends,' he said.

Again, only time will tell...

'Make a lovely couple, don't they,' Rosmerta said, putting the firewhisky on the bar.

'They are *not* a couple,' Severus replied emphatically.

She shrugged. 'If you say so.' She poured two drams of whisky. '*Slange!*'

Severus raised his glass to Rosmerta and drank. It was like nectar.

'Do you like it?' she asked.

It was the best firewhisky he'd ever tasted and told her so.

'My father was something of a connoisseur,' she said. 'That's the last bottle of that year. Take the rest home and enjoy it.'

'I cannot possibly accept, Rosmerta,' he protested. 'It must be worth a small fortune.'

'Please,' she said, patting his hand. 'I'd like you to have it.' She smiled and moved away again.

Flustered by Rosmerta's generosity, Severus dropped his gaze to the newspaper once more. Hermione and Potter; the fairy-tale ending everyone wanted to see. He smirked. They were going to be disappointed. He took another sip of whisky and sighed. What was he going to do about Hermione.

He was no longer angry, just... sad. Albus had said not to be too hard on her, but Severus could not help but feel hurt and betrayed by Hermione's duplicity.

She is young, Severus.

That was certainly true, but was that really any excuse? How often would he have to make allowances for her youth?

Whatever her reasons and the favourable outcome of her demands, Hermione had manipulated him and Severus resented her for it. He was in no hurry to get back to her, and by now, he realised, she must be wondering where he was. Well, she could stew a bit longer as far as he was concerned.

Severus had to admit, though, that not many people would have stood up to him as fearlessly as she had, and Merlin, had she been mad at him. He lifted his glass to his lips and stopped.

And I turned my back on her.

He allowed the thought to sink in. He had turned his back on an angry witch and hadn't thought twice about it. Why had he done that?

Because she would never harm me. Because I would trust her with my life.

Severus put his drink down and quietly left the pub.

* * *

The only sound that broke the silence in the sitting room of the Blacks' ancestral home was the purring of a very contented half-Kneazle, luxuriating in the pleasure of being scratched behind the ears. Crookshanks was in seventh heaven. He had his mistress' undivided attention for what seemed like the first time in ages and he was enjoying every minute of it. She did seem a bit distracted, though, but he wasn't about to complain. He butted her hand to get it where he wanted it. *Ooh, yes... Over a bit... yes... Just a bit more... Up a bit... Ooh, right... there.*

Hermione sighed as she absentmindedly stroked the purring ball of fur on her lap. It was getting late and there was no sign of Severus. What was keeping him? She was beginning to think that he wasn't coming back when she heard the door opening with a soft click. Severus stood there, still dressed in his summer travelling cloak.

'Are you staying?' she asked nervously.

'If you can you put up with an ungrateful, arrogant pig,' he replied.

Pushing Crookshanks off her lap, Hermione leapt up and launched herself at him. 'I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have called you names like that.'

Severus put his arms around her and drew her in close; the smell and feel of her taking away the last vestiges of his anger. 'In the circumstances, I think you were probably justified.'

'No,' Hermione said, 'I was in the wrong and I'm ashamed of what I did. Please, please, forgive me.'

'And am I to expect such behaviour in future if I do not comply with your wishes?' he asked gruffly.

'No,' she replied vehemently. 'No, I've learned my lesson. I promise I won't ever pull a stunt like that again.'

'Very well,' Severus said, chuckling softly, 'I accept your apology. What's done is done. However, there is still something that needs to be addressed.' He took her hand and led her over to the settee. 'Sit with me a moment.'

Hermione sat down next to him, still holding his hand.

'What you did,' Severus began, 'could have adverse consequences for you. You do realise that?'

She shook her head. 'I don't understand.'

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. 'Hermione, if you order someone to do something against their will, even in payment of a life debt, it can be almost as bad as casting the Imperius Curse. Performing such magic can harm the caster. Did Minerva not tell you of this?'

Hermione was shocked. 'No-no, she didn't. I suppose she was too angry for your sake.'

'I see.' He took both her hands in his. 'I doubt you need be too worried. What matters, as in all magic, is the intent. I do not believe that you acted maliciously, but you must tell me what you were thinking at the exact moment when you made your demand.'

Hermione tried to remember. 'I was thinking... I wanted you to be happy and to have time to heal'

'That was certainly selfless of you,' he said dryly. 'Anything else?'

'Not really,' she replied, 'only that I wanted to keep you safe. I suppose that was partly selfish of me.'

'Perhaps.' He considered the possibility. 'However, I do not see anything harmful in that sentiment. I accept your motives were honourable and that you did not intend to entrap me.'

'No,' she said, shaking her head, 'I most definitely did not.'

'Good, then it would appear no harm has been done.' He squeezed her hands. 'You should also know I told Minerva that I was returning of my own free will, and that what you did was unnecessary.'

'There was no need'

Severus hushed her with a kiss. 'I will return to Hogwarts for two years after which time I shall review my position. Does that meet with your approval?'

'Yes.' Hermione flung her arms around his neck and kissed him back. 'yes, it does...'

She rested her head on his shoulder a moment and then giggled as a thought occurred to her. 'You know, Severus, I think that this probably qualifies as our first row.'

Severus smirked and kissed her forehead. 'I am inclined to agree with you.'

'And...' Hermione nuzzled his neck. 'I've heard tell that make-up sex is *really* great...'

'That is a theory I would, uh, very much like to put to the test. What are you, um, proposing?'

'Oh, I have a few ideas.' She nibbled his earlobe. 'But I think it requires a more thorough and meticulous analysis elsewhere.' She stood up and tugged his hand. 'Come on. Let's go to bed.'

It was Hermione who awoke first the next morning and had the pleasure of studying her lover while he slept. Severus looked years younger in repose, she noticed, the lines on his face being less pronounced in this relaxed state. She observed his breathing for a few moments, fascinated by the flaring of his nostrils as he exhaled. Hermione did not have Severus' patience, however, and could not resist kissing him on the tip of his nose.

'Still here, I see,' Severus said, without opening his eyes.

Hermione swatted his arm. 'I need to go to the loo'

'Don't let me stop you.'

'I didn't want you to wake up and find me gone.' Hermione leant forward and kissed his chest. 'And... it's very difficult to get out of this bed with you in it.'

'Woman, you're insatiable.'

Hermione laughed. 'Hello, pot, meet kettle.'

'Where do you get these expressions?'

Still smiling, Hermione caught a lock of her hair and swirled the end around one of his nipples.

Severus emitted a strange, strangled noise. Intrigued, she did it again.

'Stop it!' he said through gritted teeth.

I don't believe it! 'You're ticklish, aren't you?' Hermione grinned at her discovery.

'Yes,' he admitted, 'I am and you are not to breathe a word of it outside this room on pain of death.'

Hermione swirled the hair around the other nipple. 'I won't tell a living soul, I promise. It'll be our secret.'

Severus growled and flipped her over onto her back. 'If you need to go to the lavatory, I suggest you do so now.'

Laughing, Hermione wriggled out from underneath him and reached for her dressing gown. Severus reclined on his elbow, eyes tracking her every movement, as she padded towards the dressing table and picked up her toiletry bag. He watched as she slipped her dainty feet into those ridiculous slippers the ones that made her look like she had a dead rabbit attached to the end of each foot and then slung a towel over her shoulder. He didn't think he would ever tire of looking at her, or of the intimacy of witnessing her little morning rituals. Two years in Hogwarts was a small price to pay for that privilege alone. Hermione blew him a kiss from the door and then she was

gone.

Severus sighed and rolled onto his back. Putting his hands behind his head, he stared at the ceiling with smug satisfaction. Make-up sex definitely had a lot going for it, he decided, although it had certainly taken him by surprise, her taking the lead like that.

Severus smirked at the memory of Hermione slowly disrobing him and the hungry look on her face as she pushed him back on the bed. He touched his fingertips to his mouth and closed his eyes. Feathery kisses; butterfly lips on eyes, nose and cheeks; he traced the path she had tenderly followed, exploring his neck with admirable thoroughness, finding that oh-so-tender spot behind his ear, and then turning her attention to his collarbone. Nipping and sucking, hot breath on his extremely sensitive nipples; he touched them now, remembering how he had quivered when she had finally discovered them. Down his torso she had travelled, bathing each and every one of his scars with her kisses. He trailed his hand over his abdomen and lightly stroked his erection, recalling how he had almost forgotten to breathe when she had caressed it against her cheek. It was then that Severus had sensed some hesitation on her part and, not wanting her to feel under any sort of obligation, assured her that felling him wasn't necessary. Hermione had merely smiled.

Any misgivings Severus may have had were soon forgotten when Hermione ran the tip of her tongue along the length of his cock and then took the head into her mouth. Severus closed his eyes and relived the experience all over again. In all honesty, it wasn't the best blowjob he had ever had there had been far more sexually experienced women in Severus' life than Hermione; women whose technique had taken him to the brink of insanity, deep throating and sucking him off with mechanical efficiency. Hermione's performance couldn't compete with that, but then her lack of skill was not an issue. It was *her*, and he had dreamt about Hermione's mouth around his cock for a very long time.

Severus stroked himself more firmly now, imagining that hot, wet, sucking heaven. Arching into her and fisting the sheets, he had given her fair warning of his impending orgasm, wanting and not wanting to come in her mouth; afraid somehow that his seed would despoil her. But Hermione had kept going, relishing the taste of him and swallowing the salty liquid without complaint. Then, as he lay there recovering his breath, she had done an extraordinary thing. To his utter incredulity, Hermione squeezed out the last drops from the tip of his cock and licked them up.

She must have mistaken the look on his face for something else as she had asked him uncertainly, 'Was that okay?'

Unable to speak, Severus had pulled Hermione into a crushing embrace and held her until he was sure he could exhale normally. This total acceptance of him, of all of him, was almost his undoing. Feeling the unfamiliar pressure of tears behind his eyes, Severus had been afraid to look at her. He held her fast, preventing Hermione from turning her head towards him. She hadn't fought it. Instead, Hermione had kissed the skin that was closest to her and said that she loved him. Severus had not replied.

Remembering the moment, Severus chastised himself as he reached for his wand to clean himself up. *Fool. Why didn't you say something? Would it have been so hard to say, 'I love you, too?'* He sighed. Relationships. He had avoided them for so long he had no real idea how to behave.

Please God, don't let me cock this one up.

He scratched his balls and yawned. Where was she anyway? She was taking an inordinate amount of time in the bathroom.

By now, Severus also had a pressing need to empty his bladder. Not feeling particularly inclined to get up, however, he hunted around under the bed for a chamber pot. Having no luck there, he scanned the room, spotted a rather ghastly porcelain shepherdess on the mantelpiece and Summoned it.

Suitably po-faced, he thought, catching the simpering figure. *This'll wipe the smile off it*

Severus Transfigured the unfortunate shepherdess into a suitable receptacle, relieved himself and banished the contents. Job done, he restored the ornament to its former state and sent it flying back to the mantelpiece. He lay back on the bed in eager anticipation of Hermione's return. Suddenly remembering Hermione's views on oral hygiene and morning stubble, Severus reached for his wand again just in time to clean his teeth and perform a shaving spell before the door opened. A large breakfast tray floated into the room with Hermione behind it.

'What's this?' he asked.

'Breakfast,' Hermione replied. 'What does it look like?'

'I don't normally eat breakfast,' he grumbled. The thought of eating first thing in the morning made his stomach churn. 'Just coffee will do, thank you.'

Hermione set the tray down on the bed.

'I'm not going to miss breakfast two days in a row,' she said determinedly, 'and you need to keep your strength up.'

Severus grunted.

'There's nothing heavy or fried,' she said. 'Look, it's just some poached eggs, toast and marmalade.'

Hermione dipped some toast into the egg and fed it to him. Between the tray and his mouth, some egg yolk dropped on his chest.

'Oops,' she said. 'Let me clean that up for you.'

Severus sighed as he chewed the toast and Hermione licked up the egg. Breakfast in bed, he decided, was something he could quite easily get used to.

The summer passed in a blur of activity. Hermione, unable or unwilling to deal with her parents' estate during the war, had run out of excuses. Even so, the prospect of selling her family home was not pleasant, for she was only too aware that once the house was gone, her last solid link to her childhood, indeed to the Muggle world itself, would go with it.

Severus understood what she was going through and was both sympathetic and supportive. 'There is no need to rush into selling either property, Hermione,' he said. 'Take your time and start with the small things. Don't make any decisions until you feel ready.'

Hermione heeded his advice. Severus made sure the wards were secure on the house, but other than that he left Hermione to her own devices, thinking that it was a necessary part of her grieving process and something she had to work through herself. Instead, he concentrated on putting his own house in order and making preparations for the new school year.

Such practicalities aside, there was still plenty of time to do all the usual things new lovers do; they went for long walks, ate out and stayed in bed for whole days at a time. They talked about the past; their childhoods, their likes and dislikes and found they had a lot in common. Uncertainly at first, Severus began to tell Hermione things about his youth that he had never confided in anyone else. She listened attentively, held him when he relived some ancient pain, and never once passed judgment. Naturally, these discussions also included their plans for the future and it was during one such conversation that Hermione casually mentioned she was considering curse breaking as a career.

'Haven't you had enough excitement for one lifetime?' Severus asked, taken aback at the idea. 'I thought you would have preferred something a little more... academic.'

'Well, yes,' Hermione replied, 'but the thing is, what? I'm interested in a lot of subjects and I'd find it hard to specialise in just one. Curse breaking combines a lot of the disciplines I like Charms, Arithmancy, Runes Potions even, as well as history and archaeology.'

'Most curse breaking jobs are not all that glamorous,' Severus said. 'You do realise that, don't you? The competition is stiff to get into the field, Hermione. Most Curse Breakers end up working for Gringotts doing repetitive, routine work.'

'I know,' Hermione conceded. 'Bill Weasley told me that. I do realise I'd have to start at the bottom and work up.'

'It can also be very dangerous,' Severus continued. 'Experienced wizards get killed every year. Very few witches consider it as a career'

'Exactly,' said Hermione.

'And,' Severus ignored her interruption, 'it is not what you could call steady employment. You have to go where the work takes you, and a lot of it is on short term contracts.'

Hermione didn't like to point out that periods of unemployment were the least of her worries. She sighed. 'I know there are dangers involved, Severus. It's just... I wouldn't like to think that all the exciting times of my life are behind me before I've even turned twenty. But, you never know,' she added, smiling, 'I might change my mind. Again.'

Severus privately hoped so. Of all the careers she could have picked, Hermione was considering one that could be potentially life threatening. It was unlikely that Hermione would be content with a mundane job at Gringotts for very long, he knew that, and if anyone was likely to succeed, it would be her. But then that would mean a lot of time spent out of the country; time spent away from him and Severus did not think much of that idea. Some of the bravest, not to mention best looking, wizards he had ever met were Curse Breakers; men who might well become Hermione's colleagues. A little seed of concern lodged itself in his brain. With Draco Malfoy's trial only days away, however, he did not allow himself to dwell upon it. There was still plenty of time for her to reconsider and choose a more suitable profession.

Severus had expected Draco's trial to be a circus, and he wasn't disappointed. The great, the good and the curious packed the courtroom to hear Harry Potter and the other Order members bear witness. Severus sat close to Hermione, ignoring the stares and whispers aimed at him. Minerva, Harry and the Weasleys sat around them as a show of support.

A hush descended as the Aurors lead Draco into the courtroom. Hermione instinctively reached for Severus' hand and squeezed. When she tried to remove it from his grasp, he gripped more tightly and wouldn't let go.

'Too young,' Severus whispered, so quietly Hermione almost missed it.

She had to agree. Draco's customary swagger and arrogance was absent. He had lost weight and looked pale to the point of transparency. She glanced at Harry, but he was too busy watching the magical chains bind Draco to the interrogation chair.

I'm so glad it's not Severus who has to sit in that chair, Hermione thought guiltily.

Draco surveyed the room nervously. Catching Severus' eye, he relaxed a little at the sight of a friendly face. Severus acknowledged him with a brief nod.

Very soon, it became clear to all concerned that the Minister of Magic wanted to make an example of Draco and that the Wizengamot was going to be more than happy to convict him. It was as much as Severus could do to keep his face impassive while they read out the charges. By the time they got to 'Conspiracy to commit genocide,' Severus thought Draco was looking at a life sentence.

The Interrogators put forward their case; Draco had taken the Dark Mark voluntarily and had been keen to do Voldemort's bidding. He had wilfully put Hogwarts at risk by giving Death Eaters access to the school, and could not deny his attempts on the life of Albus Dumbledore or his part in the former headmaster's eventual murder. A term in Azkaban seemed a foregone conclusion.

The Chief Warlock gazed down at Draco. 'Do you have anyone to represent you, Mr Malfoy?'

'I'

'Yes, he does.'

Heads turned in the direction of a determined looking Minerva McGonagall.

'You?' Scrimgeour asked incredulously.

'Yes,' said Minerva, 'me. Do you have any objections, Minister?'

There was a murmur around the Judges' Balcony.

'No,' said the Chief Warlock. 'You may proceed, Professor.'

'Thank you, sir,' Minerva replied. She turned to Harry. 'My first witness is Harry Potter.'

There was a collective gasp as Harry stood.

'Mr Potter,' Minerva began, 'please describe for us the events that took place on the Astronomy Tower at Hogwarts, the night Albus Dumbledore... died.'

'Certainly, Professor.'

There was silence in the courtroom as Harry gave his account of that tragic night.

Severus stared straight ahead, but kept a tight grip on Hermione's hand.

'So,' said Scrimgeour triumphantly, 'you saw Snape kill Dumbledore!'

'Minister,' the Chief Warlock interrupted, 'that has already been established. What is important is the reluctance of Mr Malfoy to carry out the task.' He turned to Harry. 'Please continue, Mr Potter.'

Harry described how he gave chase as Severus and Draco fled Hogwarts, emphasising how Severus had prevented the Death Eaters from harming him.

'Thank you, Mr Potter,' said Minerva. 'That will be all. My next witness is Severus Snape.'

A ripple of excited chattering echoed around the room as Severus stood up.

Minerva coughed before she began her examination. 'Professor Snape, please tell us what happened after you left Hogwarts that night with Mr Malfoy.'

Severus recounted their year in exile, stressing that Draco had not been involved in any of the atrocities committed by Voldemort's followers. You could have heard a pin drop as Severus testified how Draco had searched for and delivered the Hufflepuff cup to Harry and the part he had played in drawing the Death Eaters away from Hogsmeade.

'To go back to that night on the Astronomy Tower when you killed'

'Minister!' the Chief Warlock exclaimed. 'May I remind you that Professor Snape is not on trial here. I must ask you to confine your questioning to the case before us. Do

you have any further questions for this witness, Professor McGonagall?'

Minerva inclined her head towards the bench. 'No, sir. I would now like to present the testimony of some of the survivors present at the battle.'

As the others related how Draco had defied Voldemort in the end and had refused to kill Hermione, the Minister of Magic sank lower and lower into his seat, knowing his chances of making a public example out of the last Death Eater were shrinking by the minute.

'There are no further witnesses,' said Minerva. She sat down and folded her hands in her lap.

'Very well, thank you, Professor.' The Chief Warlock looked down on Draco. 'Is there anything else you wish to add in your own defence, Mr Malfoy, before we consider our verdict?'

'No, sir,' said Draco, 'only that I am deeply sorry for the death of Professor Dumbledore. I was stupid and naïve. I regret not having the courage to stand up to my father and doing what was right. I will regret it for the rest of my life.'

* * *

It took an hour for the Wizengamot to consider the evidence. As the court reconvened, Severus reached for Hermione's hand again. She gave him a small smile.

'Fingers crossed.'

They turned their attention to the Judges' Bench. The Chief Warlock shuffled the parchment in front of him and prepared to read out the verdict. He cleared his throat.

'Draco Malfoy,' he began, 'the Wizengamot finds you guilty of the attempted murder of Albus Dumbledore.'

There was uproar.

'*Silence!*'

Once he had re-established order, the Chief Warlock continued. 'Given the nature of your participation in the defeat of Voldemort and other extenuating circumstances, however, we do not consider a custodial sentence appropriate. It is the judgment of this court, therefore, that you be banished from Wizarding Britain for a period of five years. All other charges are hereby dismissed.'

With an evil grin on his face, Scrimgeour reached for Draco's wand and snapped it in two. Severus watched in horror, knowing that it could so easily have been his own.

'Oh, that was just... just *spiteful!*' said Hermione. 'There was no need for that. They could easily have kept it.'

'Indeed,' Severus agreed. *What will happen to him now?*

'You are free to leave this court.'

'Go to him, Severus,' Hermione whispered. 'We'll help him. Tell him he can stay at my place, if necessary.'

Severus was touched by Hermione's concern. Draco had never lived among Muggles; he would be defenceless without his wand and wouldn't have a clue how to survive. Severus took both her hands in his.

'You have a good heart, Hermione,' was all he managed to say.

It was a kind offer, but an unnecessary one as Draco's French relatives offered him a home for the duration of his exile. Minerva arranged his safe passage out of the country, knowing there were people eager to carry out their own form of justice on the last of the Death Eaters. With a stiff promise to stay in touch, Severus and Draco said their farewells.

All too soon, the summer days grew cooler and the start of the Autumn Term was upon them. On the last day of the holidays, Hermione inspected the bright, spacious rooms overlooking the grounds that Minerva had allocated her in Gryffindor Tower. She sighed, admiring the view. That was the one thing she didn't like about Severus' quarters; no windows. It was such a pity that she would be spending very little time here, she thought. Minerva had graciously given her a Floo connection to Severus' chambers so, as comfy as the bed looked, Hermione doubted she would ever sleep in it. She glanced at the clock. There was just enough time for a quick shower before the Welcoming Feast. She picked up a handful of Floo powder and tossed it into the grate.

The Road to Hell (Part Two)

Chapter 14 of 18

Back to Hogwarts. Does a bright future for Hermione mean an uncertain one for Severus?

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A/N: Huge thanks and a bottle of Old Ogden's to Wickedlywanton for her help and encouragement. This chapter is dedicated to her.

Severus stared gloomily at the stranger before him.

'Welcome back, you old bugger,' said the mirror. 'It's good to see you again.'

Severus did not share its sentiments. Dressed in his full teaching robes, Severus was having a hard time reconciling the serene image in front of him with the growing sense of panic he was experiencing. He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a long breath. Gods, he was dreading this evening. How would the children react to him, particularly his Slytherins? How on earth was he supposed to command their respect? He turned his head to see Hermione walk out of his bathroom wearing only a

towel and promptly forgot all about the Welcoming Feast.

'Gods, you look hot,' she said, gazing at him.

Severus did a twirl, smirking at the comforting *swish* of his robes. The heavy material undoubtedly gave him substance and the appearance of confidence. He still *looked* like his old menacing self, at any rate.

'Well, Miss Granger,' Severus said silkily, 'are you going to stand there gawking all evening, or do you intend getting dressed?'

Hermione laughed. *The bat is back. Only this time, he's my bat.* She dropped her towel and walked slowly towards him.

'Hermione...' he warned.

'Hush. I've always wanted to do this.' Hermione put her arms around his neck and pressed her body against the rough wool of his robes, sighing contentedly. She released him abruptly, turning to get dressed, only to find herself lifted off her feet and flung unceremoniously on the bed.

Severus looked down at a naked, and rather damp Hermione, sprawled over the quilt and had a fleeting vision of her tied to the bedposts. He fell on top of her and kissed her hungrily.

Hermione squealed, trying to push him off. 'Severus, we'll be late for the Sorting.'

'Bugger the Sorting.'

Hermione giggled helplessly.

At the sound of her laughter, Severus came to his senses and scrambled off the bed. What on earth was he thinking? He was behaving like an animal.

'You are right,' he said gruffly. 'We are going to be late.' He straightened his robes and smoothed his hair. 'I will see you in the Great Hall. It would be better if we arrived separately.'

Hermione stared after Severus' back as he swooped out of the room, then sighed as she got off the bed and gathered her clothes. What was all that about? Hermione had no cause to complain about Severus' skills as a lover: he was gentle, tender, considerate and yet...

It's like he has to ask permission.

It was a far cry from the days of his 'inspections'. Hermione smiled, remembering. And where had that ~~dem~~ gone; the one who had just... taken her that time in the library? Something had been unleashed that night; something raw, animalistic even, but although Severus' passion had been overwhelming in its intensity, Hermione had revelled in the knowledge that she had been the one to bring on that loss of control. Tonight, for the first time since then, she thought she had seen that same gleam in Severus' eye for a fleeting moment, but it had vanished just as quickly as it had appeared.

Hermione sighed again, hurriedly pulling on her robe. Despite her assurances, she was afraid Severus was still ashamed of his behaviour that night. What was it going to take to convince him that she wouldn't be offended if he just... let go?

Hermione was still pondering the question as she rushed to the Great Hall.

Should I confront him? she thought, taking her seat next to Harry at the end of the Gryffindor table. *Would he be upset? Would he think I was criticising him?*

Looking along the High Table, Hermione decided to let it lie at least for the time being; he had enough on his plate at the moment without her nagging him. She caught Severus' eye and gave him a small smile. He acknowledged her with a slight incline of his head just as the doors opened and Professor Flitwick led in the first-years for the Sorting.

Later in the evening, after a boisterous and sumptuous Feast, Hermione accompanied Ginny and Harry back to Gryffindor Tower. The three friends were mostly silent as they trudged up the stairs. Ron's absence was weighing heavily on them, although no one said anything there was no need; they each knew what the other two were thinking. Hermione said her goodnights, then sat in the window seat of her room for a while, reliving her first sighting of Hogwarts: the boats, Hagrid. She shivered and rubbed her arms while gazing at the moon's reflection on the surface of the lake. So much had happened since then. So many memories, both good and bad.

She sighed then smiled, thinking about the Welcoming Feast as she got up and walked over to the hearth. Severus should have returned from the Slytherin common room by now.

He must be so pleased, Hermione thought, stepping into the fireplace.

'I'm back, Sev' her smile disappeared at the sight of a dishevelled Severus slumped in his chair, head in one hand and a tumbler of firewhisky in the other. His teaching robes lay discarded in a crumpled heap at his side.

'Whatever is the matter?'

Severus did not look up so Hermione knelt beside him and pushed the hair back from his face.

'Severus?'

'I was not... I did not expect...'

'To be cheered by the entire school?' Hermione volunteered.

'Yes,' he replied.

'Would you have preferred it if they had booed and thrown things at you?'

Severus huffed. At least he would have understood such a reaction. 'They treated me like a hero, Hermione.'

'But you are'

'I am NOT... I killed the headmaster of this school, for God's sake! Has everyone conveniently forgotten that?'

Hermione sighed. 'They understand what you had to do'

'No, they do not,' Severus said quietly. 'No one does. I do not see how I can teach'

'Nonsense.'

'Is it? One of my first year Slytherins asked if I would kiss her goodnight. Me! Can you believe it? Never in all my years...' he trailed off and took a gulp of whisky.

Hermione couldn't help but smile. 'So, you're afraid they won't cower in your presence anymore or call you the Bat of the Dungeons?'

He snorted. 'I blame that Skeeter woman. All that bloody rubbish she wrote about me in the paper... Deserves a medal, my arse. How am I supposed to control a class if they no longer fear me? Tell me that!'

'Well, she was right about that,' Hermione replied, taking the glass out of his hand and climbing into his lap. 'Everyone else is going to get one and as for the other thing, well, we'll soon find out. You can practice on me if you like.'

'Hmm?' he muttered, absentmindedly playing with her hair.

'Fifty points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for making inappropriate advances to a professor.'

'What advances?'

'These...'

'Oh, *those*...'

* * *

It was an uncharacteristically nervous Severus that stood poised at the door to the Potions classroom the next morning, steeling himself to make his customary dramatic entrance.

Second year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, he reminded himself. *Easy. Get a grip, man.*

Severus took a deep breath and pushed the door with all his might. It slammed behind him most satisfactorily. He marched to the front of the classroom, neither looking left nor right, waved his hand at the board, then paused before spinning on his heel.

'Turn to page'

He stopped, staring at the scene in front of him. The class was on its feet, all eyes staring back at him expectantly. Severus looked around the room suspiciously.

'Sit.'

There was a lot of scuffling and scraping of chairs on the flagstones, and then silence. It was really rather eerie. While everyone opened their textbooks, Severus surreptitiously examined his desk and chair for any jinxes, or anything the Weasley twins might have dreamed up, but he could not detect anything untoward.

Throughout the lesson no one said a word; everyone followed his instructions to the letter, and not a single cauldron exploded. Every potion turned out perfectly. Severus had never experienced such a success rate in all his years of teaching. At the end of the day, after each of his classes had followed the same pattern, he returned to his chambers a nervous wreck. He had absolutely no idea what was going on, but he intended to find out.

'What the hell is going on?' he asked a bemused Hermione.

'Nothing,' she replied.

'But... They're *listening* to me. I mean, without me having to threaten them.'

'It's called respect, Severus.' She put her arms around him when he looked at her incredulously. 'Anyway,' she smiled, 'you should be so worried. I overheard a couple of sixth-year Hufflepuffs discussing your, erm... attributes.'

'What?'

'The girls.' She smiled up at him. 'I'm going to have to beat them off with a big stick, it seems.'

'How fortunate I have you to defend my honour,' he purred. 'Jealous?'

'No, not really.' Hermione grinned. 'It just confirms what an excellent taste in men I have.'

While Hermione tried to make light of the situation, Severus found the change in people's attitude towards him difficult to stomach. Animosity, contempt, resentment all of these things he could have coped with; he already had the defence mechanisms in place to deal with those. Respect, gratitude and admiration bordering on hero-worship simply aggravated him. Having his life exposed for the entire world to scrutinise, and a hatred of teaching, did nothing to improve his frame of mind, either.

Severus managed to disguise his feelings during the day being a spy for so many years had its uses but in the evening, when the mask slipped, it was Hermione who had to deal with his bouts of bad temper and general grumpiness. She couldn't really understand why he was making such a fuss, though. The war was over. He didn't have to pretend anymore; he was free to be himself. Why couldn't he just snap out of it?

Hermione had to bite her tongue and use every last ounce of her patience to try and convince Severus that he didn't have to revert to type. But, being the sort of person who stuck her chin out at adversity and just got on with things, there was only so much of his brooding she was prepared to suffer in silence.

'Haven't you noticed how proud your Slytherins are of you, Severus?' Hermione asked one evening in exasperation. 'Can't you see how important a role model you are to them, particularly to those whose parents supported Voldemort?'

Severus grunted in reply and stuck his nose in a book to indicate he did not want to pursue the subject. People were being *nice* to him, for gods' sake; people who would not have given him the time of day few years ago. He saw no earthly reason to be *nice* back and was quite happy to let them believe he was still the same surly, sarcastic bastard he had always been.

Hermione was not deterred. She wormed her way into his lap, trying to snatch the book out of his hands.

'I am not in the mood for games, Hermione,' Severus said, holding the book out of her reach.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I realise it must be hard for you, having to live with such an imbecile.'

'Pardon?'

'Well, I'm such a poor judge of character, for a start. Here I am thinking I was in love with a strong, brave, powerful wizard, but it turns out he's really just some cold, uncaring, nasty, cynical old git. It just illustrates what a feeble mind I must have.'

Severus looked at her blankly, or so he thought, but Hermione was starting to learn how to read him. She noticed the slight softening of his eyes and the little line at the corner of his mouth which indicated he was trying not to smile.

'Smile,' she said, 'or I'll tickle you.'

'You wouldn't dare,' he said, smirking in spite of himself.

Happy that she had broken his mood for this evening at least, Hermione put her head on his shoulder and relaxed. It had been a long day.

'Just... be there for me, Hermione,' Severus said quietly.

'Always,' she replied mid-yawn.

Smiling, Severus stuck his nose in her hair and kissed the top of her head. As long as he had her; as long as he had *this* then everything would be all right. The rest of the world could go to hell.

'I love you,' he said almost inaudibly.

His only answer was a soft snore.

* * *

Realising she couldn't force Severus out of his gloom, Hermione left him to come around in his own good time. She had more than enough to keep herself occupied as it was with the study schedule she had set herself. Hermione's thirst for knowledge had not abated, and she resumed her studies gratefully and with enthusiasm, trying to make up for lost time even though she was already streets ahead in most of her subjects.

Towards the end of September, Minerva called Hermione into her office.

'You wanted to see me, Minerva?' she asked.

'Yes, my dear, I have a proposition for you,' Minerva replied. 'Do sit down.'

Hermione sat in the chair on the other side of the desk and looked at the Headmistress expectantly.

'I've been thinking and I've taken advice from some of your other teachers,' Minerva began, 'how would you feel about taking some of your NEWTs early in the November resits?'

Clearly shocked, Hermione stammered, 'I-I don't know. I've never even thought about it. Do you think I'm ready?'

'No,' Minerva admitted, 'but it wouldn't take that much extra work on your part, and we would give you all the help we can.'

Hermione thought about it. There was no real reason to rush into the exams, but it would look good on her CV. And, if she got a few subjects out of the way, it would mean more free time in the evening time she could spend with Severus.

'How many subjects do you think I should sit?' she asked cautiously.

'Well, obviously, that's up to you,' Minerva replied. 'But you would sail through Charms...'

Hermione nodded. Charms was her least challenging subject.

'... and you have an aptitude for Arithmancy. Ancient Runes is another possibility, and as for Defence Against the Dark Arts well,' Minerva smiled wryly, 'I'm sure you and Mr Potter would get an 'O' each just for turning up!'

Hermione laughed. 'What about Transfiguration?'

Minerva played with the quill in front of her. 'Don't take this the wrong way, Hermione,' she said. 'I think you would pass, but if you want a higher grade, I suggest you leave it as well as Potions and Herbology, naturally, until the end of the year.'

Hermione bit her lip as she considered the matter. 'Have you discussed this with Severus?'

'No.' Minerva shook her head. 'As I did not consider Potions to be an option, there was no need.'

'Very well,' Hermione said, making her mind up, 'I'll do it. I'll do as you suggest.'

'Excellent!' said Minerva. 'I shall inform Professor Flitwick and the others of your decision.'

* * *

Hermione had to wait until the evening before she had a chance to tell Severus her news. She found him in the Potions lab, bottling supplies for Madam Pomfrey. He turned as the door opened and gave her a small smile.

'Come to help?' he asked.

Hermione walked over to him and gave him a quick hug.

'What can I do?'

Severus pointed to a large batch of Pepperup Potion. With winter on the way, it would soon be in much in demand. Hermione rolled her sleeves up and began the laborious process of putting the individual doses into phials.

'Minerva called me in today.'

'Oh?'

'I'm going to sit some of my NEWTs in November.'

Severus was silent for a moment. 'Which ones?'

Hermione told him.

'No doubt you will excel, Hermione,' Severus said, 'but did Minerva say why she wanted you to do it?'

Hermione mulled it over. 'No, other than she thought I would be ready with a little extra coaching. You don't think she has some ulterior motive, do you?' Hermione laughed.

'As a Gryffindor, I would consider that unlikely.' He smirked, and Hermione laughed again. 'But, no doubt she is aware of the fact that your academic achievements will

reflect well on the school.'

Hermione hadn't considered that possibility. She sighed. 'Why do you always look for the catch?'

Severus didn't reply. Instead, he indicated a pile of parchment on the end of the worktable. Hermione stopped what she was doing.

'What have you got there?'

He sighed, passing them to her. 'Read them.'

Wiping her hands, Hermione picked up the first letter. "'Dear Professor Snape..." da-de-da ...*Witch Weekly*? She looked up in surprise.

Severus nodded. 'Carry on.'

Hermione returned to the letter and continued, "'...we would like to offer you a weekly column... testing and recommending the latest beauty potions'" Hermione covered her mouth to smother her laughter.

'Read the others.'

Hermione glanced through the other letters. There were some trivial offers, but in the main, they contained invitations to review articles in some of the more serious, and influential, Potions periodicals.

'But, Severus,' Hermione said, 'this is right up your street. *And* they're offering you twenty Galleons per review. That's not to be sniffed at.'

'It's not the money, Hermione,' Severus said wearily, sitting down on a stool. 'Don't you see, I haven't changed. I am still the same competent brewer I have always been, but no one appreciated me... before.' He grabbed a handful of the letters. 'This has nothing to do with skill, and all to do with celebrity. I want no part of it.' He threw them down again, put his elbows on the desk and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. 'What do you think these people want; I mean, really *want* from me?'

'That's obvious,' Hermione replied. 'Your name in their publications will increase their circulation. Take the money, Severus, that's my advice to you. Grab it with both hands before they change their minds.'

'I had no idea you had such a mercenary streak in you, Miss Granger.' He smirked. 'But you see my point. People rarely act out of generosity of spirit. I am unable to blindly trust their motives as you are prone to do.'

'I see.' Hermione moved behind him and began massaging his shoulders. Severus groaned as his muscles started to relax under Hermione's capable fingers.

'That feels good.'

Hermione stopped abruptly. 'That'll be ten Galleons, please.'

'What?'

'Well, you expect people to act in their own interests, so I'm charging.'

Severus chuckled and swivelled around to face her. 'You will be the death of me, witch.'

Hermione smiled in turn. 'Seriously, though, not everyone is out to get a piece of you, my love. Can't you just accept some things at face value?'

Severus looked away. 'I was taught at an early age not to,' he replied quietly.

Hermione raised her eyebrows but said nothing, waiting for him to explain further.

'When I was a child,' he began hesitantly, 'there used to be this snow globe on the mantelpiece at home you know, the thing you shake and it looks like a blizzard inside?'

'Yes, of course,' said Hermione. 'I used to have one, too.'

'It was quite old,' Severus continued, 'Victorian, probably. My mother had had it since she was a girl.' He sighed at the memory. 'It used to fascinate me. I would stare at it for hours on end the little houses inside that resembled some... village of indeterminate Middle European origin, and... make up stories about them.'

'Go on,' Hermione encouraged.

'I would' he paused. 'Oh, this is stupid.'

'No, it isn't,' Hermione said. 'It's fascinating. What stories?'

Time seemed to stand still for Hermione as Severus began to tell her about the miniature village and its inhabitants, protected from the outside world by its glass dome. He could recall, even now, the names he had given the various families; especially the children and their pet dogs.

'There was a red glow coming from the downstairs windows I always imagined there would be a roaring fire inside, with plenty to eat on the table...' He sounded almost wistful. 'Then, one day, I told my mother that I thought it would be a nice place to visit. She laughed and said, "Then why don't we?" Up until then, the thought hadn't occurred to me that such a thing was actually possible.'

'How wonderful!' said Hermione.

Severus looked at his hands. 'She had to Charm away the liquid, of course, but then she shrunk us and we Apparated inside. The first thing I noticed was that the snow wasn't snow at all. It was hard and sharp and I cut my hand when I tried to pick it up. Then, we trudged up to the village. Up close, you could see that it was just a lump of carved bone or possibly even ivory that had been painted rather garishly. There were no doors, or windows, no children, or dogs nothing. I was so disappointed. After my mother had Apparated us out again, she said, "So you see, Severus, things are rarely what they appear to be, and very often they are best kept at a distance. More importantly, some things are better left to the imagination since they may not stand up to close scrutiny in the harsh light of reality."'

'Oh, I'm so sorry.' Hermione put her arms around him.

'What for?' Severus asked, clearly perplexed.

'Because you obviously were an imaginative little boy, and instead of encouraging you, your mother destroyed your illusions. Do you still have the globe?'

'No,' Severus replied, 'my father broke it and why are you crying?'

'Because it's so sad.'

'Don't be ridiculous! My mother was trying to teach me a lesson about life, and I am grateful that she did!'

Hermione brushed her tears away, shaking her head. 'When I was a little girl,' she sniffed, 'I used to have a dolls' house in my bedroom. I used to imagine that while I slept, the dolls would come alive they'd dress up, throw parties and all kinds of things. I know for certain that, if my mother had been a witch, she'd have made it happen so I could have gone to the parties with them. She wouldn't have crushed my imagination so brutally.'

'Well,' said Severus briskly, 'it would seem our mothers had very different views on child rearing. Anyway, it is all in the past, and there is nothing I can do to change it. Now, are you going to help me finish here so we can have the rest of the evening to ourselves?'

Over the next few weeks, Hermione saw little of Severus as she virtually lived in the library, cramming like mad. Flattered that Minerva had such confidence in her abilities, Hermione was determined not to let her down. Being Hermione, however, she was still panicking that she hadn't done enough right up until the moment she turned over the exam papers. She had never been so relieved when, at last, she and Harry emerged from the Defence Against the Dark Arts practical.

'That was tough,' said Harry. 'I'm glad that's over.'

Hermione ruffled his hair. 'You'll walk it,' she said. 'Did you see the look on their faces? It was like you were doing them a favour.'

Harry grinned. 'I'm parched after that. Fancy a quick drink to celebrate?'

'Why not?'

With some of the pressure off, and a big gap in her timetable, Hermione began to plan for Christmas. It was going to be a Christmas of many firsts: the first without her parents, the first without Ron, the first without a megalomaniac trying to kill her and of course, her first Christmas with Severus. It would be a quiet holiday, but Hermione was determined it wasn't going to be a miserable one since there was still much cause for celebration. Besides, she reasoned as she methodically wrote out her shopping list, she had been neglecting Severus with all the studying she had been doing and wanted to make up for all the pre-exam nerves he had had to put up with for the past two months.

The library was soothingly quiet at this time of day, just as she liked it. Hermione stared into space, twirling the feather of her quill round and round her finger trying to think of suitable Christmas gifts for Severus and her friends. She ran her eyes down her list again. The Weasleys were sorted, as was Harry. She had a vague idea what to buy her teachers since Minerva had given her a few suggestions, but Severus was proving difficult.

It was almost time for lunch. Hermione sighed and worried her bottom lip. There was always her father's wine cellar to fall back for an emergency gift, she supposed, and there was some very good cognac... She hesitated before scratching 'Brandy?' on the parchment.

The easy solution was, of course, a book, but that was the sort of present he usually received from Minerva. Hermione wanted to buy him something personal: a reminder of their first Christmas together, something he would treasure always, but she had no idea what. There was nothing else for it, she decided. She would have to venture into Muggle London.

A slight rustle of fabric caught her attention, and she glanced up to see Severus walking towards her looking very serious. She immediately covered her list.

'It's come, hasn't it?' Hermione asked, trying not to panic.

Severus nodded and handed her the piece of parchment. She unrolled it with shaky fingers.

'Well?' said Severus.

'All 'O's,' she replied weakly, handing it back to him.

Severus glanced at her results then looked around to see if anyone was listening. 'I'm very proud of you, Hermione,' he said in a whisper. 'We should go out and celebrate. Would you like that?'

'I'd rather stay in and celebrate,' she whispered back.

Resisting the impulse to kiss her, he said silkily, 'That would also be most... acceptable.'

'The tree looks very nice, Dobby,' Hermione said kindly, 'but I think it would have been better, not to have used real fairies.' Indeed, it appeared as though a fight were about to break out for the coveted position on the top.

Crestfallen, Dobby's ears drooped.

'It's fine, really,' Hermione added hastily. 'Now, you know what to do on Christmas Day?'

The elf nodded excitedly. 'Yes, miss, Dobby is happy to help.' He looked around Severus' chambers. Some paper chains would be nice...

'I think, Dobby,' Hermione said, guessing what was on his mind, 'that we're pushing our luck with the tree. No more decorations, okay?'

'Very well, miss.'

Hermione went back to wrapping her presents. Even though she hadn't wanted to go overboard this year, there still seemed an awful lot. She hummed as she made the finishing touches to the bows, hoping Severus would like his gifts. 'There, all done.'

Hermione arranged the parcels under the tree with a deft flick of her wand and stepped back to admire the finished result.

She smiled approvingly. *If he says, 'Bah, humbug' just once,* Hermione thought, *I'm going to hex him.*

One of the greatest pleasures in life, Severus had decided, was waking up with an armful of warm, soft Hermione. She stirred as he spooned in closer to her, pressing her bottom back against him.

'Happy Christmas, Severus,' Hermione said sleepily.

'Indeed it is,' he agreed, nibbling her earlobe.

She giggled. 'I suppose we should get up and open our presents.'

'Everything I could ever want for Christmas is in this bed.'

Smiling, Hermione turned around and snuggled into his embrace. Everything was going to plan. Keeping him in bed a little bit longer was not going to be in the least bit difficult.

* * *

'Hermione?' Severus called from the living room, 'The tree has gone.'

He stared at the space where the ridiculous thing had stood the night before. Not only the tree but the remaining presents, to which he had added his gifts for Hermione, had vanished also. He turned around to see a grinning Hermione carrying a small package in one hand and his travelling cloak slung over her shoulder. She was dressed for the outdoors. She was obviously up to something.

'I hope you like it,' Hermione said a little shyly as she handed him the parcel. 'Be careful and don't shake it.'

Hermione bit her lower lip nervously. Would he like it? She watched as Severus carefully and methodically undid the ribbon and unpicked the Spellotape. His head fell forward so his hair hid his face from her when he finally discovered what it was.

He sighed. 'I don't know what to say, Hermione.'

'Don't you like it?'

Like it? Severus stared at the snow globe. 'No one has ever...' He looked up, swallowing hard. 'Come here.'

Hermione took the globe off him and placed it carefully on the table before she slipped into his arms.

'Why?' Severus managed to ask after a little while.

'Because everyone should have a little wonder in their lives,' Hermione replied. 'Is it anything like the one you used to have?'

He looked again at the little snow scene. 'It is very similar. Wherever did you find it?'

'A little junk shop in London.' Hermione shook out his cloak and put it around his shoulders. 'Now, close your eyes.'

When Severus opened his eyes a second later, they were inside the snow globe.

Hermione took out her wand and stirred up a gentle snowstorm.

Severus held up his hand. 'It feels real,' he said, 'but it is not melting.'

Hermione laughed. 'I didn't get an 'O' in Charms for nothing.' She grabbed his hand to tug him in the direction of the little village, but Severus pulled her towards him and kissed her instead.

'You are one clever little witch.'

Hermione smiled up at him. He hadn't seen anything yet. 'Come on.' She led him towards the first house and paused by the window. Inside was a cosy sitting room with a roaring log fire. Severus could see something moving inside.

'People?' he asked.

Hermione smiled. 'Dobby is doing me a favour. Let's go in.'

Severus pushed open the door, and Hermione followed him inside. Dobby had gone to town with the decorations, but Severus was still relieved to see the Christmas tree in one corner with his presents underneath it.

'It looks like an explosion in a tinsel factory,' said Severus.

'Shh,' Hermione said, tapping his arm. 'You'll hurt Dobby's feelings.'

The house-elf came into the room, smiling broadly. 'Lunch is served, miss.'

'Thank you, Dobby.'

They followed Dobby into the dining room where they were greeted by a table groaning under the weight of the Christmas feast that the elves had prepared for them.

Severus shook his head in disbelief. He hoped Dobby wasn't expecting them to eat all that.

'I wanted to give you something special so you would always remember our first Christmas together,' Hermione said.

Severus pulled out her chair for her. 'I will not forget this day if I live to be two hundred.'

* * *

Later, when they had finished their meal and had collapsed, stuffed, on the sofa, Severus handed Hermione the parcel he had placed under the tree. He sat back, sipping the brandy Hermione had given him, and watched as she made short work of the gift-wrapping.

Such impatience.

Hermione pulled the scrap of silk and lace out of the tissue paper and stared at it for a long time before standing up and walking over to the mirror. She could see Severus in the reflection watching her face as she held it up against her.

'Would you like me to try it on?'

Severus nodded.

Hermione reached for her wand and changed her sensible day-robe for the garment that was ostensibly a nightgown, but was totally impractical to actually sleep in. She stared at the young woman in the mirror and smoothed her hands over the ivory silk. It was beautiful; probably the most sensuous thing she had ever worn next to her skin. Unconsciously, she lifted her hair up onto her head and turned to look at the back the garment plunged in a V of lace just below the waistline and heard Severus gasp.

If there had been any vestiges of doubt left in Hermione's mind that Severus saw her as anything other than a grown woman, the sight of herself in the mirror and the look on his face dispelled the thought forever. This wasn't the sort of present you bought a schoolgirl; this was the kind of thing a man bought for his lover, or mistress. She found it slightly disconcerting; her friends and family had always bought her things like books or comfy jumpers practical presents for practical, sensible Hermione. No one had ever bought her anything this frivolous; no one had ever seen her in this light. Hermione wasn't entirely sure if the person she was on the inside really matched the woman she was looking at. But, by the look of longing on Severus' face, he had no such misgivings.

'It's beautiful, Severus,' she said, smiling. 'Are you sure this is for me or for you?'

He smirked back. 'Oh, definitely for me. But I would rather you wore it.'

Hermione laughed and picked up the last present under the tree and gave it to him. She watched as he slowly unwrapped it, placing the bow carefully to one side. He shook out the contents.

'I thought your old one was looking a bit threadbare', Hermione said.

'That was... considerate of you.' Severus copied Hermione's earlier actions and held the dressing gown in front of him. Reaching for his wand, Severus quickly changed into the floor-length garment.

Hermione nodded approvingly. 'It looks just like a robe. Is it comfortable?'

'Very. Thank you,' Severus replied. He turned to retrieve something from his discarded clothing. 'I, too, wanted to give you something to mark our first Christmas.'

Hermione took the small package, opened it and gasped. 'Oh, Severus.' She picked up the diamond-studded earrings. 'They're... oh, they must have cost '

'I could afford them,' he interrupted. 'There is no need to concern yourself.' Severus stood behind Hermione as she turned to the mirror and put them in her ears. He watched as she turned her head from side to side, admiring them, then silently, he raised his hands and pushed the straps of the nightgown off her shoulders. Hermione did not protest as the garment slipped to the floor.

'Lift your hair again.'

Hermione piled her hair on the top of her head.

'May I remove your locket?' he asked. 'I would like to see you wearing only the earrings.'

Hermione nodded, and Severus unclasped the chain.

'So beautiful...' Severus put his arms around her, bringing his hands up to cup her breasts.

Hermione moaned and leaned back against him, resting her head on his shoulder. Severus lightly trailed one hand down her side as Hermione shifted her weight to stand with her legs further apart.

'Always so wet for me,' he murmured, dipping his fingers inside her before gently circling her clit. 'I want you. Now.'

Severus started to pull Hermione over to the couch, but she stopped him.

'Over here.' Hermione guided him over to the window. Letting go of him, she placed her hands on the windowsill with her back to him and spread her legs wide.

'Like this.'

Severus groaned. Opening his dressing gown, he positioned himself behind her, teasing her entrance with the tip of his cock.

'Please, Severus.'

'I am in no hurry, my love.' Leisurely, Severus inched his way inside her, ignoring her little whimpers of frustration. The scent of Hermione's arousal filled his nostrils as he gripped her hips and began to move with slow, languorous thrusts. He glanced out through the snow flurries to the barely discernible features of his chambers the real world with all its attendant problems and closed his eyes against it. No one existed but them, here in this private heaven. Safe in the little globe, protected by its bubble of glass, Severus allowed himself to believe, just for a few moments, that life was perfect.

Hermione plonked herself down at the Gryffindor table.

"Morning," said Harry.

Hermione sighed. After two weeks of eating alone with Severus, it felt strange to be sitting in the Great Hall for breakfast again.

'Have some muesli,' Ginny offered, placing a bowl in front of her.

'Thanks, Gin,' Hermione said, reaching for the pumpkin juice. 'Sorry, I'm not awake yet.'

As the familiar screeching filled the air, a snowy owl swooped down and dropped a formal looking letter in Hermione's bowl of cereal. She plucked it out, cleaned off the milk and regarded it curiously.

'Switzerland?' she said to nobody in particular.

'Huh?' said Harry.

Hermione opened the letter. 'Good grief! I've been head-hunted!'

'What?' cried Ginny in alarm.

'The Gnomes of Zurich are sending a representative to interview me as a trainee curse breaker,' Hermione said excitedly.

'Never,' said Harry, snatching the letter out of her hand. 'But, they're really secretive. They only employ the very best.'

'Yes, so how would they know about me?' Hermione wondered.

'Bill,' said Ginny, spreading jam on her toast. 'He must have told the right goblin about your results.'

'Oh, this is so exciting,' Hermione said, beaming. 'I can't wait to tell Severus.'

She glanced up at the High Table to see Severus looking at her quizzically. They generally did not talk to each other in the Great Hall, but she didn't think this could wait. She took a gulp of pumpkin juice before getting up and approaching the teachers' table.

'Not bad news, I trust, Miss Granger?' Minerva asked.

'No, Professor. Far from it.' Hermione gave the note to Severus who read it quickly before showing it to Minerva.

Severus said nothing.

'Good heavens! This is most... unusual,' Minerva said, clearly taken aback. 'Congratulations, my dear.'

'Yes,' said Severus, 'congratulations.'

'I think congratulations are a bit premature,' said Hermione, smiling at him. 'They haven't offered me a job yet.'

'I'm sure they will. Now, if you will excuse me, I must prepare for my first class.'

Hermione stared after him. He hadn't taken the news with the enthusiasm she was expecting. She turned to Minerva who was watching her closely.

'Tread carefully, Hermione,' Minerva said quietly before she, too, got up and left the Great Hall.

Two days later, Hermione was walking back from the greenhouses after Herbology when she spotted the headmistress talking to a stranger. Minerva waved at Hermione to join them.

'This is Monsieur Brulange, Hermione,' said Minerva, introducing her to the tall, dark young wizard. 'He is the representative of Gringotts, Switzerland.'

The young man took Hermione's hand and kissed it. 'Christophe, please,' he said, flashing a dazzling smile.

Hermione blushed and smiled back. He was *gorgeous*.

'I am staying in London for a few days, Miss Granger, and as you are aware, there are some matters I would like to discuss with you. Perhaps we could go for lunch, yes? Perhaps Saturday? Would that be convenient?'

'Um... yes, yes. Lovely, er... Christophe,' Hermione replied. 'Thank you.'

'Speaking of lunch,' said Minerva, 'you are most welcome to join us.'

'That is very gracious of you, Madame,' said Christophe. 'Hogwarts' hospitality is legendary.'

Minerva lead the way into the Great Hall. 'Perhaps, Miss Granger,' she said as Hermione stopped at the Gryffindor table, 'you would like to join us at the High Table, this once?'

Hermione nodded and followed Minerva, feeling the eyes of the entire school on her back. She stopped at Severus' chair to introduce him.

'This is Professor Snape, Christophe,' said Hermione.

Christophe shook hands but barely took his eyes off Hermione, much to Severus' annoyance.

'Christophe has come all this way to interview me, Professor,' Hermione smiled shyly at the young wizard.

'But it is a pleasure,' said Christophe, returning the smile.

'I'm sure it is,' said Severus dryly.

Minerva indicated the vacant seat next to her. 'Please. Sit, Monsieur.' She nodded at Hermione and gestured towards the chair on the other side. 'Miss Granger.'

Hermione was soon engrossed in conversation as Christophe talked about his job and the sort of qualities Gringotts looked for in their young trainees.

'Of course,' Christophe said, prodding his dessert suspiciously, 'should you repeat your results in your other three NEWTs, which I'm sure you shall, you are likely to be fast-tracked, which will mean much travelling for you.' He smiled his perfect smile again.

Blushing at the compliment, Hermione turned her head to digest this bit of information and caught Severus openly glaring at them. He did not look at all happy. Hermione stared at him quizzically, watching as he dropped his eyes to his plate and repeatedly stabbed a piece of cheese with his knife.

As Hermione said goodbye to Christophe after lunch, she noticed Severus hanging back, no doubt to find out what arrangements had been made. Hermione told him.

Severus pursed his lips. 'Saturday,' he said. 'I was hoping... Oh, never mind. This is obviously more important.' He turned and stormed off.

What on earth is the matter with him? Is he jealous or something? It was a business lunch for heaven's sake, even if it was on a Saturday. *Saturday. Oh, Shit!*

'Severus, wait!' Hermione called after him.

He stopped but did not turn around.

'I'm so sorry. It's your birthday isn't it?'

Severus nodded.

'I hadn't forgotten about it, honestly. I just forgot it was Saturday.'

'It is of no consequence,' he said. 'Perhaps, another time.'

'No,' Hermione replied. 'I'll cancel it.'

'You cannot do that, Hermione. You may never get another chance like this.'

Hermione thought it over. 'No,' she said, 'I'll tell him I have a prior engagement but that I can meet him for drinks beforehand. Would that be okay? We could have the rest of the day together, then.'

'Very well,' Severus agreed, cheering up slightly. 'If you are sure that would not interfere with your plans.'

'Yes, of course I am.' She looked around before giving him a quick peck on the cheek. 'I'll see you later.'

Severus watched her hurry off to her next lesson. Once she was out of sight, he turned and strolled aimlessly down the corridor without any real thought as to where his feet were taking him. His stomach was churning, and he felt sick. He stopped and leaned against a windowpane, relishing the cool of the glass against his forehead. Gazing down towards the lake, Albus' tomb was just visible from his vantage point.

'Excellent news, is it not?'

Severus jumped at the sound of Albus' voice behind him. He spun around, half-expecting to see his ghost.

'If you say so, old man,' Severus replied, spotting Albus' figure in the painting on the opposite wall.

Albus regarded him over his half-moon spectacles. 'You realise you may have to let her go, my boy.'

Severus said nothing.

'Severus,' Albus said softly, 'she is'

'Young. Yes, I am well aware of that. You do not need to keep reminding me.'

'She has a bright future ahead of her, Severus. If she loves you, she will come back. It is a risk you will have to take.'

Severus turned away from the portrait and stared out the window. Would she, though? He had seen with his own eyes how flustered she had been when that... that

Young, good looking

That... *Frenchman* had fawned all over her. He wasn't blind. The way that Brulange character had looked at her was more than professional courtesy. Not that he was the only man Severus had observed admiring Hermione lately. There had been quite a few who had openly stared at her when they went out in public together - men who were far better looking than he was. You didn't need to be a Legilimens to read their minds when they saw who she was with. 'What does she see in him?' was written all over their faces; and the thing was, he could hardly blame them since he had often wondered the same thing. Sighing, Severus had to acknowledge he wasn't alone in noticing that Hermione had grown up and turned into a rather lovely young witch.

And so she had. Hermione had blossomed over the past few months. She exuded an air of confidence wherever she went and walked with a spring in her step. But then, she was back where she was happiest, doing what she liked the best only this time without the pressure of a war going on in the background. And of course, she was in love. In love and relaxed in the certainty that her feelings were ardently returned. But, Severus was oblivious to all of this. The fact that a large part of the reason Hermione looked so radiant was due to his love for her never even occurred to him. Instead, the cold, irrational fear in the pit of his stomach told him he should prepare for the worst.

On the morning of her appointment with Christophe Brulange, Hermione awoke alone to find a note on the pillow where Severus' head should have been. Groggily, she pushed her hair off her face and sat up to read it.

Hermione,

I shall meet you at the Leaky Cauldron at lunchtime. We shall be eating in Muggle London. Wear something suitable. Good luck with your interview.

Severus.

Hermione crumpled the note and threw it to the floor. They were supposed to go to Diagon Alley together and now... She glanced at the clock and leapt out of bed. She had barely two hours to get ready and Apparate to London. Why hadn't Severus woken her? It was like he wanted her to be late....

Uncomfortable with that thought, Hermione grabbed her dressing gown and headed for the bathroom, muttering to herself. "Something suitable," indeed. As if I could turn up at an interview with a representative of possibly the oldest banking institution in the world in Muggle clothes! What was he thinking!

By the time she had showered, she was convinced Severus was jealous of her having drinks with Christophe.

'How could he possibly think that I would...*Idiot.*'

She pulled on a demure but flattering periwinkle-blue robe and tamed her hair into a French plait.

Plain and businesslike, but not too frumpy, she thought, smoothing down the skirt.

As she strode through the grounds towards the Apparation point, Hermione continued to mull over Severus' ludicrous behaviour. If this was jealousy, she thought, he wasn't being terribly subtle about it, which was most unlike him. She stopped short.

*What if he's doing this to unnerve me so I fluff my interview?*The thought made her angry, but she brushed it aside. She would deal with him later. Right now, her meeting with Christophe was more important. She calmed herself and Disapparated.

Reappearing in Diagon Alley, she took a deep breath and entered the Leaky Cauldron. She spotted Christophe in the corner and smiled in greeting. He waved her over.

'I took the liberty of ordering a bottle of wine,' he said.

'Thank you,' Hermione replied, taking off her cloak before sitting down beside him. 'Is this how you normally interview prospective employees?'

Christophe smiled broadly. 'Not really, but then I have already made my assessment and reported back to my superiors. I thought we might have a drink to celebrate.' He moved closer to her. 'The final decision rests with the goblins, of course, but I can safely say that you are the kind of young person we are always on the lookout for. So, I thought we might use this opportunity to get to know one another better.' He brushed his hand against Hermione's knee. 'You know, a good word from me could do wonders for your career.'

She moved away, startled. Just what was that supposed to mean?

'Don't be so coy,' Christophe said, closing the gap again. 'It's not every day a Muggleborn witch like you gets offered this sort of opportunity. I suggest you take it.'

'And I suggest you leave before I detach your limbs from your body.'

Hermione was not surprised to see Severus at her side. 'I can handle this,' she said, standing up. 'This meeting is over.'

Christophe shrugged. 'No doubt we shall meet again.' He looked at Severus and back to Hermione. 'Perhaps by then you will have... reconsidered your position.' He Disapparated abruptly before either of them had a chance to say anything.

'You knew I was here, didn't you?' Severus asked. He had been sitting on the opposite side of the bar behind a Do Not Notice Charm.

She nodded. 'I sensed you immediately.' Ever since Hermione had joined with Severus' mind, she could detect his presence when he was close by, charm or no. 'But, what I would really like to know is why you thought it necessary to spy on me?'

Severus was unabashed. 'I did not trust him,' he said simply. 'He put something in the wine before you arrived.' Severus picked up the bottle and sniffed. 'Befuddlement Draught. As I thought.'

Hermione was horrified. 'Of all the should report him.'

'I should hope so,' said Severus. 'But later. I would like to enjoy the rest of my birthday with you, now. If you don't mind.'

Hermione sighed and Transfigured her clothes. Taking Severus' proffered arm, they stepped out onto the street.

* * *

Hermione lay in bed, staring at the canopy, replaying the day's events. Had she done something to give Christophe Brulange the wrong impression? She couldn't think of anything. He had seemed so nice.

Creep, she thought angrily.

Earlier that evening, Hermione had told Ginny all about it. She had been shocked to discover her friend did not find his actions surprising.

'It's not that I agree with it,' Ginny had said hastily, seeing the look of outrage on Hermione's face. 'It's very wrong, but that kind of thing is bound to happen if you enter a male-dominated profession.'

Hermione silently vowed to mount a one-woman crusade against such archaic attitudes. She sighed. Perhaps Severus was right; she was too trusting of other people's motives.

Severus turned in his sleep and threw an arm over her. Hermione shifted it to a more comfortable position, and he pulled her closer. She couldn't be angry with him; he had only been trying to protect her. She was more angry with herself for being so naïve.

Hermione had to wait another month before she received the letter from Gringotts offering her a trainee appointment in Zurich once she had completed her education. While the incident with Brulange had taken the shine off her excitement, she wasn't going to let his chauvinistic behaviour influence her choice of career.

For his part, Severus had been dreading the letter's arrival and hoping against hope that Hermione's experience would have at least made her stop and think twice about what she was getting into. Nonetheless, he offered Hermione his congratulations and tried to look pleased at the news. It was certainly a chance in a lifetime for her, and he could not begrudge her the achievement, but a nagging voice was telling him that this was the beginning of the end for them.

If only he could go with her... But he was tied to Hogwarts for another year not long for him, certainly, but an eternity for someone Hermione's age. Anything could happen in that time.

So, that was it then. Hermione would be leaving in the summer; he couldn't go with her and he was powerless to stop her. Albus was right; he would have no choice but to let her go. He had been living in a fool's paradise imagining that someone like Hermione would stay with him indefinitely. It was laughable, really; he had so little to offer her. When you got right down to it, she didn't really need him for anything.

And so, little by little, Severus began to withdraw. He snapped at Hermione over the pettiest things and retreated into melancholic silences. Whenever she asked him what the matter was he would reply, 'Nothing.' Hermione wasn't stupid. Although she was bewildered by his change in attitude towards her at first, she quickly realised that Severus grew most agitated whenever she tried to talk about her future with Gringotts. She had her suspicions as to why, but kept them to herself initially, scared that if she confronted him outright, he would only deny it and it would make matters worse. She tried to think up a subtle, Slytherin way of reassuring Severus that her job would have no effect on their relationship, tried to show him that his fears were groundless, but nothing seemed to work.

By the time the Easter Holidays came around, Hermione couldn't take anymore. She was tired of treading on eggshells, having to gauge his mercurial moods on a daily basis and placating his temper. She had tried the softly-softly approach; now it was time for some good old-fashioned Gryffindor bluntness. Hermione knew what she wanted to say. She just had to summon up the courage to say it.

Now, she thought, I'll do it now. There's no point in putting it off. He can only say 'no.'

* * *

Severus sat staring into the fire, warming a glass of whisky in his hands. Even with two weeks away from teaching ahead of him, he was still feeling miserable. It only brought the time when Hermione would leave that much closer. Perhaps he should be the one to end it so he could walk away with at least some of his dignity intact?

He glanced up as she entered the room, the smile on her face making his heart lurch. How could he ever have thought he could keep her? He must have been insane. He had to distance himself from her steel himself for the unavoidable pain she would cause him, but how could he when he was fated to love her while there was breath in his body?

Hermione smiled nervously, gathering her resolve. 'Severus, I need to talk to you.' She knelt on the floor beside him and looked up at him. 'Please be honest with me, love. You're worried that I'm going to leave you, aren't you?'

Severus was taken aback by her bluntness. Had he been that obvious? He thought of denying it but there didn't seem to be any point. He nodded dumbly.

'How can you think that?' she asked quietly. 'I've opened my mind to you shown you my heart and my soul. Don't you trust me?'

'It is not a question of trust, Hermione,' Severus replied, staring into his glass. He paused, struggling to put his fears into words. 'I know you are sincere, but you are still growing, my love. You will move on, make new friends and acquaintances. You will meet someone who will share your newfound interests. Your feelings for me will change. It is inevitable.'

Hermione sighed. 'So, I was right. That's what all this moodiness has been about. Why didn't you say something?'

Severus remained silent.

'Severus, look at me, please,' Hermione continued. 'Yes, I want to grow, learn new things, meet new people and make a name for myself in our world, of course I do. But, without you in my life, none of it would mean a damn thing.' Hermione took the glass away from him, put it on the table, and then took his hands in hers. 'I just want you to know I want you to be sure, that whatever I do, wherever I go, you will always be the centre of my life. I'm not interested in other men, Severus. I belong with you. I want you only you.'

'Hermione '

'Let me finish. I've been thinking about this a lot.' She squeezed his hands. 'I just want to say, that... if you want, of course, I... um... I'm prepared to make some sort of ... er... commitment.' She looked at him pointedly.

It took a moment for the meaning of her words to sink in. She couldn't be serious, was she saying what he thought she was saying?

'Marriage?' Severus asked hoarsely.

'Um... Well, yes, though not right away, of course. I don't want to rush you. In a couple of years perhaps but an engagement, betrothal, whatever you want to call it just to show I'm spoken for... that is... I mean if you want... Because if you don't, I'm quite happy as we are, though if we should ever decide to have children sometime not for a long time obviously, I think I would rather be...' Hermione stopped babbling, cut off by the thunderstruck expression on his face.

'Marriage?' he repeated. *Children? She wants me to father her children?* 'You would marry me?'

'Hmm... ' Hermione smiled. 'That depends. Are you asking?'

Her smile faded when he said nothing. 'Well,' she said, getting up, 'at least have a think about it. I'm going to the library. I'll see you later.' Hermione gave him a quick kiss, grabbed some books, and left.

Severus sat there unmoving.

'Marriage,' he said weakly. 'Children.' Did he want that? And, if not, what did he want?

Marriage. Children.

Severus turned the idea around in his head. It wasn't really all that important to him; providing she stayed, he would be happy to continue as they were, but if was important to Hermione then... He sighed. What did *he* want? Severus thought long and hard about the answer, but in the end it boiled down to one thing. He wanted Hermione, pure and simple. He wanted her by his side always and he wanted to keep her safe from harm. He didn't want her doing a job that put her in danger; he didn't want to lose her, and engagements could be broken...

NO! You promised your mother.

Severus sat very still for a moment as the thought flashed through his mind. Then, as if in a trance, he got up and walked the short distance to his bedroom, closing and warding the door behind him.

* * *

Severus paced the room for a while before settling himself down on the bed. He stared for a long time at the box on top of the chest of drawers and wrestled with his conscience. His thoughts drifted between the solemn promise he had made his mother before she died and the girl who had brought so much joy into his life: the girl who lay in his arms every night, coming alive under his touch, the girl who thought him beautiful. He made his decision.

Summoning the musical jewellery box, Severus set it down on the bed beside him. It had belonged to his mother, a Christmas present from his father the year before Severus had been born. He reached underneath, wound the key and opened the lid. The tinkling strains of the *Blue Danube* filled the silence as Severus removed its contents. In essence, it contained the few personal possessions of his mother that remained her wedding ring and some other small pieces of jewellery, a few photographs some Muggle, some wizarding, Severus' first baby shoes and his Hogwarts' acceptance letter.

Once empty, Severus ran his finger along the bottom and pressed his thumbs into the corners, releasing the catch that hid the secret compartment. He stared at the small leather pouch a few moments before finally removing it. The promise he had made his mother all those years ago rang in his ears, but he ignored it. Severus picked up one of the wizarding photos and looked at her horror-stricken face. Eileen shook her head frantically and mouthed, 'NO.'

'I am sorry, Mum.' Severus turned her photograph face down on the bed. Undoing the strings of the pouch, he felt the unmistakable magical call of its contents and sighed in defeat. Some promises were meant to be broken.

A/N: 'CV' stands for Curriculum Vitae.

Special thanks go to Septentrion and Alienor for coming up with a good French name on a day when my brain refused to cooperate.

Wrapped Around Your Finger

Chapter 15 of 18

Severus accepts Hermione's proposal but not without conditions.

Disclaimer: All characters depicted belong to JK Rowling. I make no money from my scribblings.

A/N: Many thanks to Septentrion for agreeing to beta this chapter at very short notice. She is an angel. Thanks also to Sylvanawood for her encouragement and help in getting me through a very bumpy chapter.

Obscured in shadow, Crookshanks bided his time, dispassionately observing his quarry go about its business. The mouse, oblivious to the mortal peril it was in, zigzagged unhurriedly towards a small fissure in the stonework. It was now or never. Crookshanks crouched low, wiggled his bottom and fixed his eyes on his prey. *I am Hunter, Nemesis of Mice, Harbinger of Death. Prepare to meet thy doom!*

The hapless mouse screamed in terror as Crookshanks' four paws landed on its back. Triumphant, the half-Kneazle tossed his catch up in the air, toyed with it a while and then sank his teeth into its neck.

Ahhh... the thrill of the chase; there was nothing quite like it. He might be getting a bit long in the fang, but old Crooks could still give those rodents a run for their money. Mm-mm ... much more satisfying than those biscuits his mistress insisted on giving him. He discarded the liver of the now eviscerated mouse and continued to munch contentedly. Although *Bast be praised* he'd never had to hunt for a living, Crookshanks knew it was always wise to keep one's paw in since you never could tell when the old skills would come in handy. And... *ohhh...* there was nothing, but nothing, that could compare with that taste of warm, coppery blood from a fresh kill. He purred in the satisfaction of a job well done.

Suddenly, Crookshanks ears pricked up at the sound of feet approaching.

Four. He held on to his prize tightly. You never knew what thieves stalked the corridors at this time of day.

A head appeared around the corner. Crookshanks regarded the creature disdainfully.

'Mine.' He hissed. 'Get your own.'

'Good evening to you, too,' the bespectacled tabby replied primly. 'I have eaten, thank you.' She licked a paw and swiped it over her face to emphasise the fact. 'So, do you have any news for me?'

Crookshanks polished off the mouse quickly and began to groom his whiskers. 'What do you want to know, Not-a-cat?' he asked, feigning ignorance. Crookshanks was not one for gossip.

'How are things in your household?'

Crookshanks flicked his tail. In truth, he was concerned. His mistress was full of herself one minute and miserable the next. This, he was sure, was due to her Mate's unhappiness. He wondered how much he should reveal.

'My mistress is well,' he replied finally, 'but the Dark Man is... sad. Why, I do not know.'

His companion nodded. 'I thought as much. Thank you for telling me.' She turned to leave. 'If anything should happen...'

Crookshanks regarded her with unblinking eyes. It seemed he wasn't the only one who was uneasy. He was starting to get a bad feeling in his guts, and it had nothing to do with the mouse he had just eaten.

* * *

Hermione was having a hard time concentrating on her Transfiguration essay and was spending more time staring off into space than at her parchment. It had seemed such a good idea at the time, but now she was beginning to regret being so frank. Sighing, she placed her elbow on the desk and leant her head against her fist. Perhaps she had been a bit pushy - seemed too keen, maybe even a little desperate. She had all but gone down on one knee and proposed to Severus, and his reaction had been, well, less than enthusiastic. Hermione brushed the feather of her quill along her cheek thoughtfully. He had just... looked at her as if the idea had never entered his head. True, neither of them had actually broached the subject of marriage specifically, but wasn't a future where they would be together what they both wanted? Wouldn't it follow that getting married was an option at the very least?

Hermione put her quill down and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. He'd had plenty of time to think it over by now. Yawning, she stretched and rotated her shoulders, noticing Madam Pince glance in her direction. They were the last two people in the library, and it looked like the librarian thought it was high time she was on her way. Well, it was unlikely she'd get any more work done tonight at any rate. Hermione got up and gathered her things.

Even if he says 'no', it won't change anything not as far as I'm concerned, anyway she thought as she picked up her books. *But, he'll have to tell me what he wants, in that case. We simply can't go on like this.* Hermione slowly made her way back to the dungeons, running various scenarios through her head but always arriving at the same conclusion. She had passed him the Quaffle; what he did with it was now up to him.

Severus, in the meantime, had not been idle, having emerged from his bedroom with a fully-formed plan of action in his head. It was prudent to be cautious, he reminded himself as he walked over to his writing desk. In fact, it was paramount: everything had to be seen to be above board, the correct procedure followed to the letter, so that no one could accuse him of any trickery. To that end, he scratched a quick note on a piece of parchment and made his way to the Owlery.

It is for the best, he repeated like a mantra as he walked. *I am not prepared to leave my...our...future happiness to the Fates.*

Severus called down one of the school owls, attached the message to its leg and watched as the bird circled overhead before heading south. There, it was done. Hopefully, he would get a reply by return of post.

Still mulling over his decision as he strolled back to the dungeons, Severus considered the possibility that Hermione might have changed her mind during her time in the library but quickly dismissed it as unlikely. She had been too keen on the idea, and he had to admit that, now he'd had time to let it sink in, he was also rather looking forward to their betrothal. It would not be easy; Severus had no doubt about that, but was he not a powerful wizard? He would prevail; he was sure of it.

Closing the door to his chambers, Severus called Hermione's name, but there was no reply. *Good. She must still be in the library.* Unable to relax, however, Severus started to pace the floor, stopping in front of the fire from time to time, mentally rehearsing what he was going to say.

All things considered, he felt quite composed, but it was an unnatural calm, and he knew it. The last time Severus had experienced this level of serenity, he had been on his knees before Voldemort - thoughts carefully Occluded and emotions firmly shut down. It was unnerving how easily he had assumed the mask again, but he pushed the uncomfortable thought aside; there was no point dwelling on such matters. For better or for worse, his course was set. Lost in thought, he held his palms towards the flames to warm them.

Severus' shoulders tensed slightly as he heard the rush of the door opening and Hermione entering the room, but otherwise he did not acknowledge her presence. He had to get this right...

Hermione, noting his stance, inhaled long and deep before dumping her things on the table. Biting her lip to stop herself from asking straight out if he'd made his mind up, Hermione quietly moved towards Severus and slipped her arms around his waist. She pressed her cheek against his back and waited for him to say something - anything. For a moment, Severus remained silent and motionless, then he covered her hands with his own and began to gently stroke the backs with his thumbs.

'I have been giving your... *proposal*... due consideration...' he said eventually.

'Oh?'

'... and I am... amenable to the idea.'

'Oh.'

Severus peeled Hermione's hands away and turned to face her. Then, before she had a chance to say anything further, he quickly took her hands in his again, raised them to his lips and kissed them in turn. Smiling, he said, 'I would be a fool, if I were not.'

She gulped. 'Oh. Oh, that's good.'

Chuckling at her astonishment, Severus pulled Hermione into his arms and kissed her softly. There was no hurry. He could take his time over this.

Hermione sighed with relief. 'I was so afraid I'd blown it,' she said, nuzzling her head against his chest.

Severus smiled into her hair. 'Far from it, my love. You brought me to my senses. I am only sorry it took me so long.' He kissed the top of her head and smoothed down a stray curl. 'The truth is, I can no longer envisage a life without you by my side, not anymore. I know I have not been myself of late, but everything will be all right, now. I promise.'

They stood contentedly in each other's arms for a little while, Hermione smiling to herself as she listened to Severus' elevated heartbeat. *I suppose that was the closest thing to a proposal I'm going to get.*

'Hermione...?'

Or maybe not.

'I have to ask you something,' he said hesitantly. 'What...?' He coughed. 'What do you know about weddings in our world?'

Hermione looked up at him. 'Bill and Fleur's wedding is the only one I've ever been to. Why?'

He sighed. 'I thought that might be the case. Come, we have a lot to discuss. Let's make ourselves comfortable.' Severus led Hermione over to the sofa. 'Forgive me. I am assuming you would wish to be married in a wizarding ceremony. We could be married in a Registry Office if you wish, but I draw the line at a church.'

Stuffing some cushions behind her back, Hermione shook her head. 'No. If my parents were alive, I daresay it would be different. But... No, a wizarding ceremony would be fine. But... isn't it a bit soon to be worrying about that?'

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. 'I just want...'. He stopped and tried again. 'I only mention it because I wanted you to be sure... You understand, then, that in a wizarding ceremony, the bride and groom are bound for life?'

Hermione nodded. 'Yes, I remember that and thinking I didn't like the sound of it. It sounded like... slavery, or something.'

Years of practice kept Severus' face impassive. 'The words are symbolic, but... although those vows are not Unbreakable, divorce is rare in our world.' Severus leaned forwards and took Hermione's hands once more. 'Hermione, I have to say this ... While I have never given the idea of marriage much thought, I intend only to marry the once. I will make my vows with the intent of keeping them and you. Are you absolutely sure that you want to be with me and only me, for a hundred years or more?'

Hermione squeezed his hands. 'I don't see the point of making vows if you don't intend to keep them,' she replied. 'And... you are the only man I ever want to be with. However many years we may have together, Severus, it could never be enough.'

He sighed, although he was pleased with her response. 'I thought you would say something like that. Very well. My next question is this. Did you also know that it is customary for a couple considering matrimony to enter into a betrothal contract beforehand?'

This was news to Hermione. 'A contract? No, I didn't. Is that strictly necessary? I mean... It sounds a bit... clinical.'

'Perhaps.' Severus released her hands and scratched the stubble on his chin thoughtfully. 'I appreciate that it may seem so to a Muggle-born. But there is a very good reason for it.' He leisurely Summoned a glass of Firewhisky and took a sip. 'The Betrothal Contract is a hangover from the days of arranged marriages...when dowries, land and so on were settled. But it still serves a useful purpose today...'. He gestured towards the decanter. 'I'm sorry. Would you like one?'

'No. No, thank you,' Hermione replied flatly. 'Do continue. This is fascinating.'

Ignoring the frost in her voice, Severus pressed on. 'Through a series of questions, the contract establishes what each party expect from the marriage...what they bring to it, and what they want out of it. Any causes for concern, where opinions differ widely, for example, are highlighted. It is not uncommon for the couple to realise that they are not as compatible as they first thought and decide not to go through with it.'

Hermione got up and walked over to the fireplace. 'I see,' she said, picking up the snowglobe and shaking it. 'And... are you expecting that to happen in our case, Severus?'

'No, of course not. But you would be surprised...'

'A contract,' Hermione said evenly, watching the snow fall. 'You know, Severus, I realise you are not the most romantic of men and I fully accept that but...'. She sighed. 'Well, a girl imagines that when she meets the man she wants to spend the rest of her life with, that there will be at least some mention of love...'. She put the globe down carefully and turned to face him. 'I suppose that would be too much to ask?'

'Hermione, come here.'

Reluctantly, Hermione moved towards him. Reaching for her hand, Severus pulled her onto his lap. 'Do you not know by now that I love you?'

Hermione nodded her head but did not look at him.

'My love, if I did not think this was necessary, I would not suggest it. Please humour me on this. I want us to be sure...'

'...that we're doing the right thing,' Hermione interrupted. 'You keep saying that. If you're not sure, perhaps we should just forget all about it.'

'No. Hermione, you misunderstand me.' Severus pulled her closer and tucked her head under his chin. 'You know full well the odds are stacked heavily against us. Our age difference alone...'

She pushed his chest and sat up abruptly. 'Oh, not that again! How many times do I have to say it doesn't matter?'

Severus pulled her back into his embrace. 'I know. It is of no importance to you or to me,' he whispered soothingly, holding her tight. 'But, we will have our critics.' Severus kissed the top of her head. 'And what *does* matter to me, is that I am seen to be following normal custom...no self-respecting father in the wizarding world would sanction the betrothal of his child without such a contract. And, as you do not have a father to oversee the proceedings, it is even more important...please, Hermione, I am asking you, just this once, to trust in my greater experience in these matters.'

Hermione thought for a moment before relenting. 'O-kay.' She sighed. 'If it means *that* much to you, then I'll go along with it...but that doesn't mean I'll take any notice if it says we're incompatible.'

Severus chuckled and kissed her. 'In that case, you'll be pleased to hear that I have taken the liberty and Owled the Ministry for the necessary papers.'

'You've WHAT? You presumed I would...'

'The sooner we get this out of the way, the better,' Severus insisted. 'But there is still no need to rush, and with the holidays ahead of us, we will be able to give it our full attention.'

'Oh, all right.' Hermione threw her hands up in defeat and clambered off his lap. She stretched and yawned. 'I'm going to have a bath. It's been a long day.' She took a few steps towards the bedroom then smiled over her shoulder as she began to unfasten her robe. 'You can scrub my back... if you like.'

Severus watched until Hermione had disappeared from his sight before knocking back his whisky. All in all, that had gone better than he had expected. He extinguished the fire and followed her into the bedroom.

* * *

The next morning, Hermione had a bit of a lie-in. With lessons over, those not remaining in Hogwarts for the holidays would soon be making their way to Hogsmeade to catch the Hogwarts Express. Severus was already up and about, rounding up the stragglers and attending to his last minute Head of House duties, leaving Hermione to catch up on some much needed sleep.

But Hermione was now wide awake, turning over the previous evening's events and feeling slightly overwhelmed by it all. Would it be prudent to seek advice from someone impartial, she wondered someone in whom she would feel comfortable confiding such a personal matter? Ginny would have been the obvious choice, of course, but she had already left Hogwarts with Harry for some long overdue alone time together at Grimmauld Place, and Hermione didn't want to intrude on their privacy. She sighed. Minerva? No, she was very busy, and Hermione didn't want to bother her with something like this and Severus probably wouldn't like her talking to his boss behind his back, either. There was always Sunday, she supposed, as both she and Severus had been invited to the Burrow for lunch. Perhaps Mrs Weasley might be a better source

of information on this contract thing.

Hermione rolled over and thumped the pillow. A contract. She had never envisaged anything so formal just an understanding between the two of them would have been enough. What would it entail? She had no knowledge of magically binding contracts, other than they were not something to enter into lightly. She would have to study it carefully, of course not that she didn't trust Severus, but... Hermione smiled. Wasn't this just like him? Cautiously approaching her proposition from all angles, making sure everything was correct and in order before committing himself. It was the nature of the man, the wizard, when all was said and done. And she had to admit that he had looked so much happier and more relaxed than she had seen him in ages last night... So... tender and attentive... Like his old self, in fact. Hermione ran her hand down the front of her body and shivered. Yes, perhaps she was meeting him more than half way, but, hell, *whatwouldn't* she compromise to keep him like that? He was just asking her to sign a piece of parchment when all was said and done.

Her stomach rumbled as the smell of something breakfasty drifted under her nose. Getting up and reaching for her dressing-gown, Hermione followed the trail to the living room where she was just in time to see a house-elf lay out the cutlery on the table. He bowed and squeaked, 'Professor Snape ordered breakfast for Miss,' before vanishing.

Hermione sighed. How many times did she have to tell Severus not to bother the house-elves on her behalf? They had enough to do as it was, today of all days; all the trunks had to be transported to the station and later, once the school had emptied, an army of them would be busy cleaning up the dormitories, common rooms, classrooms... There was absolutely no need to add to their workload by making them wait on her. Still, they had gone to the trouble, and Hermione was very hungry. She sat down and drank the pumpkin juice in a few gulps before attacking the poached eggs. If Severus was planning private breakfasts like this over the holidays, she decided, then she would have to come to some sort of agreement with the elves regarding payment.

* * *

'Well,' said Severus, removing his cloak, 'that's the last of them safely off the premises.'

Hermione looked up from her magazine. 'Good. How many Slytherins are staying?'

'Only two...both sixth-years. Davenport and Bevan. Both more than capable of looking after themselves. I doubt we'll be having any trouble from them.' He fished inside the pockets of his robes. 'Do you want to see the *Prophet*?' He held out the paper towards her.

'Anything interesting?' Hermione enquired.

'Just the usual half-truths, gossip and sensationalism,' Severus replied, removing a small package from his pocket.

Hermione eyed it warily. 'Has it come?'

Severus nodded before sitting down on the sofa with the newspaper. 'We'll look at it later,' he said, turning to page three, knowing full well Hermione would not be able to contain her curiosity for very long. He was right.

'I think I'd rather look at it now.'

'Oh, very well,' he sighed, folding the paper and placing it on the coffee table. 'Enlarge it for me and bring it over here, would you?'

Hermione approached the package with her wand drawn, tapped it and performed the necessary charm. The package unfolded itself to reveal a sealed envelope addressed to Professor S. Snape. Without opening it, she passed it to Severus and sat down beside him.

Severus studied the envelope for a moment. 'It seems harmless enough.'

'Stop teasing me and open the thing.'

'Such impatience.' Severus opened the envelope and removed the three pieces of parchment that were inside. He glanced at the covering letter before handing it to Hermione, who read over it quickly:

"Dear Professor Snape, congratulations on your forthcoming nuptials..." Hermione snorted. *"Please find enclosed the standard betrothal contract in two parts to be completed by you and your intended. We advise you to complete the forms independently... Problems/points of concern will be highlighted in red... These areas should be discussed and initialled by each party if and when an agreement is reached... Once completed, each form should be signed and countersigned where indicated. Please note that this contract will remain valid for a period of five years after which time it will become null and void if a marriage fails to take place. The Ministry accepts no liability in that event. On completion of the enclosed documentation, the fee of fifty Galleons will be charged to your Gringotts account..."* "Fifty Galleons! Severus, that's daylight robbery.'

Severus shrugged. 'That's the Ministry for you.'

Hermione scanned the rest of the letter before turning her attention to the two pieces of parchment that Severus was holding. 'So,' she said, 'which one do I have to fill in?'

'This one.' Severus indicated the document in his left hand. 'But first, I think we'd better cast one or two Revealing Charms.'

'What for?' Hermione asked.

'Because I still have enemies, Hermione,' Severus replied. 'Some of whom may be employed at the Ministry. We must be sure we know what we're signing.'

'You mean... someone might... sneak in something...?' Hermione was appalled. 'That's terrible. You really think a Ministry official would do something as underhanded as that?'

He snorted. 'Given half a chance.' Severus took out his wand and muttered a series of incantations. 'However, these appear to be in order... Here.' He gave Hermione her section of the document. 'Have a look for yourself.'

Hermione took the parchment and glanced over its contents quickly. For the most part, the questions appeared quite straightforward, but it was easy to understand how conflict could arise if the parties were not in agreement over some of the more fundamental issues. She glanced up at Severus and smiled ruefully. 'I see what you mean about incompatibility.'

Severus took her hand and squeezed it. 'Perhaps we should let it all sink in a bit before we proceed any further.'

'Agreed.' Hermione placed the parchment on the table in front of her. It had given her much food for thought. And talking of food... 'Do you fancy going to the Three Broomsticks for lunch? My treat.'

'Why not? Some fresh air would do us both good but no discussing *this*.' He put his half of the contract on top of Hermione's. 'It can wait until later.'

* * *

'Severus, what should I put for "intended place of abode"?' Hermione asked.

Severus did not look up. 'If you're not sure of anything, Hermione, put "yet to be determined". We can discuss it together afterwards.'

'Okay.' Hermione let out a long sigh. She had been poring over the form for almost half an hour now, and it was proving to be more complicated than she'd first thought. From the time she had entered 'Muggle-born' as her blood status and the letters had turned red, points of concern were being continually highlighted. The questions regarding her financial situation had been particularly tortuous, and there now seemed to be a disproportionate ratio of red to black on the page.

Hermione did not dwell on it. After all, these were points of *potential* cause for concern as far as the Ministry saw it not her or Severus. She huffed, dragging the plume of her quill through her fingers. *Wedding arrangements*. There were only two questions: Hermione ticked "wizarding" with a "yet to be determined" for the date.

She was distracted by a meow at her feet, followed by some loud purring and friendly head-butting. 'Hello, Crooks.' Hermione reached under the table to stroke her pet. 'Are you hungry?'

'That creature is always hungry,' Severus grumbled. 'He eats more than I do.'

Hermione ignored him. Putting her quill down, she lifted Crookshanks onto her lap and turned her attention back to the parchment. *Progeny: If yes, how many?* It was a reasonable question, she knew, but it was something that Hermione had only ever thought about in the vaguest of terms. This was something they really needed to discuss in some detail since Hermione had no idea what Severus' views were on the subject. After a moment's hesitation, she picked up her quill again and wrote "undecided" in the space provided. Unsurprisingly, it turned red.

She quickly worked through several paragraphs concerning 'Progeny from prior relationships', happily striking them through with a 'not applicable', and soon found herself studying the final question. Oh, dear. Again, this was something she had never discussed with Severus, and again she was not surprised to see her answer change colour. *I hope this isn't going to upset him...*

'Have you finished, Hermione?'

She nodded. 'Think so. I suppose we're meant to compare notes, now.'

Severus chuckled. 'Indeed. Bring your chair closer, and let's see how wildly unsuited we are for each other.'

Hermione swatted his arm. 'Don't joke about it. You haven't seen what I've written yet.' She pushed Crookshanks off and dragged her chair closer. 'There seems to be an awful lot of red script on yours, too,' she remarked, handing him her parchment.

Severus regarded Hermione's replies, raising an eyebrow at the first item for discussion. 'Hermione, I'm sure you already know this, but just to make it absolutely clear, your bloodline and blood status do not matter to me in the slightest.' He initialled the appropriate clauses which transformed the ink to black once again.

Hermione smiled. 'Of course, I knew. And, for the record, your income and current employment are not an issue for me, either,' she said, scratching her initials next to the offending paragraph on Severus' parchment.

'Neither is the fact that you own two desirable properties...which will remain in your sole ownership, I may add...while I only have the one,' he countered. 'Although, I can't see us ever living in any of them.'

Hermione chewed her bottom lip before replying. 'I know... You're right. I can't see it either, but... it's still nice to have a bolt-hole in the sun...' She giggled at the look on his face. 'Yes, the sun. Yellow thing in the sky. Remember it?' Hermione sighed, her smile fading. 'But, seriously, Mum and Dad's house... I suppose I'll have to let it go at some point, but you know how it is...'

'Yes,' Severus answered softly. 'I've kept my old childhood home all these years, and I have very few happy memories of the place. Perhaps it is also time for me to... let go.'

Hermione put her arm around him and leant her head on his shoulder. 'When the time comes, it would be nice to buy somewhere that is just... ours...where we can make our own memories... For us and our... family if we have one, that is.'

Severus dipped his head so that his hair obscured his face. 'I see you have not completed the section on children, either,' he said.

'No, I didn't, seeing as we've never discussed it...'

'Quite. Do... you want children, Hermione?'

She toyed with a strand of his hair, contemplating her reply. 'I'm not sure...I've never given it a great deal of thought, but yes, I think so or I will one day.' She pulled him closer to her when he remained silent. 'Neither of us has any family left, Severus. Any family we have, we'll have to make ourselves.' She hesitated. 'How-how do you feel about it?'

Severus slowly turned his head towards her. 'Hermione, not even a year has passed since I was taking each day as it came, thankful to see the sunset. Having you, a wife... children, would have been like asking for the moon. Yet, here we are. In all honesty, my love, I would just settle for you, and I would be more than content with that... Having children is another step again.' He sighed. 'It's a daunting prospect; I admit it scares the hell out of me...'

Hermione laughed.

'*But,*' he continued, 'I have also been giving the matter some thought, and I have come to the conclusion that, yes, I too would like to have children one day.' He smirked when Hermione kissed his cheek and smiled soppily at him. 'So, it would seem we can both tick the "yes" box. We just have to decide on the size of our brood.'

'Brood? Molly Weasley has a brood. Two is more than enough for me, thank you.'

Severus looked at the parchment again. 'The choices are: 1-4, 5-8 and "other".'

Hermione nodded. 'So I noticed. I wonder why.'

'The high numbers?' Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. 'I suspect it is to take into account the risk of any... uh... Squibs...' he trailed off.

'Oh.' Hermione replied quietly. 'I see. Purebloods and all that...'

'Indeed.'

'1-4 it is then.' Hermione ticked the box with a sigh, not wanting to dwell on it. 'But two is definitely the limit. Agreed?'

'Agreed.'

They watched their writing return to black then scanned down the page to the last contentious issue on Hermione's parchment. Hermione braced herself as she heard Severus suck in his breath.

'You do not wish to take my name on marriage?'

Hermione thought carefully before replying; a blunt "no" would sound harsh, she knew, and she didn't want to hurt his feelings. 'I want to keep my name for... professional purposes...'

'So, you think taking my name would hold you back?' Severus interrupted, sounding hurt nonetheless.

'No, that's not it at all.' Sighing, Hermione covered Severus' hand with her own. He stiffened, but did not try to withdraw it. 'My parents are dead, Severus,' she continued softly, 'and I have no family that I am close to. I hardly venture into the Muggle world anymore there is no need; my life is here. So, you see, my name is... the only link I have with the past, my roots. It's all I have left. Please try to understand. If I ever make something of myself, it would sort of... pay tribute to my Mum and Dad for all they did for me. I want the name of Granger to mean something in our world. My parents don't deserve to be forgotten as if they were just-just some... some insignificant Muggles who died needlessly in the crossfire...' Hermione's voice broke. She started take her hand away only to find it clasped firmly in Severus' strong grip.

'I see,' he said quietly. 'That is an acceptable reason, Hermione.'

She smiled at him and sniffed. 'That doesn't mean I'd have a fit if someone called me "Mrs Snape", you know,' Hermione added. 'I would be very proud to be your wife, Severus. Never doubt that.'

Severus brushed a stray tear away with his thumb. 'I know, I know. Don't upset yourself. Here,' he said conjuring a handkerchief. 'Blow.' While Hermione dried her eyes, Severus picked up his quill and initialled her parchment. 'There. That's everything. We now only have to sign them.'

Hermione quickly read over both parts of the contract again. Nodding in agreement, she added her signature to her part, and Severus did the same. Once they had been countersigned and dated, the two sheets of parchment rolled themselves up into two neat scrolls and promptly vanished. It was done.

'Well, that would appear to be that...' Severus took a deep breath, slid gracefully off his chair and knelt beside Hermione. 'I believe it is customary for the lady to stand.'

Somewhat stunned, Hermione rose shakily to her feet. Severus took her hands in his.

'Hermione Granger, you have been, in turn, in the short time I have known you, an insufferable know-it-all, a thorn in my side, a most brilliant pupil, a beautiful witch, a fearless warrior and the love of my life. Without you by my side I would have a future filled only with darkness and misery. Why you would have me is beyond my comprehension, but I would be honoured if you would consent to be my wife.'

Hermione sank to her knees and kissed him. 'Yes. All things considered, I think I'd like that. Very much.'

Severus reached into his pocket and smirked. 'In that case, it would please me greatly if you would accept this as a token of my affection.'

Wide-eyed, Hermione felt her heart pounding in her chest as she watched Severus tip out the contents of a small pouch onto the palm of his hand.

'Oh, Severus,' she breathed. 'It's beautiful, but... it's a bit big...'

'Not "it",' he said, "'they.'" Observe.'

Intrigued, Hermione watched as Severus ran his thumbnail down the shank of the ring and gently pressed it into the metal. Then, with the thumb and forefinger of each hand, he slowly pulled. The metal parted, like mercury, stretching, holding on until the last possible second as if the separation were somehow more than it could bear. Severus held the two rings out for Hermione to see.

'They used to fascinate me as a child,' he said, bringing them together so that the metal began to merge once more. 'They are the only heirlooms of the Prince family that are left. My mother's parents were the last to wear them.'

'Amazing,' Hermione whispered, spellbound. 'May I see?'

'Of course,' Severus replied. 'This one the slightly thicker one, is the man's ring. This one is... yours.'

Severus placed both rings in the palm of his hand, but Hermione had eyes only for the smaller of the two. He watched her face as it called to her, already weaving its magic, and smiled to himself. Hermione was as captivated as he had been the first time his mother had revealed their existence to him and divulged the complexity of their power. Transfixed, he had stared at them, too, and solemnly promised never to be tempted to use them, even as the possibility of enticing Lily Evans with their enthralling beauty had seeded itself in his brain.

'Beautiful...' Hermione murmured, her fingers reaching out to touch it. The Celtic knots engraved into the gold and the clear, multi-faceted gemstones shimmered in the flickering candlelight.

There was a low growl from under the table.

'Do you accept?'

At the sound of Severus' voice, Hermione tore her gaze away from the ring to look into the fathomless eyes of her future husband. 'Yes. Yes, I do.'

The growling grew more persistent.

Holding her gaze, Severus wordlessly took Hermione's left hand in his.

This was too much for Crookshanks. With a blood-curdling howl, he sprang at Severus, hissing, spitting and clawing viciously at his hands, but it was no good. The ring slipped easily onto Hermione's finger.

Not missing a beat, Severus effortlessly Stunned the half-Kneazle and turned his attention back to Hermione. She was as white as a ghost.

'Severus... What-what have you done?' The room was spinning. Any minute now, she was going to be sick... *You should never, ever put on any jewellery, particularly something that old, without testing it for curses first.* Ron's warning percolated through the fog, but it was getting hard to think...

'It's all right, Hermione.' Severus' voice seemed a long way away. 'It's only the ring adjusting to your magic. It will pass.'

Just as Hermione thought she was going to black out, everything suddenly crashed back into focus. 'What have you done?' she repeated angrily, trying to pull the ring off her finger.

'The rings are linking with our magic, joining us.'

'What exactly does that mean, and what have you done to my cat!'

With a flick of his wand, Severus *Rennervated* Crookshanks, who glared at him before slinking over to Hermione's side. 'Quite simply, it means, my love, that you are bound to me until the day one of us dies.'

Infuriated, Hermione tried to pull the ring off again, but Severus stopped her. 'Only I can do that,' he said softly, 'and you must realise now that I never will.' Tenderly, he pushed her hair off her face. 'There's no need to be upset or angry, Hermione. This changes nothing between us. I love and respect you and will never harm you. You must

believe that.' Severus touched the ring, which was now on his wedding finger, with his thumb. 'Accept the binding, Hermione.'

Severus watched Hermione's face as her anger faded, to be replaced by a look of confusion and then one of acceptance.

Hermione dropped her gaze and stared at her hand. 'It is very beautiful,' she said, turning the ring around her finger.

Severus nodded. 'It is goblin made by one of their most famous jewellers and is at least four hundred years old.'

'Really?' Hermione smiled. Then she noticed the scratches on his hands. 'Oh, did Crookshanks do that? Here, let me.' She took out her wand and performed a healing charm. 'That was very naughty of you, Crookshanks,' she scolded. 'Don't do it again.'

Crookshanks meowed at her admonishment, arched his back and trotted out of the room in disgust.

'Now,' said Severus with a smirk, 'if you don't mind, I think I'd rather like to kiss my new fiancée.'

Before she could say anything further, Severus gathered Hermione into his arms and claimed her mouth with his own. It was a demanding kiss; one that spoke of desire and possession and promises of delights to come. He held nothing back, all fear of rejection having dissolved. There were no more nagging doubts; no fear in the back of his mind that one day, the look of love in her eyes would fade. She belonged to him, now. No one else would have her; she could never leave him. A kiss had never felt so good.

A Mudblood, eh? And not an especially pretty one at that. Good for breeding, though, and an excellent mind...

Severus easily shook the thought. If that was the best it could do, he would have no problem resisting its machinations. He loved Hermione; he would keep her safe and never abuse the ring's power by interfering with her free will...other than making her accept the binding, of course, and... Severus pulled back and opened his eyes to look at Hermione. *His Hermione.* She regarded him with hooded eyes, breathing heavily, lips swollen from his kisses... She would never look at another man like that. Not ever. His need for her engulfed his senses.

She is yours. Take her...

Yesss... Severus trailed his hand down the column of Hermione's throat, and she shivered under his touch. Cupping a breast, he squeezed gently, feeling her nipple stiffen through the material... Skin, he had to have skin. Pushing the garment off her shoulders, he made short work of her bra. He bent to mouth the velvety soft skin of her breasts, flicking his tongue, coaxing the hardening peak... *Almost... edible...* He bit down...

'OWW, that hurt. What did you do that for?'

'Shhh.' Severus gently sucked on the tenderised flesh, soothing it with his tongue.

'Gods, Severus...'

Severus felt the tension leaving her body as he continued to lick and suck until she became almost limp in his arms. The thrill of the power he had over her shot down his spine to his groin as he watched the flush of arousal spreading over her breasts. He would be the last man to ever see her like this; the only man who would ever know the taste of her sweet skin or the wetness that was waiting for him, spreading between her legs, preparing her for him. No more the beggar at the feast, no more scraps for him; those days were over. *His. All his.* With trembling fingers, Severus reached around Hermione's neck and unfastened her locket. Not even the dead would have a claim on her today.

'Stand up, Hermione.'

She sighed and stood up on shaky legs, holding onto Severus' shoulders for support, her robe pooling at her feet as she did so. Severus reached up and slowly pulled down her knickers. Sitting back on his heels, he drank in the glorious sight of his goddess adorned only with his ring on her wedding finger. Hermione smiled down at him benevolently, her scent filling his nostrils as he rubbed his nose against her soft curls and ran the tip of his tongue along her slit. She tasted divine, as always. He grabbed her by the hips and pulled her closer. Hermione moaned and laid her hand on his head, twining his hair through her fingers. *'More...'*

Bossy little thing, isn't she?

'Hmm... manners, Miss Granger.'

'More... please...'

'Seeing as you ask so nicely... Get on the couch.'

Hermione tottered over to the sofa and sat down while Severus quickly divested himself of his clothing and crawled after her. Pushing her legs apart, he knelt between them.

'Feet up.'

Hermione put her feet up on the sofa, spreading her knees wide. She reached for Severus, pulling him towards her and kissing him hungrily.

Compliant, yet fiery. Unusual...

'You are so beautiful,' Severus whispered. 'I want you so much.'

Hermione smiled. 'I know,' she said softly, stroking his face. 'I know.'

It took every last ounce of self-restraint not to take her there and then, but Severus' ache to please her overcame his own desperate need. By sheer force of will, he concentrated on the tiny portion of her collarbone just beneath his lips. Giving it his undivided attention, he sucked and nipped at the skin, beginning an inch by inch survey of his territory, resisting Hermione's impatient attempts to push his head down to where she wanted it. There was no rush, no rush at all.

Hermione cried out when he began to suck her nipples once again and tried to push him away. 'They're too sensitive... please...'

But they were made for him to suck...

You and your son.

'Mmm...' The thought was intoxicating. What would she look like, breasts engorged with milk, his son sucking...? What would it taste like? He licked his lips.

She is young, ripe...

Severus shook his head. *Not yet... not... married yet...* He continued kissing his way down her belly, trying not to think of a child...*your child...* growing in her womb, and settled between her legs.

'Mmm... Severus...'

He dragged his fingers along her inner thighs before parting her lips with his thumbs. 'So, wet... always so wet for me.' He swiped his tongue along the length of her slit, then stopped and sighed, extricating a stray pube from his teeth. I wish she'd do something about this muff of hers.

Command her to shave.

Severus circled his tongue around her clit, causing Hermione to moan and thrust her hips up into his face. The hairs tickled his nose, and he sighed again as he brushed them out of the way. She would undoubtedly look a lot nicer without it, and there was skin under that bush he had never kissed, skin she was hiding from him, skin that belonged to him. *Mmm, yesss...* He blew gently over her clit, delighting in her little moans of approval *Delectable little pearl... All mine... How about a little piercing...? Would you like that...? And a little disc... Property of Severus Snape...*

If it would please you...

Severus smirked, glancing up Hermione's body, watching her face as she moaned and writhed, almost insensible with pleasure from his touch. Yes, it would please him no end...nipple rings, too, but he didn't think Hermione would be too keen on the idea.

Her opinion is of no consequence.

That was simply not true... And there would be no commanding, but now she was his, there were avenues of pleasure they could explore together that he would never have dared suggest before... he would teach... train. Oh, yes, a myriad of possibilities, and all the time in the world. Pushing Hermione's knees into her chest, he slid his tongue further down and dipped it inside her. Oh, she tasted so good; he would never have enough of this. He slid his hands under her arse, kneading her buttocks as he lapped and sucked his way back up to her clit. Flicking it delicately with his tongue, Severus felt Hermione tense underneath him, and he knew she wasn't far off. He kept going even as she shuddered uncontrollably against his face.

'Oh, Severus, please, no more... It's too much.... Gods, stop!'

'Tell me what you want, Hermione.'

'You... I want you... now.'

'Where do you want me?'

'You know damn well. Stop teasing me!'

Grinning, Severus pulled her to the edge of the sofa and placed the tip of his cock against her entrance, savouring the moment. He eased his way in slowly, maddeningly, ignoring the pounding of the blood in his ears and the persistent tingling in his balls. Swallowing hard, he stilled and flexed his cock inside her. Hermione responded by rhythmically squeezing her muscles around it.

'Like that?'

He groaned. Torn between the desire to sustain the moment indefinitely and to spend himself inside her as quickly as possible, Severus gritted his teeth. Teasingly, Hermione rocked her hips, giggling at the ragged gasp that escaped his lips. She felt so, so good, but the stone floor was playing havoc with his knees. He pulled out.

'Turn around, Hermione.'

It took a moment for his instruction to register before Hermione rolled over and knelt on the sofa.

'Hurry up.' Severus gave her a sharp smack on the backside.

'Ouch. There was uncalled for,' she said crossly, looking over her shoulder at him.

'But it's so *smackable*, my dear,' he replied, giving her another one.

'Stop it!'

Sighing, Severus rubbed the reddening skin. *Another time, perhaps.* He spread her cheeks to admire the view of her swollen pussy and could not resist one more taste. Delving his tongue inside her, he wondered how she would react if he dragged his tongue back and licked her anus but decided that was another pleasure that could wait. Instead, he climbed onto the sofa behind Hermione and pushed her forward so that she was half-hanging over the back. Holding his cock, he put it between her legs, rubbing it along her slit until it was well lubricated, then he slid back, found his target and entered her swiftly. He closed his eyes, revelling in the tight, wet heaven that surrounded him.

Her arse is tighter...

Severus groaned as he gave in to his body's demands, knowing he wouldn't last long. He reached around and between Hermione's legs, finding her clit, wanting... needing...

Command her to come!

NO!

SHE EXISTS FOR YOUR PLEASURE!

Something inside him snapped. Grabbing the back of the sofa, he pounded into her, harder, deeper, oblivious to everything but the white heat of his building orgasm and the bone aching need to bury himself inside her until, with a triumphant roar, he collapsed on her back, panting and sweating.

'Move,' Hermione gasped. 'You're crushing me.'

Though spent and exhausted, Severus managed to extricate himself, allowing Hermione to turn around and slump back on the sofa. He grabbed his wand to clean them up before flopping beside her, pulling her onto his lap and kissing her between gasps for breath. Hermione sighed contentedly, feeling warm, loved and thoroughly shagged. Then, she noticed the ring.

'Severus, look! The stones. They've changed colour!' They had indeed turned red.

'Hmm...!' He regarded his thoroughly ravished witch with smug satisfaction. 'That tells me my intended has a very passionate nature.'

Hermione laughed and kissed him on the nose. 'Oh, Severus. You needed a ring to tell you that?' She glanced at his finger. 'But yours haven't.'

Severus chuckled. 'No, they will only turn red if you are ever in danger and then I will be able to Apparate to your side.' He kissed her softly when she opened her mouth to question him further. 'So, you see, being joined by the rings has many advantages, and I shall tell you more later. But for now,' he said with a glint in his eye, 'I don't know

about you, but I'm getting cold. I suggest we continue this somewhere more... comfortable.'

'But it's nearly dinnertime!'

'I shall order something for us later, but right now, you look tired and I prescribe bed rest. Plenty of... bed rest.'

* * *

It was an excited Hermione that made her way to the Headmistress' office with Severus the following day. They were running late for lunch, and so Severus had asked Minerva permission to travel by Floo to the Burrow.

'You're sure it's okay to tell her, Severus?' Hermione asked as she stepped off the spiral staircase.

'Why should I mind? She'll find out soon enough.'

'Come in you two,' Minerva called out. 'The door's open.'

'Hello, Minerva.'

'Good Morning, Hermione. You look very happy, I must say.'

'Severus... he... I'm... we're engaged!' Hermione blurted out, holding her hand out so Minerva could see the ring.

'That's lovely, my dear,' Minerva said quietly. 'Congratulations to you both.' She smiled warmly at Hermione. 'Now, if you wouldn't mind going ahead, I'd like a quick word with Severus.'

Minerva watched Hermione disappear through the flames before rounding on Severus. 'What have you done?'

'Whatever do you mean, Minerva?' Severus replied innocently.

'Don't play games with me, Severus Snape. It's been a good few years, but I know a binding ring when I see one. Where did you get it?' She reached into her sleeve. 'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't summon the Aurors.'

Severus merely smirked. 'It's been in my family for generations. I've done nothing illegal.'

'That's beside the point!' Minerva retorted. You know perfectly well how Dark those things are. I shouldn't have to remind you...'

'No, you don't.' Severus' eyes narrowed. 'I understand its power all too well, and I won't abuse it, if that's what you mean. I can control it.'

Minerva bit back her tongue. *Then you're a bigger fool than I thought.* She tried a different tack. 'Hermione is special and very dear to me. She has been through so much lost family, friends... But now she has a bright future ahead of her...'

'Hermione wanted a commitment; she took the ring of her own free will.'

Minerva snorted. 'I very much doubt that...at least, I doubt she fully realised what it entailed. So,' she continued icily, 'have you got her to hand over all her money to you, yet?'

'As a matter of fact,' Severus replied, 'we entered into a perfectly standard betrothal contract. Her assets are quite safe, Minerva. I do not want her money.'

Minerva stared at him keenly. 'Did you, now? And did you sign it before or after you gave her the ring?'

'Before.'

'Well, that's something, I suppose,' Minerva admitted grudgingly. 'But I want a wand oath from you that you will legally marry her.'

'Min...'

'No, you listen to me, Severus. Five years and any protection that contract gives her will run out if a marriage does not take place. If you care for Hermione, you will marry her...and the sooner the better.'

'Not that it's any of your business, but I...we have decided to marry in the summer.' He smirked. 'There seemed little point in waiting.'

'WHAT!'

'Make your mind up, Minerva. Do you want me to marry her or not?'

Clenching her fists, Minerva drew herself up to her full height and looked at Severus with as much contempt as she could muster. 'Severus Snape, I'm holding you personally responsible for that girl's welfare. You harm her, and ring or no ring, I'll...'

'You'll what, Minerva?' Severus snapped. 'There's nothing you can do. Hermione is mine, and the law will back me up on that. And if you're thinking of sacking me, I promise you, you will never see her again nor will any of her friends.' Severus sighed and took a moment to regain his composure. 'Minerva,' he said, holding his hands out towards her in a conciliatory gesture, 'I have no intention of secluding Hermione from the world, or from the people she loves. I am not her gaoler.'

Seething, Minerva turned her back on him and walked towards her desk. 'Only time will tell, Severus. Only time will tell.'

Severus took that as his cue to leave. 'If that's all you have to say, Minerva, then I'll be going. I'm expected at the Burrow.'

Minerva waited until she heard the whoosh of the Floo before slumping into her chair. She put her elbows on her desk and put her head in her hands. 'Of all the stupid, idiotic, arrogant...arseholes!'

* * *

The shadows were lengthening, but Minerva remained unmoving at her desk.

'You must not blame yourself, Minerva,' said a voice behind her.

Minerva shook her head. 'I knew things weren't right between them, Albus. I should have seen this coming.'

'How could you have? You're not a seer.'

Minerva folded her arms and harrumphed. The door opened a crack, and Crookshanks padded in, meowing angrily.

'I never in my wildest dreams imagined he'd do something like this, Crookshanks. I'm so very sorry.'

The half-Kneazle jumped onto the desk and sympathetically rubbed-up against Minerva's arm. Not-a-cat hadn't been there; it was he who had failed in his duty to protect his mistress. If anyone was to blame, it was him.

Minerva scratched behind his ears and made soothing noises. 'There's no use crying over spilt milk, Crookshanks,' she said. 'The question is, what do we do now? What *can* we do now?' She sighed and stared at the fireplace, waiting. There was little point in going anywhere. She'd bet her pension that any minute now, she'd be receiving a visit from one worried and very angry witch. 'We'll just have to be there for her, Crookshanks,' Minerva said, stroking his back, 'and pray that Severus is as strong as he thinks he is.'

Unappeased, Crookshanks let out a pitiful yowl and curled up on the desk to keep vigil with Minerva.

It wasn't long before a green flare in the grate shook them out of their reverie. 'Are you there, Minerva?'

'Yes, Molly.' Minerva sighed. 'Come through. I've been expecting you.'

Hermione awoke slightly earlier than was usual, feeling stiff and achy. Grimacing, she turned on her side, wondering if her husband might be awake, too. She needed him to heal the bruising; the children couldn't see her like this...they would be up and about demanding her attention before long, and she had a first-year Charms class straight after breakfast. Would he still be in a foul temper? Dare she wake him? Gently, Hermione shook his shoulder until he stirred in his sleep. She turned over again and lay quietly. That way, she hoped, he wouldn't realise she had disturbed him.

Severus opened his eyes and groaned. His head was pounding. Had he been drinking? Oh, yes, the potion and... He turned his head to look at his wife. Hermione was facing away from him. The blanket, having slipped off her shoulder, revealed a mass of purple bruising on her upper arm. Carefully, so not to wake her, he lifted the covers.

What the fuck did I do to her? Severus stared at the scratches, bite marks and the imprints of his fingers where he had grabbed her. Horrified, he reached for his wand and started to heal the damage that he could see.

Hermione smiled at the sensation of the magic passing over her skin. She turned towards him, yawning. 'Good morning, my love. You're awake early.'

'Yes, my lovely witch, I am.' Severus kissed her gently.

Hermione flinched slightly at his touch. 'Oh, before I forget, I took a Headache Potion last night because I couldn't sleep. I hope you don't mind?'

'No, not this time.' He ran his thumb along her jaw. 'Are you hurting anywhere else?'

Gingerly, Hermione turned over to reveal yet more bruising. Severus cast the healing spells again, and Hermione sighed with relief as the soreness eased. Once Severus had finished, she thanked him and kissed him tenderly. Severus stroked her face, still annoyed with himself for his loss of control.

'Forget about last night, Hermione,' he commanded quietly in her ear.

Hermione yawned and blinked. 'Good morning, my love. You're awake early.'

A/N: At this point in the tale, I would like to pay tribute to Ladyofthemasque, whose story 'In Annulo' provided the inspiration for the betrothal rings.

A Day in the Life

Chapter 16 of 18

An ordinary day ends most unexpectedly.

Disclaimer: It's all JK Rowling's. No money has changed hands.

A/N: Huge apologies for the long hiatus of this story. The next chapter is underway and, hopefully, won't take quite as long.

Thanks as ever to Septentrion, my very patient beta.

'Katy, will you please hurry up? You're going to be late for school.' Having already bundled a still bleary-eyed Albus through the Floo, Hermione was standing by the fireplace, tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for her daughter to make an appearance. *That girl is so laid back, she's almost horizontal.* 'Ka...'

'Okay, okay.' Katy stomped into the living room, a fur-lined cloak slung over her arm.

'Why on earth are you wearing *those*?' Hermione enquired, frowning at Katy's sturdy footwear.

'We're going on a field trip. I did tell you... last night?' At her mother's surprised expression, Katy sighed. 'You haven't done my picnic lunch, have you?'

'I don't remember you saying anything... Oh, never mind.' Hermione placed the pot of Floo powder she was holding back on the mantelpiece. 'Winky! I need you.'

The house-elf appeared in the blink of an eye. 'How may...'

'Katy needs a picnic lunch,' Hermione snapped. 'And be quick about it. I haven't got all day.'

Winky bowed and disappeared.

'There's no need to be so mean to Winky, Mum.' Katy's eyes narrowed as she glared accusingly at her mother. 'It's not her fault you can't remember things.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Katy opened her mouth to reply, but closed it again when Winky reappeared clutching an enormous picnic basket. She smiled. 'Thank you, Winky.'

The elf beamed at Katy before vanishing.

'I'd better get going.' Katy hurriedly took a pinch of Floo Powder and threw it into the grate. 'See you later, Mum.' Grabbing the basket, she called out, 'Hogsmeade Junior School,' and stepped into the flames, leaving behind a rather confused Hermione.

Picking up her (now cold) cup of coffee, Hermione reheated it with her wand and sank into her chair with a grateful sigh. Even with Katy's surprise announcement, she'd still managed to scrape a good half hour to herself before first period. First-year Charms. Such a doddle; she could teach that standing on her head with one hand tied behind her back...not that she didn't have meticulously prepared lesson plans, mind.

Ah... Bliss. She chuckled guiltily and sipped her coffee, determined to enjoy every minute of it. Having the Deputy Headmaster for a husband certainly had its benefits; devising the timetables might be an onerous duty, but Severus had turned that to his advantage, making sure Hermione's Monday mornings weren't too demanding and steadfastly refusing to countenance any grumbles from the others about preferential treatment. Even with the aid of magic, Hermione knew it was impossible to please everyone, anyway, so she didn't let it trouble her conscience all that much.

It was also a bonus not having to face all the noise and bustle of breakfast in the Great Hall, Minerva having long ago exempted her from that duty because of the children...a privilege for which Hermione was especially grateful. On many a hectic morning, when she was running late, Hermione was lucky if she managed to grab a slice of toast before rushing off to class. But on those occasions, like today, when she was able to get Katy and Albus off to school relatively on time, Hermione could order what she fancied from the kitchens and enjoy a few precious moments of solitude before the start of her working day.

No Severus, no children, no teaching. This was *her* time.

She was just about to order her breakfast tray when her eyes fell on the magazine on the table *Charm Matters*. Hermione smiled, remembering the previous afternoon when she had returned from her walk, and Severus had... Severus had...

Driven me crazy with lust, put me over his knee and... and... said he was going to fuck me hard later But, he hadn't...

Wrinkling her brow in consternation, Hermione went over the previous night's events. The children had come home; she had made dinner, and got them ready for bed. And then she had gone into the bedroom... and... She rubbed her temples as her head started throbbing. Why couldn't she remember? And what had Katy meant?

'This is ridiculous.'

Putting her cup down, Hermione got up and went into the bedroom. She hesitated by the door. Yes, she'd... she'd... gone over... to the dressing table. Yes, that was it. She crossed the distance quickly and stared at her reflection. Picking up her hairbrush, she dragged it through her hair and paused thoughtfully.

'Mirror, did you say something about getting a haircut last night?'

'Yes, dear,' the mirror replied. 'You were having trouble getting the tangles out.'

Ah, yes. She remembered now. She'd taken something for a headache... and gone to sleep. Severus must have decided to leave her rest. Yes, that must have been it. Mystery solved, Hermione swept her hair up and twisted it into a chignon.

'Gods, I'm turning into Minerva.' Hermione shook her head in dismay. Something really had to be done about it. Maybe Saturday? She had an appointment with Madam Malkin, anyway, and there was that new hairdresser Ginny was always raving about; she could owl her for his details at morning break... Yes, that sounded like a good plan.

Breakfast forgotten, Hermione returned to the living room, gathered up her marked essays and made her way to the Charms classroom.

* * *

'I don't want excuses, Miss Simmonds.' Hermione flicked her wand at the board, erasing the instructions she'd put up at the beginning of the lesson. 'I had to learn how to use a quill at your age as well, you know. It's not that difficult.'

'But, miss, I...'

'When I set a deadline for an essay, Miss Simmonds,' Hermione continued, ignoring the girl's protests, 'I expect to see your parchment on my desk at the appointed hour. Now, I suggest you go to the library at the earliest opportunity and complete the task I set you. Any further delay will result in the loss of house points. Do I make myself clear?'

Hermione watched the dejected, and probably homesick, Muggle-born leave her classroom and join her friends, who were waiting for her by the door.

Not my problem, she thought, flexing her aching back. First lesson over, thank heavens.

Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. Hermione shook her head at the idiocy of the combination. It was so bloody frustrating. Three weeks into term, and there were still several Hufflepuffs who hadn't managed to master a basic Levitation Spell. Three weeks! The Ravenclaws had looked so bored, she'd assigned them some extra reading. But at least they were trying their hardest, which was more than could be said for some of the Gryffindors in her next class. They were even less interested in Charms than Ron and Harry had been...which was something of an achievement.

Still, there was break and a free period before she had to engage in another battle of wills. If she got a move on, she could make it to the Owlery and back and still have time for a quick cup of tea. A brisk walk might loosen her up a bit and clear her head, too. Smoothing out a scrap of parchment, Hermione penned a quick note to Ginny and tucked it in her pocket before hurrying from the room. She turned right, away from the babble of teenage voices congregating at the other end of the corridor. It was a slightly more circuitous route, but little used. With any luck, this way she wouldn't bump into anyone who would hold her up with idle conversation. She was worked up enough as it was without sacrificing her mid-morning cuppa.

A house-elf shot behind the suit of armour he'd been polishing, but Hermione scarcely noticed as she strode past. On reaching the stairs, she put one hand on the banister and hitched up her robe with the other, pausing briefly to glance down the dimly-lit corridor that ran off at a right angle to the stairwell. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione glimpsed a flash of something white disappearing into one of the disused rooms.

'Odd,' Hermione muttered. 'That door should be locked.'

Only too aware of the castle's tricky nature, Hermione felt duty bound to investigate. Hopefully, it would only take a minute. *Probably a cat*, she thought, entering the empty corridor. Her echoing footsteps were the only noise in the still space, and she drew her wand instinctively, casting a Silencing spell on her shoes to muffle the sound as she walked. She'd just passed the room where Fluffy had once stood guard when she heard a plaintive mewing, and the door opposite clicked on the latch. There was only one cat she knew of that could do that.

'Minerva? Is that you?'

Cautiously, she peered around the door. 'Minerva?'

But there was no sign of anyone, and she would have closed and Charmed the door locked, if it hadn't been for the enormous mirror standing on clawed feet, floor to ceiling in the middle of the room.

'No... It can't be.' Ron and Harry had told her about it, of course, but in all her years at Hogwarts, Hermione had never seen it for herself. With some trepidation, she crossed the threshold and took the few short steps necessary to read the inscription on the ornate gold frame. It left her in no doubt:

'Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.'

Hermione closed her eyes, wanting and not wanting to see the manifestation of her heart's deepest desire. After all, she had a loving husband, children, career (well, maybe that wasn't so great), so what, really, could it possibly be? Her parents? Maybe she'd see her Mum and Dad...like Harry had. But, in any case, a quick look wouldn't harm, would it?

Curiosity getting the better of her, Hermione took a deep breath, opened her eyes again and waited patiently for the fog to clear...

Nothing seemed to be happening. She wondered briefly if there was something the matter with the enchantment; no charm lasted forever, and this particular magical artefact was getting on a bit. Hermione watched the mists as they continued to swirl, great Catherine Wheels of rainbow colours until, eventually, the last tendrils dissipated, and she was left with... her reflection.

She blinked. 'That's... impossible.'

Now, Hermione was no expert, but even she knew that only the very wise...or the very simple...desired nothing and therefore would see only themselves in a mirror such as this. And she also knew that she was neither of those things. There had to be something... She inched forward and her reflection smiled, holding out her hands.

Biting her lower lip, Hermione tilted her head, critically examining the image in front of her. Perhaps she looked a little... younger? More... vibrant? The dark circles around her eyes she'd acquired from many nights of restless sleep were notably absent... Her boobs were higher and her figure didn't look quite so... rounded as it'd been since Albus' birth... Surely she wasn't so vacuous as to want to be young again?

Hermione's reflection just stood there, arms outstretched, smiling.

'I look... happy...' Was that it? 'But... I am... happy.' She backed away slowly. Harry had told her he'd sat for hours staring blissfully at what could never be, but for some reason, she felt unnerved by the experience. She didn't look like that anymore...she wasn't sure she'd ever looked like that. Tearing her eyes away from the smiling girl, Hermione fled the room. She needed a sit down and a very strong cup of tea. The letter would have to wait.

* * *

Double Charms with the Gryffindor and Slytherin first years was descending into chaos. The object of the lesson...a very straightforward Levitation Spell, in Hermione's opinion...had not been accomplished, despite her clear and detailed instructions. There were feathers all over the place. She was fed up and rapidly running out of patience. Why couldn't they just *listen*?

'No, Edmonds. Swish and *flick*.'

It had been a most trying morning.

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Mr MacGuire. You're holding the wrong end! Do you want to blind yourself?'

Diarmud MacGuire grinned back sheepishly. 'Sorry, miss.'

Hermione ignored him, demonstrating the importance of a snappy wrist action for the umpteenth time to a largely disinterested class. 'Swish and *flick*. Better, better.' She looked daggers at a small group of Slytherin girls. 'Miss Davenport, your wand is a delicate instrument, not a Q-tip. In future, please attend to your ear-wax problem *before* coming to class.'

Miss Davenport looked bored. The other girls sniggered.

Win-GAR-dee-um Lev-ee-OH-sa... OH-sa. Again. Keep practicing.'

'What's got into her, today?' Peter Edmonds muttered under his breath to his new best mate. Smirking, Crispin Harris passed him a note under the desk. Peter unfolded it and put his hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh, glancing furtively at Hermione.

The bell rang for lunch.

'*WAIT!* Hermione shouted over the racket of chairs scraping on stone. 'I want a three foot essay on Levitation Charms and their applications by a week next Wednesday. Extra marks will be awarded for comparisons with similar spells.' As the class started to scramble for the door, she remembered the letter in her pocket. 'Oh, and is anyone going to the Owlery lunchtime, by any chance?'

'I am, miss,' Crispin volunteered.

'Would you mind sending this for me, please, Mr Harris?'

'No problem, miss.'

The chattering and general noise died away. Hermione turned her head towards the door, sensing a familiar presence. She saw Peter Edmonds trying to stuff something up his sleeve, but he wasn't quick enough.

'What have you got there, boy?' Severus loomed over the young Gryffindor, who looked suitably intimidated.

'N-nothing, sir.'

'I'll be the judge of that.' Severus held out his hand, Summoning the parchment effortlessly. Scowling, he stared at it and turned it sideways. 'That, Edmonds, is not anatomically possible. Twenty points from Gryffindor and detention with Mr Filch for one week, starting tonight. Now, get out of my sight!'

Edmonds didn't need to be told twice and legged it down the corridor after his friends.

'I wish I could do that.' Hermione sighed.

'What? Put the fear of God into the little buggers?'

'I think I'd be satisfied I could just get them to stop talking long enough to cast a decent spell,' she replied, rolling her eyes. 'I almost called Macguire a dunderhead today. I only just managed to stop myself.'

Raising an eyebrow, Severus smirked. 'It's good to know I have such a positive effect on my wife's teaching methods.' He strolled over to the window and gazed out over the grounds.

'So, to what do I owe this pleasure?'

'Hm? Oh, I...um...' Severus folded his arms across his chest as he turned to face her. 'I've just... uh... been to see Septima about an Arithmancy problem I was having difficulties with, and as I was passing, I thought I would escort you to the Great Hall...being the gentleman that I am.'

'Great, I'm starving...' She tilted her head slightly. 'Are you okay? You look a bit frazzled.'

'What? No, no I'm fine.'

'Sure?'

He nodded. 'A bit of a headache. Nothing serious.'

'Okay, then. Just let me get my things, and I'll be with you.'

Leaning against the window sill, Severus watched Hermione rummaging through the papers on her desk. 'Who were you sending an owl to?' he asked.

'Ginny... Now where did I put that...?'

'Oh?'

'Yes. Ah, there it is...' Hermione retrieved a quill from under the desk. 'Auto-Answer,' she said, holding it up. 'Confiscated from one of your Slytherins.'

'And... Ginny?'

'Hm? Oh, I've an appointment with Madam Malkin on Saturday...'

'But, I'm on chaperone duty!' Severus huffed. 'I was going to suggest lunch in the Three Broomsticks.'

'Were you? I'm sorry...' Oh, dear. She'd disappointed him again if the set of his jaw and the way his bottom lip was sticking out ever so slightly was anything to go by. Others may have been oblivious to such a small change in his expression, but having seen a more pronounced version of it on Albus' face every time he couldn't get his own way, Hermione knew a pout when she saw one.

'There's no need to pout.'

'I do *not* pout.'

'Of course you don't,' Hermione replied, joining him by the window. She reached up and put her hands on his shoulders, but he did not respond. 'Look,' she said, 'I really need to buy some new teaching robes...and I need something dressy for Harry's charity bash the weekend after Halloween, too. The robe you bought me for my birthday isn't really suitable for a ball.'

He snorted. 'Really.'

Hermione decided to try a different tack. Trailing her hands down his arms, she picked at an imaginary speck of fluff on his sleeve. 'And I thought that... maybe just... maybe, mind... I might buy a new... outfit for playtime, as well... But then again, I suppose I could go shopping in Hogsmeade instead.' Demurely, Hermione looked up at her husband to see his eyes glittering in amusement. That was better.

'Minx.'

'And,' she said, stroking his chest, 'if you're a good boy, I might just buy you something, too.'

'And if I'm a bad boy...?' he asked, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her towards him.

'Then you might, just might, mind you, get to play with them...and me...Saturday night.' She laughed as his stony countenance softened. 'I've asked Ginny to take the kids for the day, but seeing as we were so rudely interrupted by our inconsiderate son last week I might, if you ask me nicely, ask Ginny if they can sleepover.'

Suppressing a grin, Severus licked his lips before kissing her soundly. As his hands start roaming towards her breasts, Hermione knew she had to create a diversion...and quickly...if she wanted any lunch, and so, giggling, she broke the kiss.

'And just what do you find so amusing about my kisses, Professor Granger?'

'I was thinking about what we did in this classroom once,' Hermione replied, smiling up at him. 'Do you remember which desk?'

'Of course. How could I ever forget.' He nodded towards the furthest row. 'It was that one over there, if my memory serves me correctly'. Taking Hermione's hand, he tried to pull her towards it.

'Naughty.' She pulled away and started to walk towards the door. 'Come on. We're late enough for lunch as it is.'

'Tease,' he said, giving her a swift smack on the backside.

'Ouch!'

'You deserve to be punished for that blatant attempt to distract me, Professor Granger,' he growled. 'In fact, I may enforce the no knickers rule on a weekday.'

'You wouldn't.'

'Oh, but I most certainly would.'

Hermione squealed as Severus caught hold of her robes and yanked her back against him. Pushing a tendril of hair out of the way, he whispered in her ear, 'What do you think your adolescent, spotty-faced pupils would say, if they knew that their illustrious professor was... walking around with no knickers on like some common tart, hmm? Tell me that.'

Snorting with laughter, Hermione wriggled around in his arms so she was facing him.

'And what, pray, do you find so amusing, *now*?'

'I was only thinking that with this lot, I might just find out.'

He frowned. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Well,' Hermione replied, 'there have been a few 'badly cast' *Wingardium Leviosas* accidentally aimed my robes already. I've managed to foil them so far but, you never know, one just might get lucky, and then they'd all get an eyeful.'

'The little bastards,' Severus tried to keep a straight face, but failed miserably.

'They're absolute horrors,' Hermione said, shaking her head. 'I can't recall anyone trying that on Professor Flitwick in my time.'

'Nor in mine.' Severus shrugged. 'But then again, he didn't have your legs...' Chuckling, Severus put his hand on Hermione's elbow as they moved towards the door. 'Come on. Let's go and get something to eat. Oh, and by the way, did I mention there's a head of house meeting this evening...?'

* * *

Listening to Albus' steady breathing, Hermione crept out of his bedroom, quietly closing the door behind her. More monsters under the bed. He certainly had a vivid imagination, that child. She shook her head, wondering about the root of his fears and insecurities, but at least the bed-wetting phase seemed to have sorted itself out at long last, which was something. Peeking around Katy's door, Hermione checked her daughter wasn't disobeying her by reading under the bedclothes, and then returned to the living-room.

There was no sign of Severus yet, but staff meetings could go on forever, as Hermione knew only too well. Feeling tired but not the least bit sleepy, she sat down in her chair and flicked through *Charm Matters*, scanning Bill Weasley's article on Egyptian runes, yet again, envying him his fascinating...not to mention glamorous...career. She shook the feeling off, reminding herself with a long sigh of the number of Curse Breakers killed or seriously injured in the field each year. It was a sobering thought. No, she really was much better off teaching at Hogwarts. Severus had been right, as usual: Curse-breaking was far too dangerous a job for a woman. Shaking her head, she glanced at the clock. Five minutes and Winky would be here with the cocoa.

* * *

Sitting in the chair closest to the fire, Severus was starting to feel drowsy as the meeting dragged on. The room was stuffy; Aurora's habitual plea for more telescopes was enough to send the most desperate of insomniacs to sleep, but so long as there was no other business, and Pomona didn't drone on about her greenhouses, then Minerva would wrap things up, and...

'Thank you, Aurora. I shall bring it up at the next financial meeting with the Minister.'

It seemed Minerva was as anxious to finish as he was.

'Anything else?' Minerva glanced at Pomona, who shook her head. 'No? Good. Then, thank you everyone... Oh, just a minute, I almost forgot. Severus, I need you to look over the agenda for the governors' meeting before you go, if you wouldn't mind...'

Severus suppressed a groan as Minerva handed him a sheaf of papers and bid him goodnight. He dropped the bundle onto his lap, pretending to scan the top sheet as the staff room emptied, but his eyes were refusing to focus. He was tired; the events of the past twenty four hours were preying heavily on his mind. Especially when he'd awoken and... Severus rubbed his eyes.

What the hell got into me?

He'd been trying to rationalise his behaviour all day. The loss of control had been inexcusable, but the most worrying aspect of the whole affair was that, while he could remember the anger, everything that had followed was just a confused blur. And erasing Hermione's memory of the incident, he knew, had been a rushed decision born of panic; he'd obviously hurt her physically, but it was the expression on her face as she was lying there...that look of apprehension combined with passive acceptance...that had decided the matter.

Severus ground his teeth in annoyance as he replayed the scene in his head for the umpteenth time; he'd never had recourse to issue a direct order to forget anything before...well, there had been that nonsense with the house-elves and one or two other little things where he'd felt justified in demanding Hermione's compliance, but they hadn't been as a result of anything like *that*... No, no... Taking everything into consideration, he had probably done the right thing.

So... In that case, why had he felt the need to check up on her at lunchtime...as if she might still have some recall of the episode, even though he knew that to be impossible?

Guilt. It was guilt.

...Do not berate yourself. You acted in her best interest.....

Ignoring the worm in his head, Severus threw the pile of papers on the floor, stretched out his long legs and leaned his head on the back of the chair. An old memory was stirring and it was not a happy one. That look. That resigned look. It had been painfully familiar...he'd seen it before, all too often, on his mother's face, Friday evenings, when his father used to stagger home from the pub, three sheets to the wind. What if his anger got the better of him again? What if he was turning...

...A dutiful wife takes an interest in her husband's endeavours. She deserved to be punished....

'Not true,' Severus whispered, twisting the ring on his finger.

Oh, her lack of interest in his research had undoubtedly incensed him, and that indifference, combined with his own frustrations, had made him want to teach her a lesson. Severus mulled this over, remembering his pleasure in making her beg for release. He'd wanted to make Hermione pay for her apathy, all right, but not like *that*. And, anyway, over the course of the evening, his irritation had abated, and his equilibrium had returned.

So what had been the trigger for his fury? Had it been the sight of a compliant wife, naked and head bowed, waiting to do his bidding as she'd been ordered? Perhaps... Yes, that had been the start of it... that blind acquiescence... It had enraged him, and... part of him had wanted her to argue with him, fight back...the girl he'd fallen in love would never have just lain there and taken it...but there had been no reaction, and then something had snapped and...

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. This wasn't getting him anywhere. Thanks to his ever present critic, his thoughts were going around in circles. He played with the ring again, trying to block its pleas to put the entire episode behind him. Would it harm, he wondered, to silence its persistent nagging for just a little while?

Hesitantly, Severus eased the ring over the knuckle and let out a grunt of relief. After ten years of marriage, such... aggravation should not occur. The rings were supposed to bring harmony and contentment to the couple that wore them; he and Hermione should be as one by now, but... something was definitely not right. Severus stared at his finger, wishing he could just take the damned thing off completely.

And then where would I be? Would she ever forgive me?

Somehow, he doubted it. She would in all likelihood leave and never look back... No, for better or for worse, his course was set, and there was nothing he could do now other than live with the consequences. *But... Gods...* How much longer could it be before he was granted some peace?

Yawning, Severus folded his hands in his lap. It had to be soon; this couldn't continue indefinitely. And in the meantime, he would make a conscious effort to rein in his temper, or at least make sure he was nowhere near Hermione when he felt his anger rising. All he had to do was to be more vigilant of his moods in future and spot the danger signs. And then it shouldn't prove too difficult to keep his distance...

Where on earth was Severus? Hermione drummed her fingers on the arm rest. This was soon accompanied by an impatient jiggling of her left leg. Feeling increasingly agitated, Hermione got up and began to pace on the hearth rug. She turned and narrowly missed a collision with Winky, who had materialised with a tea tray and two mugs of cocoa. The elf squeaked in alarm as hot liquid splashed out of one of the mugs.

'I-... Sorry, Winky, are you all right?' Hermione asked, voice full of concern. 'You haven't burned yourself, have you?'

Winky's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets in surprise. 'No-no, Miss,' she stammered. 'W-Winky is unharmed.'

'I'm relieved to hear it.' Hermione's hand began to pat her thigh. 'Have you seen Severus, by any chance?'

Winky shook her head as she put the tray down on a side table. 'Not today, Miss, no.'

'Where can he be?' Hermione muttered under her breath. Glancing at the door, she yanked the neck of her robe. 'Is it me, or is it hot in here?'

'Miss?'

'It's terribly stuffy, don't you think?' She moved away from the fire, feeling slightly woozy. 'I can't... I feel... I think I need some air.'

'Is Miss all right?'

'No, I'm... Would you mind keeping an eye on the children until Severus returns, Winky?' Striding towards the door, an almost imperceptible wand flick brought Hermione's travelling cloak flying out of the bedroom to settle around her shoulders. She paused, one hand on the door-knob. 'Tell him I've gone for a walk.'

Winky didn't have a chance to reply. Hermione had already flung open the door and stepped over the threshold. But as it swung back on its hinges, Hermione's left arm shot out, and Severus' broom flew into her outstretched hand seconds before the door slammed shut behind her.

She hurried away from the dungeons with only one thing on her mind, *Out. I have to get out.* Breaking into a sweat, Hermione ran up the stairs to the Entrance Hall, her eyes searching for her goal...the great oak doors...and fought off her growing nausea as she dashed across the hallway and into the cool fresh air. No one saw her hasty departure, except the Grey Lady, who took little interest in the sight of a female professor leaving the castle with a broom in her hand. Tonight was Mabon, after all.

Outside, without giving it so much as a second thought, Hermione mounted the broom and kicked off into the night sky. She was airborne, soaring above the pinnacles, before the realisation hit her.

'What in Merlin's name am I *doing*?'

The broom seemed to sense her sudden panic and veered violently to the right and down--heading straight for Ravenclaw tower. Hermione pulled up sharply, trying desperately to remember anything Severus might have said about his broom's idiosyncrasies. *It has a tendency to pull to the right.* She tried to steer it left, but the broom was having none of it and tried to unseat her.

'Ohgodohgodohgod.'

Hermione hung on for grim death as the broom struggled for control and banked right, heading out over the Forbidden Forest. Despite a lot of cursing, swearing and cajoling, Hermione had absolutely no effect on its flight path. Unable to master the broom, she had no choice but to let it have its own way. If it kept this up, Hermione reasoned, she would fly around in a wide circle. Maybe she could ease the broom into a gentle, gradual descent on the way back? It was the best plan she could come up with. Hopefully, she wouldn't crash into anything in the meantime, wrecking Severus' pride and joy in the process.

If this doesn't kill me, Hermione thought, Severus will.

She carefully eased the handle forward; the broom responded with a shudder and plummeted towards the forest canopy. Screaming in terror, Hermione managed to stave off a collision by sheer instinct, rolling left to avoid a spruce tree, her cloak ripping as it snagged on a branch. The broom decelerated abruptly as a result but kept on the trajectory that would complete the loop it had begun.

At least she was now flying back roughly in the direction of Hogwarts, though the beads of perspiration trickling into Hermione's eyes were making it difficult for her to see properly. Hermione tried to shake them off, being afraid to take one hand off the broom and wipe them away. Blinking rapidly, she was too preoccupied with averting disaster and a painful death to notice the smoke rising from a small clearing beneath her. It was only when the green sparks shot up and erupted into tiny stars and spirals directly in her path that she turned her head. Looking down, she briefly glimpsed a group of people in the strange green light before she was skimming over the treetops once more.

Pointed hats...

Witches...?

'What the...?'

Hermione slackened her grip as she looked back in surprise, briefly losing what little control she had; the broom dived, with no heed for its passenger, through a gap in the trees. With a crash landing imminent, Hermione reacted without thinking: she drew her wand, cast a Cushioning Charm at the fast approaching forest floor and jumped. She bounced once and then landed, sprawled flat on her back. Severus' broom followed her with a clatter and lay, inert, at her side.

Tentatively, Hermione flexed her fingers and toes before raising her head. Nothing seemed to be broken.

'Stupid stick,' she mumbled. 'I'd chop you up for firewood if I thought I could get away with it.' Grunting, Hermione got to her feet and straightened her robes.

Despite feeling a bit wobbly, Hermione knew she had to move. The Forbidden Forest was no place for a lone witch to be dawdling. She glanced around, trying to find her bearings, but she had no real idea of her location or which path would lead her home; she might end up walking around in circles all night if she wasn't careful. Silently, Hermione weighed up her options: Apparition wasn't possible as she was within Hogwarts' protective wards, and there was no bloody way she was getting back on that broom.

'*Lumos!*' The tip of Hermione's wand shone brightly. Placing it on the flat of her hand, she cried, 'Point Me!' The wand spun around a few times before settling in line with her middle finger. That was odd... She would have sworn that north was in the opposite direction.

'Oh, well.' Stooping to grab the broom, Hermione set off. The back of her neck prickled with the feeling that several hundred pairs of eyes were following her on her journey, but she did her best to ignore it.

The sound of fallen leaves crunching beneath her feet was deafening in the otherwise still forest. With her sweat rapidly cooling in the early autumn air, Hermione began to shiver as she picked her way through the undergrowth, following the trail set by her magic compass. There were few obstacles in her way, but she hadn't progressed more than a hundred yards or so before she was hit with the almost overwhelming urge to turn back.

'A repelling spell? Out here?' Hermione pressed forward cautiously, ignoring the disquieting feeling that she really needed to be somewhere else. 'Why would someone...?'

A hooded figure stepped into her path, brandishing a wand. 'State you bus...' The hood was thrown back hastily. 'Hermione? What are you doing here?'

'Pomona?' Hermione stared at her friend and colleague in amazement. 'I could ask you the same question.' She sighed. 'Basically, I had to get out of the castle, and this is where I ended up.'

Pomona Sprout noticed the broom in the younger witch's hand but refrained from commenting.

'Were you with those people I saw earlier...?' Hermione glanced down at her wand, which was still indicating she should proceed on the path that Pomona appeared to be blocking. That couldn't be right; that clearing would have been south from here, not north.

'You saw us?' Pomona smiled as she sheathed her wand. 'Come, Hermione. And welcome.'

'Where to? What's going on?'

'You'll see. Come.'

Pomona led the way. Soon, Hermione heard voices and the peals of female laughter breaking the stillness of the forest. A green flash lit up the trees just ahead of them, making Hermione squeak in surprise.

'Don't worry,' the older witch said, laughing. 'Almost there.'

Hermione felt the rippling magic of another defensive spell washing over her, but there were no ill effects as they passed through it and entered the clearing.

'Wait here while I inform... erm. Stay here.'

Letting the broom fall to the ground, Hermione peered through the eerie gloom. She could just about make out several groups of people huddled around a large cauldron. A few of them had noticed her arrival and were obviously commenting on her presence. Hermione thought she recognised some of the shop-keepers from Hogsmeade, and... Weren't those three girls over there in her NEWTS class last year? With her curiosity piqued, Hermione took a step forward; the witch stirring the cauldron looked up and pushed her hat back to wipe her brow, her face clearly visible in the green steam rising in front of her.

'Rosmerta?'

Hermione had no idea what was going on, but she was determined to find out. She tore her eyes away from Rosmerta, trying to spot Pomona among all the cloaks and pointed hats. In the shadows on the far side of the clearing, Hermione saw her approaching a slender witch dressed all in white, but she couldn't see the woman's face. Like most of the women present, she was wearing her hair down and...

'Miaow...'

Startled, Hermione glanced at her feet. A small, ginger fur-ball was gazing up at her. 'Hello,' she said, stooping to pick up the kitten. 'And who might you be?'

'His name's Chudley.'

'Oh.' Hermione smiled at the young girl, who had run to claim him. 'He's lovely. I used to have a cat just like him. Is he part Kneazle?'

Lifting her pet out of Hermione's arms, the girl nodded sagely. 'He's very clever. Did yours run away?'

'No.' Hermione sighed. 'He didn't get on with my little girl, I'm afraid, so I had to send him away to live with friends not long after she was born.'

'That's sad.' The girl hugged Chudley tight. 'Was he a present for your Naming, too?'

'My...?'

'Sorry, Mum's calling me,' she interrupted, pointing towards the group near Rosmerta. 'I have to go home, now.'

Hermione nodded. 'Okay. It was nice meeting you, er...' Hermione hadn't quite caught the name.

'I am Holly, daughter of Fiona,' the girl declared, looking rather proud of herself. 'Goodbye.' With a quick wave, Holly turned and scampered off to join her mother.

Though more than a little puzzled by Holly's response, Hermione had no time to dwell on it as Pomona was making her way towards her accompanied by several women she knew only too well. She stared, not knowing what to think, as they approached, the witch in the white robe holding out her arms in greeting as they drew near.

'Oh, my dear. You've found us.'

Strange Brew

Chapter 17 of 18

A gathering in the forest.

Disclaimer: Not mine. Just playing.

A/N: Many thanks as ever to Septentrion for her prompt beta.

For the briefest of moments, Hermione wondered if she had, in fact, survived her crash-landing in the forest. Right now, it seemed more likely that she'd died and was having an out of body experience or maybe she was still lying, concussed, where she'd fallen and this was some kind of wild hallucination. Women she'd first known as teachers, then friends and colleagues, were standing in a huddle before her: women like Irma Pince, whose normally immaculate, tight bun of greying hair was now loose and falling to her waist. Hermione did a quick head count; with the exception of Rolanda Hooch and Sybill Trelawney, every female member of staff was present. What

were they all doing out here at this ungodly hour?

'Found? What do you mean, found?' she said at last. 'Minerva, what the hell is going on?' Hermione searched her companions' faces, desperate for answers. They had the grace to look embarrassed. 'Pomona... Septima? Haven't you got anything to say?' She sighed resignedly when they all glanced furtively at Minerva but said nothing. 'This is some sort of... coven, isn't it?'

The women laughed at that, and the tension eased. 'Well...' Minerva replied. 'That's how outsiders usually refer to us. However, we generally call our... gatherings, the Circle.'

Hermione opened her mouth to let out a volley of questions, but Minerva hushed her. 'All in good time. Now that the young ones have left, we can begin.'

A cheer went up as a loud boom and a spectacular explosion of sparks erupted from the cauldron. The shimmering mist rising from its depths turned a deep indigo blue.

'It's ready!' Rosmerta yelled.

'Ah, right on cue.' Minerva clapped her hands in delight. 'Excellent! Come, Hermione, ladies. Rosmerta's Special Brew waits for no witch.'

'Special Brew?' Hermione asked. 'You're going to *drink* that?'

'Just wait until you taste it,' Pomona replied, linking arms with her and winking conspiratorially. 'Nothing staves off a nippy night in the Highlands quite like it. Only... Rosmerta prefers us to call it her "Mabon Blue Moon", just so you know.'

They followed closely behind Minerva as she led the way to the centre of the clearing. Pomona wasn't giving anything away, and so Hermione stopped talking, trying instead to pick up on the conversations around her as everyone moved towards the cauldron.

'Have you ever known...?'

'... must give you a pot of my bramble jelly...'

'She's Muggle-born...'

'... bought it in Gladrags...'

'Not since my grandmother's time...'

There was some amicable jostling to get to the front as Rosmerta began ladling out her celebrated concoction. Each witch had brought their own small cup or goblet, and Hermione, not wanting to appear any different, quickly pulled a grip from her hair and Transfigured it. The landlady of the 'Three Broomsticks' was all smiles when Hermione presented her cup in turn.

'Tell me what you think,' said Rosmerta.

Hermione took a cautious sip, smacked her lips and let out an 'Ooh' of delight. 'Rosmerta, this is... delicious. What's in it?'

Rosmerta tapped her nose. 'Family secret.'

'Well, it's fantastic.' Smiling, Hermione took another, bigger, sip. It was warming, all right, tasting of fruit...apples and blackberries, perhaps...with some winter spices? Just the ticket, anyway, after her nightmare broom ride. Somewhat fortified, Hermione began to relax. It was worth staying just for this, she decided, although naturally she was curious as to what was going to happen next.

'Is everyone accounted for?' Minerva called out, peering around her. 'Where's Rolanda? She's late. Again.'

Aurora Sinistra pointed above the treetops. 'Here she comes.'

Hermione followed Aurora's outstretched hand in time to see Madam Hooch making a heart-stoppingly fast descent into the clearing. At the last moment, the flying instructor pulled up sharply a few feet from the ground and neatly dismounted. Hermione gasped in spite of herself. Although she'd never been particularly bothered by her lack of prowess on a broom, Hermione still couldn't help feeling a twang of envy at Rolanda's skill; she made it look so effortless.

Minerva nodded curtly at the latecomer and drew her wand. Turning to face north, she drew a large arc across the clearing until she faced south. She repeated the procedure in an east/west orientation.

'The Circle is closed,' Minerva announced. The others took this as a sign to conjure up some chairs, cast warming charms and settle down expectantly. 'But before we start, as you can all see, we have a guest.' Minerva gestured for Hermione to come closer. 'Sisters, it is a rare occurrence, indeed, when a Muggle-born witch stumbles upon us.' The women muttered their agreement. 'In fact, I cannot recall it happening in our Circle in my lifetime. Now, I'm sure she needs no introduction...' The witches laughed. 'But it is my pleasure to present Hermione Granger.'

Hermione blushed as the witches applauded. Minerva held her hand up for silence. 'You are very welcome to join us tonight, Hermione, if you so choose. But whatever you decide, I must now formally ask you to swear on your wand never to reveal to outsiders anything you see or hear while the Circle is closed.'

'What? B-but, I can't do that,' Hermione stuttered. 'Severus...my husband...and I don't keep secrets from each other.'

Minerva pursed her lips as a buzz went around the gathering at Hermione's response. 'Everyone here is under a similar oath,' she explained. 'We may not even speak of the existence of the Circle to anyone other than to a daughter or, in exceptional circumstances, a granddaughter. Should you join us, the same rule will be extended to you. Otherwise...'

'Otherwise, what?' Hermione asked, horrified. 'You'd Obliviate me?'

Shrugging her shoulders, Minerva replied, 'If necessary, yes.' At Hermione's stricken face, she sighed and continued, 'My dear, I realise this may sound harsh to you, but it is how it has been for generations; our very survival has depended upon it.'

'I see,' Hermione said flatly. 'And I appreciate your position, but...'

Pomona took a step closer and murmured so quietly, Hermione barely caught it, 'It is said that a Muggle-born will find her way to us in a time of great need...'

'Pomona!'

'I think she has the right to know,' Pomona said, firmly. 'I don't believe it's a coincidence that she spotted us...or that a 'Point Me' spell led her here.'

Hermione frowned as her two friends argued. She had to admit that a strange series of events had brought her to the clearing, but even so... 'I don't understand. Whose need? Mine or yours?'

'There is no way of telling,' Minerva replied, glaring at Pomona.

Somewhere, deep in the recesses of Hermione's mind, a tiny voice whispered, *Do it*. She nibbled her bottom lip, still unsure, but... urgh. To be Obliviated? Hermione really didn't like the idea of someone tampering with her memory. 'Okay,' she said finally, drawing her wand. 'I agree to your terms. I swear not to divulge anything I see or hear tonight to anyone outside the Circle or...'

Minerva touched the tip of her wand to Hermione's. 'Or your words will sound, or appear, as complete gibberish.' She smiled, obviously pleased. 'Now that's out of the way, we can start. Does everyone have a drink? Good. I hereby call the Mabon gathering of the Hogsmeade and Grampian Sisterhood to order...'

* * *

An hour later, and Hermione was beginning to regret her decision to stay. She had been intrigued at the beginning when some of the women had set up a table (or maybe it was some sort of altar. She wasn't too sure), and everyone had placed their contribution to the festivities upon it. Following a small prayer of thanksgiving to Mother Earth for the summer's bounty and a plea that the oncoming winter would not be too hard on Her children or the creatures of the Forest, Minerva had blessed the food and distributed it amongst the assembled witches. It had been a rather charming way of marking the passing of the season.

Unfortunately, after that, things started to go downhill. Hermione had chosen to sit close to the back to best observe the proceedings, but the group of teenage witches sitting directly in front of her weren't paying any heed to Minerva and hadn't stopped going on about their boyfriends, the latest fashions and who was the most shaggable player in the Cannons. It took every last ounce of her restraint not to yell at them to shut up and pay attention.

In spite of the irritating running commentary, however, Hermione had soon ascertained that the Circle was an organisation like any other. There was obviously a committee: Minerva had called upon the Secretary (Pomona) to read the minutes of the last meeting, and the Treasurer (Irma Pince) had given account of the Circle's finances. A heated debate had then followed about where they should go for their Christmas outing; it wasn't too early to be thinking about it, apparently. Hermione had started to fidget; Severus had to be back by now and was no doubt wondering where she'd got to.

After much argument, they put the Christmas issue to the vote, and Hermione heaved a sigh of relief. Soon, hopefully, she would be able to go home.

'And now Rolanda wishes to say a few words about broom safety...'

Oh, God.

'Thank you, Guardian. I'm sure many of you have heard me lecture on this topic before, but with each new batch of first years, I encounter the same problems...'

Hermione was sure it must all be terribly interesting, but she had to lean forward in her seat and strain to catch what Rolanda was saying.

'...important not to foster bad habits, which I'll end up having to break...'

Good grief, this is like that Muggle society, the Women's Institute, Hermione thought, remembering her mother's brief involvement and disastrous attempts at jam making...and from what she'd seen of it so far, it seemed equally unlikely that the Circle could hold any attraction for her. But, Hermione's curiosity had been piqued, nevertheless, and she still had lots of unanswered questions. Why all the secrecy, for one thing? How many of these circles were there countrywide, and did they communicate with each other? Worrying her bottom lip, Hermione tried to remember if she'd ever read about such *gatherings* in any of her books on wizarding history and drew a blank. But then again, it had never occurred to her to look. And what about the men? She couldn't believe that wizards were totally ignorant, either...where did the married witches tell their husbands they were going in the middle of the night, for Merlin's sake? Maybe there was some sort of understanding... In which case... did Severus know? What about his mother...What about Molly and Ginny and every other pureblood witch of her acquaintance? And then there was Minerva...their leader, obviously, but why did they address her as 'Guardian'. Guardian of what? Hermione yawned, wondering if she'd get an explanation before the night was over.

A polite round of applause made Hermione jerk to attention, and she quickly joined in. Rolanda had finished her talk and was heading her way.

'Hullo, Hermione,' said Rolanda, conjuring a chair with a flourish. 'Thank Circe, that's over.' Rummaging through her voluminous cloak, she produced a small hip-flask from one of the pockets before flopping into her seat. 'How's it going?'

'Um... Okay, thanks.'

Minerva was addressing them again: 'Thank you, Rolanda. Now, Irma, I think this would be a good time to collect the subs...'

Subs? 'Rolanda, how much is it?' Hermione whispered. 'I don't have any money on me. Could I borrow...'

'Relax.' Rolanda unscrewed the cap off her flask and took a swig. 'It's only a Sickie...enough to cover the cost of the incense and the booze. And anyway, you're our guest.' She thrust the flask in Hermione's direction. 'Want some firewhisky? You look like you need it.'

Hermione hesitated a moment before accepting the flask and gingerly taking a sip. The liquid was true to its name, burning a fiery trail down her throat and making her eyes water. 'Thanks,' she spluttered, handing it back. 'Tell me. Are these events always so... so...?'

'Boring?'

'Er, well...' It didn't seem polite to agree, but Rolanda's hawk-like eyes were sparkling with amusement. Hermione shrugged. 'In a word... yes.'

Rolanda chuckled. 'Don't write us off, just yet. Something's been brewing with one of our sisters for a good few months, now; it may well come to a head tonight.' She glanced down at Hermione's side, noticing Severus' broom for the first time. 'You flew *that*?'

Hermione nodded sheepishly. 'Well, it flew me, to be more precise.'

'I'm not surprised.' Rolanda let out a low whistle. 'Those old Cleansweeps were keyed in to their owner and don't like being flown by anyone else. I'm amazed you made it as far as the lake.' She grinned. 'You're obviously better at flying than you've been letting on.'

Hermione rolled her eyes, although she was secretly pleased at the compliment. 'It was pure luck,' she insisted. 'Now. What do you think might happen to liven things up? A demonstration of household charms, perhaps?'

'Not... exactly.' Rolanda smirked and pointed. 'See that lady over there...the one staring into space?'

'Y-es.'

'That's Briony.' Rolanda shuffled her chair closer and lowered her voice to a whisper. 'She's originally from Hogsmeade but now lives near the north coast. Her husband's been giving her a dog's life for years.'

'Oh?' Hermione glanced at the witch in question again, noticing how her hands were twisting the fabric of her robe. 'Poor woman. She looks distraught.'

Taking a generous swig of firewhisky, Rolanda grimaced and nodded. 'Hardly surprising. Personally, I'd have thrown him out on his ear a long time ago. All that drinking and gambling...'

'Oh, dear.' Hermione shook her head and sneaked a glance at the subject of their discussion, feeling pity for her situation. 'Don't tell me. She puts up with it because of her children?'

'That and because she's terrified of him.' Rolanda offered Hermione the flask again, which she declined. 'He's a big chap...ex-Auror. But to add insult to injury, Briony found out recently he's been playing away from home. With a Muggle. In Inverness, of all places.'

'Awful.' Hermione shuddered. 'How can she condone that sort of behaviour?'

'She can't,' Rolanda replied. 'Not anymore, anyway. She's had enough, but she's still scared, and the bastard won't give her a divorce.'

A bit mystified, Hermione frowned, pondering why Briony even needed to ask if she had proof of her husband's adultery. Although, come to think of it, she could only recall a couple of people of her acquaintance...girls she'd been in school with...who were divorced, and those marriages had ended fairly amicably. Divorce was rare, she knew, but Hermione had always assumed that an injured party could petition the Wizengamot without the other's consent...as in the Muggle world. Maybe she'd been wrong in that assumption? Not wishing to show her ignorance, Hermione merely asked, 'So what's she going to do about it?'

'You'll soon find out. Ah, here we go.' Rolanda tucked her flask back in her cloak. 'Watch and learn, my Muggle-born friend. Watch and learn...'

An expectant hush descended on the gathering as Pomona got to her feet. Even the girls in front of them stopped their incessant chattering.

'That concludes our agenda for this evening,' the Secretary announced. 'Is there any other business?'

All eyes fell on Briony, who stood up, somewhat shakily, and declared, 'Yes. I, Briony, daughter of Catriona, request justice as is my birthright.'

'Have you pursued all other avenues, Sister?' Minerva asked gently.

Briony nodded, looking close to tears. 'Yes, Guardian. I asked my husband again if he would release me from our binding, but he will not. Neither will he leave our home, although he says I am welcome to do so...' Her voice cracked as she pulled a hanky from her pocket and dabbed her eyes. 'Without my children.'

A lot of sympathetic muttering greeted her statement, which seemed to give Briony the strength to continue. 'I only want what is mine,' she said more firmly. 'Nothing more.'

Minerva's outstretched hand silenced the witches. 'Do you declare before your sisters that there is no desire for retribution, only justice, in your claim?'

'I do.'

'And,' Minerva continued, 'do you understand that any action taken by whatever is Summoned is your responsibility? And that should I awaken a Fury, the consequences may be dire?'

'A *Fury*?' Hermione whispered. 'She's not serious.'

'Elementals aren't predictable,' Rolanda whispered back, 'or easily controlled. Let's hope her intentions are reasonably good.'

Briony looked frightened but did not waver. 'Yes, I understand and am willing to take the risk.'

'Then, I shall proceed.' Minerva turned to face the table on which the Mabon offerings had been blessed earlier and began to make preparations. Feeling increasingly uneasy, Hermione followed Rolanda's lead as everyone else stood and moved to encircle Minerva and Briony.

'We must link up, now,' Rolanda said, reaching for her hand. 'Whatever happens, don't let go.'

'Rolanda... Isn't this a bit...you know, Dark?'

'Depends...' Rolanda regarded Hermione keenly. 'Do you draw a... definite line between light and dark, or do you think there are... shades of grey in between the two?'

'I-I...um...' Flushing, Hermione cringed, remembering the times she'd smudged that line when it had suited her. 'Shades of grey, I suppose.'

'Then don't look so worried.' Rolanda gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. 'Trust me. There is nothing to fear. This is our way; it has been our way for centuries. We were looking after our own long before anyone thought of a Wizengamot.'

'Well... if you say so...'

Hermione let Rolanda's words sink in while her attention focused on the two women beside the makeshift altar. Though still uncertain, Hermione's in-built thirst for knowledge was overriding her reservations. And anyway, the protective circle around Minerva and Briony was sealed; she didn't know what would happen if she broke it.

Minerva, in the meantime, was busy assembling an intricate pile of twigs and moss. Appearing satisfied with her efforts, she conjured a small jug and splashed a few drops of the contents over it.

'Just water,' Rolanda said before Hermione had a chance to ask. 'And now for the tricky part...'

'Setting fire to damp wood?' Hermione whispered, grinning at the look of surprise Rolanda gave her. 'Lucky guess. I was at the Battle of Hogwarts, remember. Elemental magic requires the four elements be combined in some way; I know that much.'

'Of course,' Rolanda whispered back. 'How could I ever forget? Now, watch.'

Silence fell on the Circle as Minerva lifted both arms high above her head and cast *Incendio*. The wand light danced around the twigs, almost fading away to nothing before coaxing a fire out of the tinder. With a bit of gentle fanning, the miniature pyre was soon burning away nicely. Minerva wiped her brow before glancing around the group and raising her wand once more.

What little breeze there was died, and the hairs on the back of Hermione's neck stood on end. It was unnatural, this total absence of sound. The forest was never completely quiet, and yet she could hear no rustling leaves, no snuffling animals nor even the occasional hoot in the distance of a hunting owl. Hermione's ears searched in vain for *something* to latch onto, but everything was still, almost as if time itself had stopped...

Minerva's voice cut through the silence like a knife. '*By tree and leaf, and rock and stone...*'

Hermione jumped at the sound of the others' voices ringing out beside her as they took up the chant: '*By Circe's blood and Hecate's bone...*'

Minerva's wand arm was raised again, her face pinched with concentration. Hermione stamped her boots on the hard ground as her toes began to tingle, the earth coming alive under her feet. Whatever force Minerva was commanding began to spiral up from the ground, around Hermione's legs, settling as a ball of energy at the base of her spine. Needing reassurance that this peculiar feeling was quite normal, she glanced at Rolanda, but her friend had closed her eyes. Hermione grasped her hand, and that of the witch on her left, even more tightly.

'*By mighty flood, by gentle rain...*'

A pulse, like a strong heartbeat, rose up and passed down her right arm. Then, a split second later, it returned from the hand of the witch on her left, having made a complete circuit. It happened again, more quickly this time. The energy was growing stronger, travelling around the circle at an ever increasing rate, growing faster and more powerful as it went. Hermione struggled to keep her eyes open, riveted by the scene: the hair of the witches opposite writhing and twisting under and around their

hats as, no doubt, was hers, Minerva at their centre, the conduit, holding it all together, looking like a goddess.

'By Zephyr's breath and Vesta's flame...'

Hermione sucked in a lungful of air as a static charge thrummed through her veins, igniting something deep within. She moaned then blushed with embarrassment, but no one noticed.

'Out of the earth, we cry as one...'

Joy. A sense of connection, of peace... The world was spinning... Glimpses of lives that were not hers, whispering voices piercing the veils of time, seemingly familiar and yet unknown...

'Oh... Oh...' The grip on her hands tightened as Hermione's feet left the ground, pulling her down, anchoring her to the Earth.

'For my sister's sake, I bid thee, "Come"'

Groaning, Hermione's head slumped to her chest as the energy peaked and then dissipated abruptly. Her knees felt wobbly, and she would have collapsed had it not been for the women on either side holding her up. With one last supreme effort, Hermione raised her eyes only to behold a mesmerisingly beautiful and completely naked woman sitting on the altar.

Languorously, the creature stretched, casting heavily lidded eyes around the assembly before settling on Hermione. She licked her lips. 'This had better be good.'

That was the last thing Hermione remembered before the world faded to black.

'Drink, Hermione.'

Something sticky, honey tasting... 'Wha...where?'

'It's a restorative draught, nothing more.'

Minerva? Hermione's eyes shot open. 'I broke the circle!' she wailed. 'Sorry... so sorry...'

'Hush, now, no harm was done. Do you think you can sit up?'

Hermione blinked up at the concerned faces hovering over her and pushed herself up on her elbows. 'Was-was that a Fury?'

Minerva chuckled softly. 'No, Briony got a Succubus. She was lucky.'

'What happened?'

'You passed out.' Rolanda helped Hermione to her feet. 'It happens sometimes.'

'That was your first time in the Circle,' Minerva added. 'And you weren't properly grounded. We should have prepared you.'

Rubbing her temples, Hermione noticed that their number had greatly diminished. 'Where is everyone?'

'On their way home,' Rolanda replied, offering her a hand up. 'It's just the Hogwarts' contingent left. We could hardly leave you here, now, could we?'

'Thanks.' Hermione found she was still a little woolly-headed, but her legs seemed to be holding her up okay. She brushed the grass off her robe. 'That was pretty impressive, Minerva.'

'It comes with practice,' Minerva said, her lips twitching. 'I take it you no longer think our Circle is boring?'

'Er, no,' Hermione replied sheepishly, glancing at Rolanda. 'Sorry about that.'

'We'll have a chat about it again. Soon. But it's high time we got you home.' Minerva nodded to the others, who immediately claimed their brooms and got ready for the off.

Hermione's stomach clenched in fear as Madam Pince placed Severus' broom at her side. 'I don't think I can...'

'Nonsense,' Rolanda said briskly. 'You'll be flying with us. I'll keep that old Cleansweep of yours under control, don't you fret. Now, mount up.'

Rather reluctantly, Hermione held her hand over the broom. 'Up!' she commanded. The broom didn't budge.

Rolanda sighed. 'UP!'

This time, the broom responded, rocketing off the ground. Hermione snatched it out of the air and nervously mounted, dreading what was to come. She looked around at her colleagues hovering close by: Minerva, riding side-saddle, looked concerned, Pomona, plump and ungainly, not the most sporty of witches but still looking at home on her Nimbus, and the others bobbing impatiently, eager to get away. She felt incredibly inept. Was she the only witch in the world with a fear of flying?

Without a word, Rolanda pointed her wand at Hermione's broom. A rope shot out, lassoing the handle. She looped the other end around her wrist, threading it through her fingers. 'Leading rein,' Rolanda explained. 'There'll be no tricks from this beast on the way back, I promise. Are you ready?'

Nodding, Hermione took a deep breath and kicked off. She wobbled slightly, but a quick tug on the rein by Rolanda reminded the broom just who was in charge. Together, the group rose gracefully above the forest. The other women manoeuvred around Hermione, so that she was in the middle, and with Minerva at the head, they set off.

Instead of heading straight back to the castle, however, Minerva led them in a wide loop around the lake. 'Come on, ladies,' she yelled. 'Last one to the Whomping Willow carves the Halloween pumpkins!'

With a shriek, the others chased Minerva as she banked steeply. Rolanda easily caught her up, with Hermione having no choice but to trail behind.

Please slow down, Hermione prayed, screwing her eyes shut to try and ignore her rising panic and her racing heartbeat. But as she did so, something rather unexpected happened. With her eyes closed, Hermione's perception of her surroundings shifted. Her other senses came into focus: her nerve endings registering the brush of the wind against her face, her ears and nose picking up the smells and sounds of the night. It was really quite exhilarating; you could lose yourself in the sensations and almost forget you were a hundred feet up in the air with just a stick of wood between you and a messy death. Almost. Plucking up her courage, Hermione opened one eye. She just about had time to make out a Quidditch hoop far below, and then they were skirting the edge of the forest again and heading back towards the lake.

'Once more 'round the loch for good luck, everyone,' Hooch cried, urging them on even faster.

Laughing, the others followed in close formation, Septima and Aurora flanking Hermione on either side. 'Look, Hermione,' Septima shouted over the wind. 'No hands!'

And indeed, as Hermione glanced to her left, she saw Septima let go of her broom, controlling it effortlessly with the movement of her body. She grimaced. 'Show off.'

'You can do it,' said the witch on her right.

Hermione turned her head to see a laughing Aurora Sinistra doing the same thing. She shook her head, violently. 'No, never. Not in a million years.'

They each extended a hand in her direction, but Hermione wasn't having any.

'Go on, I dare you,' Rolanda shouted, looking back.

Despite her terror, Hermione was not about to let a direct dare go unchallenged, and so, hesitantly, she took one hand off and grabbed Septima. The broom swerved, making her instinctively squeeze her thighs together, which steadied it a bit, much to her surprise. Taking a deep breath, Hermione let go completely.

'Well done,' Aurora said, beaming at her. 'We've got you. You're not going to fall.'

They were about to go into the turn on the far end of the lake once more. Hermione closed her eyes again, raising her face to the night sky...this time not in panic but just to savour the feel of the wind on her face. It felt good, rejuvenating. Who would have thought it? She had always dismissed broom flight as a complete waste of time and energy...what was the point when you could Apparate or travel by Floo...but here she was doing it regardless and enjoying herself in the process. It was a revelation. *Of course it's pointless.* She giggled to herself as the penny finally dropped. *That's the point.* No one had any need to use this precarious mode of transport, and yet they did, simply because it was fun, they were magical beings and because they *could*.

She wasn't holding hands quite so tightly, now, Hermione realised, and she was sitting up straighter. The witches put on a final burst of speed as they turned into the home straight, and this time, instead of wanting to hex them into slowing down, Hermione shrieked, 'Faster!'

'That's the spirit, Hermione,' Septima shouted back.

Laughing with the others, Hermione finally relaxed, letting her magic do the job without conscious thought. She was too busy analysing her reactions to this new found ability to notice that there were sparks coming out of the tips of her hair.

But Minerva did. Nearing the landing point, Minerva smiled in approval as her young Charms Mistress, releasing her sisters' hands with a loud 'whoop', threw back her head and cackled like a maniac.

* * *

The Battle of Hogwarts was in full swing as Severus fought his way towards Minerva and the others. Hexes were flying all around him; the Light was heavily outnumbered and being driven back to the lake. He had to get to Hermione, but all he could see was smoke. Through the mists and the groans of the injured and dying, Severus heard Hermione scream his name. Terror clutched at his heart as he moved towards the direction of the sound. Then he saw it: a great snake coiling itself around her, constricting, squeezing the breath out of her. Hermione was completely immobilised, looking at him pleadingly.

'Sectumsempra, Sectumsempra.'

The curse bounced harmlessly off the creature. Severus spun around to the source of the voice as the snake opened its huge maw and bared its fangs. The wizard turned his face to Severus.

'Kill it, Snake,' cried Ronald Weasley. 'Kill it, now. Before it's too late.'

This was a dream. It had to be; Weasley was dead. Spinning up and away from the horrific scene, Severus fought his way back to consciousness and awoke, heart pounding. Confused, it took a split second for him to register his surroundings: *The Staff Room? What time is it? How long had he been asleep?* The last strands of the nightmare slipped from memory as he looked down at his hands: his ring had almost worked its way off his finger! Hastily, he shoved it back down.

-Your witch is not at her hearth.-

And indeed, in the light cast by the dying embers of the fire, Severus could just about make out that the usually clear gemstones now resembled glittering sapphires: Hermione was not in immediate danger, but she had left their home for some reason. He scowled at it. If it hadn't been for the lateness of the hour, Severus would not have been unduly concerned; Hermione was free to come and go as she pleased without restrictions, even though she normally told him where she was going out of courtesy. But at this time of night? Where on earth could she be?

-You allow her too much freedom.-

'She is *not* a prisoner.'

-Your refusal to curtail her movements has caused this desertion.-

Severus shook his head slowly. No, not desertion. The stones were not the amber that would alert him should Hermione contemplate venturing anywhere out of the ordinary, but at the moment, that was of little consolation. With an increasingly uneasy feeling clawing at his gut, Severus extinguished the fire and left for the dungeons.

* * *

A soft drizzle was falling as the procession of witches made their final approach. Spiralling down to the Astronomy tower in single file, they silently wove their way through the arches and landed with practiced ease.

'Mind your head, Hermione,' Rolanda called back as she guided her charge through the stonework after the others.

Hermione ducked obediently until she was safely inside. 'Thank you,' she said, hopping off the broom. 'That was fan...fan...'

'Are you all right? Rolanda asked. 'You look like you've forgotten something important.'

'Yes. Fine. I need to go home, that's all.' Hermione picked up her broom and half-turned towards the stairs. 'Thank you, everyone, for such an... interesting evening. Minerva, do you think we could have that chat about, um, what happened, soon?'

'Of course,' Minerva replied. 'Why don't you call by my office at afternoon break tomorrow for a cup of tea?'

'I'd like that.' Hermione turned to go once more but hesitated. 'Rolanda, I wonder... Do you think you could give me a few lessons? I'd love to learn to do what you all do so naturally, and it would be a nice surprise for Severus and the children, too, if we could go flying as a family one day.'

Rolanda chuckled and gave Hermione a friendly thump on the shoulder. 'You know^{how}, Hermione. You've always known, but like a lot of Muggle-borns, you think, deep down, that flying is unnatural. Now you've found your seat, you won't lose it...you won't, honestly.' She huffed, rolling her eyes at the look of disappointment on Hermione's face. 'But I'll gladly watch you fly solo, if you want, until you gain some more confidence...though, I think you should stick to school brooms for a bit, don't you?'

Hermione nodded eagerly. 'That would be really great, Rolanda. I appreciate it.'

'So... let's think... How would Thursday suit...?'

Minerva's eyes followed Hermione and Rolanda as they disappeared into the stairwell, deep in conversation. A hand gently touched her arm.

'And so it begins...' she whispered, patting Pomona's hand absentmindedly. 'That was the Hermione Granger I remember...for a little while, at least.'

'It seems Ginevra was right.'

They both turned towards Septima, who drew her wand and began to make a series of rapid calculations in the air. 'It is, what, a little more than ten years after the betrothal...?'

'As you predicted,' Minerva said grimly.

Septima grunted. 'It was a reasonable assumption based on the constants at the time. And I take no pleasure in being correct.' She tutted at the swirl of sigils and numbers, incomprehensible to all but her.

'What is it, Septima?' Pomona asked. 'What do you see?'

'Based on this new information,' Septima replied, 'Hermione's sub-conscious mind's struggle to reassert her true nature will be brief, the chance of winning no more than fifty-fifty. And we can expect matters to come to a head very soon...before Halloween, certainly.'

'Oh, dear...'

Pomona's face reflected Minerva's own misgivings, but now was not the time to lose faith. 'Then we must be extra vigilant,' Minerva said in a tone that brooked no argument. 'Be there for her...whatever the outcome.'

Pomona nodded. 'And encourage her to join us...'

'Yes.' Septima added one more variable before banishing her calculations with a deft flick of the wrist. 'That certainly can't harm; although, I fear we may be clutching at straws at this stage. All we can realistically do is watch and... hope.' She frowned.

'That's all we've ever done,' Minerva said bitterly. 'Stand and watch while one of the brightest ever witches...'

'There's something else, isn't there, Septima?' Pomona did not like the worried expression on the Arithmancy professor's face.

'Severus,' Septima replied. 'He's always been the major variable, I know, but I'm... concerned his determination to resist the ring's power may be weakening.'

Minerva snorted. 'We all knew that would happen; it was just a question of time. I just pray Hermione can find the means to fight...'

'She found us, Min,' Pomona said firmly. 'She sought us out without even knowing it. We must take that as a sign, a good sign; Hermione is still in there somewhere, and we all know she's not someone who gives up easily.'

'You're right, of course, but I fear for her so.' Minerva sighed. 'Come. It's cold and very late, and I, for one, could do with some rest...'

* * *

"Night, Rolanda. See you tomorrow."

The two witches parted company on the first floor landing, Hermione still giggling over the rather puerile joke Rolanda had heard the Slytherin Keeper tell at practice and was only too happy to repeat. *She's quite a star when she's had a few*, she thought, shaking her head. Some things never changed. Quidditch and innuendo: its terminology irresistible raw material for any would-be teenage comedian with a ready wit and a filthy mind. *It's a shame that boy doesn't put his inventiveness to better use in class.*

Sconces were flaring to life, illuminating Hermione's way as she descended the stairs to the Entrance Hall. After years of patrolling the corridors, she automatically held her wand out in a defensive posture in front of her, casting *Lumos!* more out of habit than necessity. Hogwarts in the wee hours, even with most of its human inhabitants safely tucked up in bed, was anything but still or danger free: Peeves, for one thing, could be relied upon to get up to mischief at any moment if you didn't watch your back, and so Hermione kept her eyes and ears peeled. Above the natural creaking of the ancient timbers as they strained to keep the roof up, she could hear the familiar sighing of Hogwarts' ghosts, but they were flying high above, seemingly unaware of her presence...unlike the portrait people, who whispered amongst themselves, muttering occasionally, 'Put that light out' as she passed by, or who slept on regardless, letting out the occasional snore. A nearby 'Miaow' alerted her to one of the castle's resident cats going about its business, no doubt laying down the law to some poor, ill-fated mouse.

Hermione crossed the hallway quickly, her footsteps echoing in the empty space. The steps that led to the dungeon levels were not so well lit, casting menacing shadows in every corner, but it was the quickest route home. Reaching the bottom, as she'd expected, the Bloody Baron materialised in front of her. Honour bound, the ghost had never failed to keep the promise he had long ago given her husband to escort Hermione whenever she entered the dungeons alone. She was grateful for his silent presence and smiled in greeting, but said not a word, having tired of one-way conversations early on in their strange alliance. Only now as she walked with the Baron floating beside her did Hermione begin to think of Severus and what his reaction to her absence might be. There would be consequences, obviously; she would likely have to negotiate a punishment of some sort. Hermione sighed and vainly hoped she would find him asleep, even though the chances of that happening were slim.

At the entrance to her chambers, the Baron bowed, took his leave and vanished. Hermione steeled herself and pushed the door open, the creaky hinges making any attempt at stealth futile. Inside, the room was quiet apart from the crackling of the fire. In its glow, she could see a pair of long legs sticking out from the armchair.

'Where have you been?'

Hermione froze.

'I return home after an interminable meeting,' Severus began, slowly rising from the chair and advancing deliberately towards her, 'to find a house-elf asleep on the hearth rug, an absent wife and my son crying for his mother.'

Hermione took a step backwards. 'Why? What happened? What's the matter with him?'

Severus clenched his fists. 'Katie told him she'd seen a Lethifold on her field trip,' he ground out. 'Albus was convinced there was one under his bed, waiting for him to fall asleep.'

'Oh.' Hermione sighed in relief. 'Is that all.'

'All? The boy was hyst...what are you doing with my broom?' he cried, lunging for it.

'It's not damaged...not so much as a bent twig,' Hermione protested, but Severus ignored her.

'Did you get it off the ground?' he demanded as he checked his beloved broom over carefully for breakages.

'I-I didn't mean to,' Hermione replied. 'I just wanted to get some air...I had to get out, and-and it was just *there*, in my hand, and then I crashed in the forest...'

'You *crashed*?'

'I'm sorry.' Almost in tears, Hermione stared at the carpet. He had every right to be angry. 'I know how much your broom means to you...'

Severus swallowed hard. 'Sod the broom,' he whispered, letting it slip from his fingers.

'Wh-what?'

Gathering Hermione into his arms, Severus crushed her to his chest. 'I said, Sod the broom. You could have been killed. And then where would I be.'

'Oh, Severus, I'm so sorry.' She buried her face in his robes, inhaling the scent of him *Home*.

'Hush, now,' Severus whispered, stroking her hair. 'If I had only known, I would have come looking for you, but... are you injured? Should I wake Poppy?'

'No, no, I'm fine.' Hermione raised her eyes to meet his and smiled. 'What kind of Charms mistress would I be if I couldn't cast a cushioning spell, hmm?'

'Indeed.' He chuckled. 'Gods, you're shivering. Come over by the fire and warm up.'

'It's okay,' Hermione replied. 'If you don't mind, I'd sooner just go to bed. I'm really tired.'

'As am I.' Severus planted a kiss on the top of her head and released her. 'Go. I'll check that Albus is sleeping and join you presently.'

Hermione removed her cloak and sent it flying to the hat-stand. 'Don't be long.'

'Hermione...'

'Yes?'

'Don't scare me like that again.' Putting his hands behind his back, Severus touched the ring. 'My broom is off limits. You are never to attempt flying it under any circumstances.'

Hermione frowned, puzzled. 'Why would I?' Turning on her heel, she headed for their bedroom *I can buy my own*.

Severus watched her leave with a heavy heart. He had dropped his guard briefly, and look what had happened: Hermione had almost died as a result *But... why didn't the ring warn me she was in danger?* Severus sighed. Yet again, he'd had to issue a direct order for her protection, to keep her safe from harm.

-She is restless.-

He couldn't argue with that.

-She needs a new infant to occupy her.-

We agreed on two children.

-The contract allows for four-

Severus shook his head. No, it was out of the question; their family was complete *No more children. And that is final.*

Hovering in that woozy place between sleep and wakefulness, Hermione was barely aware of Severus as he crept into the bedroom. But even though he was making an effort not to wake her, pulling off his boots and undressing in semi-darkness, it was enough to put her on alert. In due course, the mattress dipped, and a cold body pressed up against her back.

'Am I not enough to warm you?' he whispered, tugging at the flannel nightgown she was wearing.

'S freezing,' Hermione mumbled. "N your nose's cold.'

'I want you close to me.' Severus slowly gathered up the soft material until it was bunched up around her waist. He sighed in contentment. 'Much better.'

The hand resting on her hip predictably slipped under her nightgown, his fingers mapping the familiar undulations of her abdomen before moving slowly upwards. He tweaked the perky nipple that greeted him; the high, pert breasts of her youth having undergone the changes brought on by age and pregnancy were no less beloved. Almost a distant memory now, those days when they'd been full and round and engorged with milk... gods what a glorious handful they'd been! Beautiful, right down to the ring of downy hairs that had appeared around her nipples. His cock stirred as images of the sensational tit-fucks they'd provided when sex became too awkward flashed through his mind, but... no more... He sighed, brought back to the present by the reality of the flatter, more pendulous breast currently filling his palm: very different, but just as lovely.

Hermione yawned and wriggled against the erection nestling in the crack of her arse. 'Thought you were tired.'

'Mmm... don't mind me...' His hand moved south again, insinuating itself between Hermione's legs, deliberately parting her labia. Severus dipped his fingers inside, smiling into her hair at the wetness he found there: welcoming, ready for him. As always. 'Go to sleep.'

'You expect me to sleep like this?' Hermione asked, craning her neck back to look at him.

'I have to attend breakfast in the Great Hall in a few hours,' Severus replied, twisting his hand to a more comfortable angle. 'I need to rest.'

'Severus...'

'But you may avail yourself of my thumb, if you so wish.'

Tired though she was, Hermione made a half-hearted attempt at moving her hips, grinding her clit against Severus' thumb, but it wasn't long before his hand relaxed, and his head lolled back on his pillow. Hermione's mind began to wander, her movement losing its rhythm as sleep claimed her... *the Circle... a Succubus...? Briony's husband...? Minerva... tea... questions, lots and lots of... questions...*

Several floors above, curled up on the tartan quilt that graced the Headmistress' bed, a bespectacled tabby was having as much problem sleeping as her human alter-ego had been a few moments previously. Still agonising over Hermione's unexpected appearance, Minerva wondered if she should have contacted Molly with the news in spite

of the lateness of the hour. Stretching and flexing, she extended her claws into the bedclothes for the extra tactile feedback to her moggy brain and pondered her dilemma. Probably wiser to wait; it would only cause unnecessary worry if she did anything now, and the dawn would come soon enough. But Hogwarts' swiftest owl would be winging its way to Ottery St Catchpole first thing in the morning.

The Things we do for Love

Chapter 18 of 18

Severus reflects and Minerva and Molly plot as we take one last step into the past

A/N: So sorry it's taken this long to get this chapter right. Thanks go to septentrion and karelia, ladyinthecloak for the beta.

Breakfast was rather a subdued affair. Minerva, having assumed her Animagus form for the short time available for sleeping, was more rested and awake than most. The remainder of the previous evening's revellers drifted in, one after the other, took their seats quietly, drank their treacle-like coffee that appeared in front of them and, by tacit agreement, ignored one another.

In stark contrast to her hungover colleagues, Sybill Trelawney breezed in with a broad smile on her face, scarves fluttering in her wake, and drew up a chair in between Minerva and Pomona. 'All quiet last night,' she announced. 'Nothing to report.' And then, glancing up the table, she whispered, 'Is it true?'

'Is what true?' Minerva answered, trying not to baulk at the overpowering scent of patchouli assaulting her nostrils whilst tucking into her kipper.

Sybill fiddled with her glasses, pushing them over the bridge of her nose, before leaning in closer. 'I saw... in the tealeaves...' She looked up the table again. '*Muggle-born*...'

'Would you care to join me for some tea this afternoon, Sybill?' Minerva hissed. 'This is not the place to discuss *such matters*.'

Sybill, rather reluctantly, took the hint and poured herself some pumpkin juice, but she was unable to resist another furtive glance in the Potions master's direction. Severus, completely oblivious to Sybill's excitement, was scanning the front page of the *Prophet* while buttering his toast. He had long ago learned to block out the irritation that was female chatter...his breakfast companions' inane small talk on this, like any other morning, being of little interest to him. Hermione's erratic behaviour, on the other hand, was still very much on his mind: he had been careless, and her first instinct had been to make a run for it. What would have happened if the ring had actually fallen off while he'd been sleeping? It didn't bear thinking about. The consequences could have been dire...

But I did not.

A keen observer at that moment might have noticed a slight tensing of the shoulders, although Severus' face, as ever, was wearing its habitual mask of seeming indifference. His grip on his knife increased, nails digging into his palm. *For fuck's sake!* He didn't need to be told the bleeding obvious: he *had* woken up in time. Just. And he had learned a salutary lesson in the process: he could not afford the luxury of a respite from his ever-present critic, no matter how exhausted he felt.

Contemplating his toast, Severus had to admit that, if he was honest with himself, he was spreading himself too thinly. There was just so much going on, that was the trouble. Things that couldn't be put off: things like his research. If it wasn't for that taking up such a big chunk of his time...not to mention his energies...outside his teaching duties and responsibilities as Minerva's deputy and as Head of Slytherin, then he would be able to pay more attention to Hermione's needs. It was a logical assumption that she was feeling a bit neglected... Perhaps he should make time and take her away for a short break somewhere? Possibly without the children. Half-term, maybe...?

Suppressing a snort, he reached for the Marmite. The year had barely started, and here he was already thinking about getting away. But, and it was a big but, his research was at a critical point. He was so, so close to cracking his experimental potion, he could almost taste it. If he could only set aside some time to just... think...approach the problem from a different angle...then the elusive element he was obviously overlooking would present itself. He was sure of it. And when he did eventually discover how to release the potential of the 'Squib Gene', he wouldn't have to think about taking a holiday; they'd be able to get away permanently, buy a house far away from Hogsmeade. Somewhere spacious with plenty of room for two growing children; somewhere he'd never have to endure the thankless task of imparting information to disinterested adolescents ever again...

One by one, the staff pushed back their chairs and left the High Table, heading for their respective classrooms, the greenhouses, the library, and the Quidditch pitch. The Headmistress, much fortified after several cups of tea, made her way back to her office.

As she meandered through the corridors towards the spiral staircase, Minerva thought of Molly and wondered if she'd received her owl, yet, and what her reaction would be. It was a rare occasion when there was something positive to report, and Hermione's appearance last night had certainly been a cause for celebration; although, she didn't want her old friend to get too excited. They were by no means out of the woods yet. It might still come to nothing.

Those portraits that were present and not snoring in their chairs nodded briefly as Minerva entered the office before returning to their business. She glanced around, acknowledging her predecessors with an absentminded wave, noted the cheery fire burning in the grate and made for the south-facing window on the opposite side of the room. Pressing her knuckles against the sill, she vainly searched the skies for any sign of her returning owl.

'Ten years,' she murmured. 'Ten years of watching helplessly, treading on eggshells...'

'Is everything all right, Minerva?'

Minerva pursed her lips and turned towards the portrait of Albus Dumbledore. 'Have you spoken to Severus recently?' she asked.

'Not for, oh, a week, at least.' Albus looked up from the book on his lap and stroked his beard thoughtfully. 'Whenever I've tried, he claims he's too busy or too tired. And I have to admit, he looks worn out at times. Why? Has something happened to Hermione?'

'Yes... and no,' Minerva replied. 'I can't really say, but, please, if you notice anything, anything at all, let me know.'

Albus' keen blue eyes regarded her over his half-moon spectacles. 'I will, of course, but... Oh, for Merlin's sake!'

'Misky is bringing Hogwarts' kitchen inventory as Headmistress requested.' The house-elf bowed to Minerva while glancing nervously at Albus' portrait. 'Misky is interrupting,' she squeaked. 'Misky is...'

'Enough!' Minerva sighed and gestured towards her desk. 'It's all right. Just leave it there, will you, and then go.'

'Yes, Headmistress. Misky is sorry for interrupting...'

The tapping of a beak on glass attracted Minerva's attention back to the window, and by the time she'd let the owl in and returned to her desk with Molly's reply, the house-elf had completed her task and vanished.

Minerva let out a huff of annoyance. 'I could really do without this.' An irritable flick of her wand sent the carefully arranged sheets of parchment flying to the in-tray as she eased herself into her chair; the more tedious aspects of running the school could wait.

'Now, then... Let's see...'. Adjusting her spectacles, Minerva broke the seal and straightened out the scroll:

Minerva.

What a turn up for the books. How wonderful! It can only be a good sign.

We must not give up hope now.

Have faith.

Molly.

'Hope, my...'. Minerva crumpled the letter up into a ball and tossed it in the wastepaper basket. Nimue, how that word left a bitter taste in the mouth. And Molly's tone was almost complacent, which was not what Minerva had expected. But then, hadn't they both been gradually coming to terms with the situation? Time was softening them: moving on, as it always did. Righteous anger was dissolving into acceptance.

It was all such a far cry from that day (was it really *ten years ago*?) when Molly had stormed through the Floo, her face as red as the hair on her head, so livid she could barely get a word out...

'That-that... *snake!* How could...'. Molly's eyes scanned the walls, suddenly all too conscious of their silent audience. Then, they fell on Albus' portrait. '*You trusted him,*' she shrieked, causing Albus and several surrounding former heads to cover their ears. Not bothering to wait for his response, Molly spun on her heel and began pacing in front of Minerva's desk, muttering, 'How could he,' over and over again.

'I know, Molly...'. Minerva sighed. 'Oh, do sit down. Please. You're wearing a hole in the carpet.'

At Minerva's signal, the guest chair sprang into action, waddling up behind Molly and trying to match her pacing.

'Sit?' The chair hovered expectantly. 'You expect me to *sit* when...'. Molly paused, frowning. '*You know?*'

'Severus informed me of their imminent nuptials on the way out,' Minerva replied. 'Now, shall I order us some tea, or would you prefer something stronger?'

'But-but, that's not the half of it,' Molly spluttered, finally sinking into the waiting chair. 'He's put a Binding ring on her finger, for Merlin's sake! Did you even *notice?*'

'I did,' Minerva admitted, fishing for her wand. 'I recognised it for what it was immediately; there was a similar ring in my family, you know... As, no doubt, there was in yours. *Alohomora.*'

A jet of red sparks alighted on a small cabinet half-hidden in an alcove next to the fireplace. The door clicked open, revealing a crystal decanter, filled with a pale yellow liquid, and a set of silver goblets. 'But I've no idea what happened to it after my great-grandmother died. Gillywater?'

Molly nodded. 'Thanks.'

Tinkling gently as a murmured incantation extracted the stopper, the decanter rose into the air and poured out a generous measure into two of the goblets.

'I don't suppose he was so stupid as to obtain it illegally?' Molly asked, holding out a hand as her Gillywater sailed towards her.

'I would have escorted him to Azkaban myself, if it were so,' Minerva replied, similarly catching her goblet. 'But he took pains to assure me it was in his family's possession...and by that I assume he means the Prince side...and that they had entered into a standard betrothal contract beforehand...'. She paused to take a sip of her favourite tipple. '... Which would imply consent on Hermione's part. I'm afraid to say, it all looks pretty hopeless.'

'There must be *something*... Some... loophole.'

The comment wasn't particularly aimed at her...it was more thinking aloud on Molly's part, Minerva realised...but she answered anyway, wanting to offer some crumb of comfort, however small. 'Well... we could get hold of a copy of the contract and examine it... And the goblins would probably still have a record of the ring's commission and creation... It wouldn't harm to get Bill to look into it...to see what we're up against...'

'Hmm...? No. No, it wouldn't,' Molly agreed. 'But, oh Minerva, how could Severus do something so... heinous? Their union was Blessed by the Goddess herself. Why would he feel the need to go to such lengths to-to...?'

'Entrap her?' Minerva offered. 'Probably because he's the most insecure wizard you're ever likely to meet. And what do you mean, "blessed"?''

'Oh, it's um... what I call it.' Catching Albus' eye, Molly blushed scarlet and stared into her goblet.

'Molly...?' Minerva tried not to smirk as she peered over her spectacles, pursing her lips as if she were about to address a disobedient first year rather than one of her oldest friends. 'Spit it out, dear. You're hardly amongst strangers here. Nothing you say will leave this office.'

Molly, not looking terribly convinced, fortified herself with a large gulp of Gillywater. 'Well...'. she said finally. 'Well, I-er... Are you able to see auras at all?'

'If I try hard. Why? What does that have to do with anything?'

'That morning at Grimmauld Place when we... found out about them. Remember?' She glanced at Minerva seeking confirmation. 'Yes, of course you do.'

'Molly...'

'But you obviously didn't see what I did,' Molly added. 'So much love... Their auras were dancing, Minerva: their hearts joined, their heads crowned with golden light.'

'You saw all that?' Minerva asked, intrigued. The portraits, too, had stilled and were listening intently. 'A blessing, eh...?'

Hmm... So, what exactly does that entail?'

'It means,' Molly replied, 'that they have seen into each other's souls. And before you ask, I know this because it happened to Arthur and me...the first time we, um...*And*

I'll tell you another thing: as a result of it, nothing and no one can come between them. It's like... finding a missing piece of yourself. So, as well as being despicable, binding Hermione was totally unnecessary: there can be nobody else for either of them.'

Minerva shook her head slowly. This could not be good. From what she knew of the nature of binding rings in general and Severus' personality in particular, she was unsure if this 'Blessing' of Molly's wouldn't turn out to be more of a curse: such intensity of feeling was wont to be self-destructive where passions ran high, particularly when emotions such as jealousy and possessiveness were added to the mix...and Merlin only knew that Severus had more than his fair share of both of those. But ultimately, it made little difference: Hermione's fate was sealed. She was beyond their protection. *Oh, if only she had been Named...*

'Hello?' Two heads turned in the direction of the voice. 'Professor McGonagall? Is Mum there?'

'She is indeed, Miss Weasley,' Minerva replied. 'The Floo is open. You may come through.'

The flames burned green, and a beaming Ginny stooped from under the mantelpiece and into the study. Straightening up, she brushed the soot off her robe and exclaimed, 'Hermione's asked me to be her bridesmaid! Isn't it exciting?' She glanced between her mother and Headmistress, but with no confirming smiles and an atmosphere you could cut with a knife, Ginny's own smile quickly faded. 'Mum? Professor McGonagall? Is something wrong?'

'Are Severus and Hermione still there?' Molly asked.

'No, they left a few minutes ago...' Ginny's eyebrows rose as she spotted the goblet in her mother's hand. 'Said they were going to Apparate to Hogsmeade, seeing it was such a nice afternoon, and walk back. Now, are you going to tell me what's up? You don't normally drink after lunch.'

Molly sighed. 'It's not every day a Slytherin *snake* ruins the life of someone I hold dear, either.'

'Mum?'

'Miss Weasley... Ginevra,' Minerva interrupted. 'Your mother and I have had a rather... unpleasant surprise.' A second chair skittered across the room as Minerva invited Ginny to sit down. 'Tell me, do you know anything of binding rings, my dear?'

'Not much,' Ginny admitted, looking puzzled. 'Why? They were outlawed years ago, weren't they?'

'The creation of new ones, yes,' Minerva agreed, nodding. 'But certain pureblood families fought hard to keep any already in their possession...'

'Although, there were just as many families who ended up selling theirs,' Molly butted in, 'to parts of the world where their use is still perfectly acceptable, you know. Even now, the goblins would be only too happy to buy back any that are left and sell them on at a profit. They fetch a pretty penny, too.'

'Quite,' Minerva agreed. 'And the use of those rings that have not been disposed of is also perfectly legal here...provided the witch consents to the binding.' She watched the look of puzzlement on Ginny's face turn to one of understanding and horror as realisation began to dawn. 'Unsurprisingly, few do.'

'Hermione?' Ginny whispered. 'No... She wouldn't consent...Why would anyone consent to such a thing?'

'Because the alternative was often far worse.'

Swivelling around, Minerva craned her neck to look at the speaker above and behind her. 'Thank you for reminding us, Dilys. It's easy to forget what life was often like for young pureblood witches just a few generations back.'

Molly hummed in agreement, but seeing her daughter's disbelieving expression added, 'It was the lesser of two evils, you see, dear...a... kindness, almost, in a time when preserving the bloodlines was more important than anything to a family...and the Prewetts and Weasleys were no exception to this way of thinking...Don't snort like that, Ginny. It's most unladylike.' Molly took a deep breath, sweeping her hand around the room. 'There was a limited choice of partner as well, remember: we're all related some way or another, so you had to be careful who you picked for obvious reasons. Love was a luxury we could rarely afford, yet every witch knew it was her duty to marry and produce offspring to keep the numbers up, as it were.' Ginny still looked unconvinced, so she tried another tack. 'Try to imagine, dear: Your father and I have arranged for you to marry someone much older, who you don't find the least bit attractive, but who you'll marry, anyway, for your family's honour. Your only choice is to endure his... attentions with loathing, or to bind yourself to him with a ring that will at least bring you contentment in the long years you'll have to spend together as well as create a stable home life for any children you may have.'

'Doesn't sound like much of choice to me,' said Ginny, grimacing. 'Although, you make it sound like you approve.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Molly snapped. 'My grandmother had to marry a man thirty years her senior, and I saw what it did to her!'

'Granny Prewett? She was as nutty as a fruitcake.'

'After Grampa died, yes, you're right. She was...' Molly's features softened as some long forgotten memory surfaced. 'I remember a warm, gracious lady who indulged me terribly as a child. But how much of that behaviour was influenced by her binding ring, we'll never know. Once she was free of it, her mind couldn't cope...having been told what to do and think for most of her life, she was incapable of making a the simplest of decisions... Yes, it was all very sad.'

'You're saying that's what Hermione has to look forward to?' Ginny cried. 'But that's horrible!' She looked imploringly at Minerva. 'Please, you've got to do something.'

'I'm afraid our hands are tied, Ginevra,' Minerva said gently. 'But I do know it's not Professor Snape's intention to impinge on Hermione's free will; he gave me his word on that, for what it's worth.'

'Which is absolutely nothing,' Molly's voice was cold. 'Even if he's strong enough to resist the temptation, which I doubt, the ring will work its influence on a more subtle level. No two rings are the same, Ginny, but they all have one objective: to create harmony between two incompatible individuals...and always at the woman's expense. Over time, you'll see Hermione become more docile, slow to anger, less argumentative. She'll put Severus' needs and desires above her own, never wanting to stray far from his side for long...so she can forget a career overseas. In short, one way or another, Hermione will be moulded into the 'perfect' wife...for Severus.' She reached for Ginny's hand and squeezed it. 'I'm sorry, I know it's hard, love, but you need to accept that we can do nothing for her... Oh, Merlin, if only she'd been Named.'

The room seemed to hold its breath. 'Molly,' Minerva said sharply. 'Watch your tongue.'

Ginny barely noticed the silent interchange that followed between her mother and Headmistress. She slumped back in her chair, lost in thought. 'What difference would that have made?' she asked eventually. 'No, please, Professor,' she added as Minerva tried to shush her. 'It might be important.'

'Hmm...' Not one for indulging teenage whims if she could help it, Minerva nevertheless found her curiosity tickled by Ginny's pleading look. 'Very well...' Her chair gave a protesting creak as she twisted around to face the wall behind her once more. 'Dilys, would you mind doing the honours?'

'Not at all.' Clearing her throat, Dilys addressed her fellow heads: 'Gentlemen, your presence is no longer required.'

The three witches waited patiently until the grumbling, shuffling procession of former Headmasters had left the comfort of their frames and then, at Minerva's invitation, the ladies that were left congregated in the painting adjacent to the fireplace recently vacated by Albus Dumbledore.

'Just so we're clear,' said Minerva, 'I'm invoking the sanctity of the Circle.'

'You're a Guardian? Like Mum?' Ginevra asked in awe.

Minerva inclined her head, neither confirming or denying it. 'Now, Ginevra... daughter of Molly, I shall answer your earlier question with a question: How did you feel the first time you declared your name before your sisters?'

'Powerful,' Ginny answered without hesitation. 'I think it was the first time I felt like a proper witch.'

That earned her a smile. 'Quite. Names are powerful things. Some cultures believe that by revealing your true name, you give away part of yourself, so you never do, for fear of granting others power over you. Now, as you learned at your Naming...' Minerva glanced at Molly, who nodded... 'the custom of taking our mothers' name goes back centuries...to our very beginnings, it is said. Even when we lived amongst Muggles and adopted their conventions in order to blend in...taking our fathers' or husbands' names in public...we kept up the practice because it was believed our magic would be diminished otherwise.'

'By surrendering our power to the wizards...' Ginny murmured.

'Exactly. Give up your name; give up your identity.' It seemed she had been paying attention for once. 'Our true names forge a link in a chain down the maternal line that cannot be broken. Your name is, in essence, who you are; once given, it cannot be taken away. Not by a wizard, and certainly not by any ring, which is why no binding can be effective without the witch's consent. If Hermione had been tricked into this... betrothal, and she had been Named, she could never have been forced to submit, but as things stand...' Minerva shrugged.

'I thought so,' Ginny said, looking at her hands. 'But what if...? What if Hermione's name meant as much to her? Enough that she'd decided to keep it...and had it written into the betrothal contract? Would that protect her?'

Molly and Minerva exchanged glances. 'Her *father's* name?' Molly asked. 'I don't know... Could it be enough? What do you think, Minerva?'

'It's not the same,' Minerva decided after some deliberation. 'But then, if she considers it a part of her identity... Ginny, are you sure Severus agreed to this?'

'Positive,' replied Ginny firmly. 'Hermione told me all about it...how she'd been nervous about broaching the subject, and how Sev...I mean, Professor Snape...hadn't understood at first. But then she explained how she felt she owed it to her parents to make her mark in the world under her 'own' name, and he was fine about it.'

'Well, it's not ideal,' said Minerva, frowning. 'But if Hermione attaches that much importance to it...and, after all, it's the only name she's ever known...she might have a fighting chance.'

'There'll be a fight, sure enough, if that's the case,' Molly said drily. 'A right battle of wills, if I'm not mistaken.'

Minerva paled visibly. 'It could make matters worse, do you think? If Hermione does not bend, she might break?'

'Mum? Is that true?'

'We must face the possibility...Oh, Ginny love, don't cry.' Molly hastily conjured a handkerchief for her daughter who took it gratefully. 'At least we have hope now, but you must realise, if that ring encounters any resistance, there's no telling what tricks it might resort to.'

Ginny sniffed. 'So we just have to wait and hope Hermione's strong enough to beat it? Oh, it's *saunder* after all we've been through...and what am I going to tell Harry? He's going to kill him when he finds out.'

'You must try to be circumspect unless you want to see Mr Potter in Azkaban...or Hermione disappear from all our lives if he's unsuccessful,' Minerva answered without a trace of humour. 'So... romanticise it a little. Say... Hermione wanted to-to make a grand gesture, to show the world how much she loved him by binding herself forever, or some such foolery. And remember, she's going to need her friends more than ever; I'm afraid it may fall to you to ensure there is peace between the three of them. But whatever happens, Ginny, please be there for her.'

In the ensuing silence, Minerva observed Ginny wilfully struggle with the tears that were turning her cheeks a blotchy red. Perhaps they were demanding too much of someone so young to carry on as if everything was normal. One thing was sure, though, the girl needed something positive to focus on. 'Now, now,' she said briskly. 'I know it's upsetting, but we need to decide what, if anything, we can do to support her in the meantime. So... Is there anything else you can tell us? Something Hermione said to you, hm? About the contract, perhaps?'

'Not much else, I don't think,' Ginny replied, shaking her head slowly. 'We talked a bit about the wedding, of course... She asked me... Oh, they're going to have a wizarding wedding. Hermione wanted to know if they were all like Fleur's and Bill's, and I said there were all sorts of different traditions. That's about it, really.'

'Hmm,' said Molly. 'Are they, indeed. Well, Hermione may not be my daughter, but I consider her one of my own...and if only for her parents' sake, the least I can do is to see her decently married after this fiasco...'

'You mustn't blame yourself, Molly. You couldn't have known.'

'No, I know, but I can't help feeling it wouldn't have happened if I'd taken time to explain to her some of the pitfalls of being a young, attractive witch.' Molly gazed at Ginny fondly and cast a cooling charm on her tear-stained face. 'But as I was saying, Hermione is like a daughter to me, and as such, she will be married from my hearth as one of my line with me standing beside her.'

The vision of a full-scale, Weasley family wedding with all the trimmings flashed through Minerva's mind. 'Severus might have something to say about that.'

'Is it or is it not the prerogative of the bride's family to decide the proceedings?'

'Yes, but...'

'I want Severus to realise Hermione is not alone,' Molly carried on regardless, 'and that she has the full backing of my family, which he'd better not cross if he knows what's good for him.'

'Sisters, sisters, you're all forgetting something.'

Three heads turned towards the speaker in surprise. 'Love,' said Dilys Derwent. 'You're forgetting the power of love.'

'With all due respect, Professor Derwent,' said Ginny, 'we know Hermione and Professor Snape love one another.'

'I didn't mean that,' said Dilys. 'I meant the love you all have for her.'

They stared at her blankly.

'Time and time again when I was working at St Mungo's,' Dilys continued with a smile, 'I saw its healing effects: protection spells cast by mothers on their children, husbands taking comfort from the touch of their wives, blessings and prayers for the dying. Those with loved ones at their sides always fared better than those who did not; sometimes there were miraculous recoveries... You should not discount it.'

'Protection spells...?' Molly said, glancing at Minerva. 'I wonder... It's not much, but every little helps.'

'Yes...' Minerva agreed. 'I don't see why not. And... if Hermione could be persuaded, we might arrange a *arold-fashioned* wizarding wedding for her, if you get my drift.'

'You're reading my mind,' said Molly, with a wicked smirk.

Ginny started to giggle. 'You're talking about the ancient rites, aren't you?'

'Yes. What's so funny?'

'Old-fashioned isn't the word,' replied Ginny, still grinning. 'I can't see Hermione buying it, somehow. Though I'd love to see Professor Snape in his wedding raiment, barefoot with a wreath around his head and all.'

Minerva had to cover her mouth as she'd been thinking much the same thing. 'But as a Muggle-born, don't you think she might find its symbolism appealing? Vows taken in a sacred grove before a representative of the Goddess...in this case me...with no artifice allowed? Just two people declaring their love for each another? The ceremony is simple and, in my opinion, quite beautiful. Right up Hermione's street, I'd have thought.'

'The ceremony, maybe,' Ginny agreed, 'but the bridal raiment...?'

'A minor detail,' said Molly with a dismissive wave. 'I shall explain its significance and why generations of our family chose to wear it. When she takes her vows, she will be surrounded by all the love and blessings woven into its very fabric by every mother who's dressed her daughter in it on her wedding day. And we'll add some more, of course.'

'I'd better not call it the family shroud in her presence, then.'

Molly gave her daughter a withering look. 'No, you'd better not. In fact, I'm counting on you to back me up.'

'Oh, all right, I'll do my best to persuade her,' Ginny said, 'on condition that you don't try to make me wear the thing when my turn comes.'

Minerva choked back a laugh. 'That's a start, but before we go casting spells willy-nilly, I wonder if it would be possible to attach some protection to a personal item...some sort of gift from one of us, perhaps? Something Hermione would treasure...'

'What about her locket?' Ginny offered. 'If we could get our hands on it, that is. She never takes it off.'

'She shall,' said Minerva. 'On her wedding day.'

The other two nodded sagely. They could easily manage that.

They fell into a thoughtful silence; Minerva took the opportunity to down the last of her Gillywater. Their spirits had risen noticeably, but there was still a nagging suspicion on her part that they were clutching at straws. 'I think...' she said slowly, 'if you're both in agreement, I'd like to propose we bring in Septima Vector. Her expertise may be just what we need at this point. To ensure our actions won't make matters worse in the long run and to give us a hint as to the timescale involved.'

'I think that's an excellent idea, Minerva,' said Molly. Ginny, too, quickly agreed.

'Then I'll send for her. Luckily for us, she's spending the holidays in the castle.' She turned to her fellow headmistresses, but one of their number had already gone scuttling off to look for the Arithmancy mistress.

'There's no need for you to hang around for Professor Vector, Ginevra,' Minerva said, rising from her chair. 'She may not be able to do the calculations here and now, in any case. You'll find the Floo powder on the shelf next to the mantlepiece, my dear.'

Recognising a dismissal when she saw one, Ginny didn't stop to argue the point. But as she was about to throw the powder into the grate, she paused: 'Mum, what happened to Granny Prewett's ring?'

'I keep it in a special vault at Gringotts,' Molly replied without hesitation. 'Not even your dad knows about it, and once you're safely married, I'll give you the key. It'll then be up to you what you do with it.'

'Destroy it,' Ginny said, the fire burning green behind her as she dropped the powder. 'I won't be responsible for ruining the life of some other poor woman.' And then she was gone.

'Little Ginny is turning into a sensible young witch,' Minerva said, attending to a stray cinder that had landed on the hearth rug.

'Had to grow up too fast, too soon,' said Molly. 'But then, haven't they all, that generation?'

'Indeed,' Minerva replied. 'Indeed. Which brings me back to Hermione...' This next part was not going to be easy, but there was no way of avoiding it. Minerva trailed her fingers along the edge of her desk, playing for time, before she dropped the bombshell. 'Molly, you need to know... In order for Septima's calculations to be as precise as possible, I will have to reveal a long held confidence, for which, under the circumstances, I do not feel the least shred of guilt.'

'I assume you're talking about Severus,' said Molly.

Guilt ridden or not, it was still hard for her to speak of it. Minerva had never wanted more to assume her Animagus alter-ego and turn her back on humanity. She needed to move in order to breathe: to chase, to pounce, to dig her claws into something fleshy...preferable the tender parts of a certain wizard. But it would have to wait. 'You assume correctly.'

A window latch, rattling in the breeze, provided a welcome distraction. She walked over to it slowly. 'You said the ring would use any means possible to bend Hermione to Severus' will,' Minerva began, giving the handle a firm tug. 'I would have thought the most effective way of doing that would be to go through Severus himself...' Her eyes were drawn downwards, towards the far end of the drive where she'd spotted two cloaked figures passing through the main gate. The expected shiver ran through her as the wards shifted to admit them. She paused, watching, as the taller of the two locked the gate behind him, the smaller touching his arm and pointing towards the Quidditch pitch. Steeling herself, Minerva turned to face Molly.

'When I took over the leadership of the Order,' Minerva began, 'and once we'd discovered that Severus was spying for us, I had regular meetings with Alastor Moody to discuss any intelligence that had been passed on. Alastor, as you can imagine, took his duties as Severus' 'handler' very seriously.'

'Constant vigilance,' Molly murmured.

'Quite so. Alastor being Alastor never fully trusted him, and by the time I knew about the spying, he'd compiled quite a dossier on Severus' comings and goings.' Minerva paused, remembering her shock at the contents. 'They say you can never truly know anyone, Molly, and... well, it turned out Severus was a valued customer at a... how can I put it, a... house of *correction*.' Minerva hoped that her emphasis would be enough for Molly to grasp her meaning so that she'd be spared the embarrassment of elaborating further. By the look on her face, however, Molly obviously hadn't the faintest clue what she was on about. 'Molly,' Minerva tried again, 'Severus was, and quite possibly still is... Oh, dear, this is so difficult. Severus has a... how can I put it... a *penchant* for whips and chains.'

* * *

Oh, not today. Hermione grimaced, clutching her side as the first tell-tale signs of an imminent period made their presence felt. 'Thanks for indulging me,' she puffed, glancing back. 'I really wanted to see this before the official dedication.' And a few inconvenient cramps and twinges weren't about to put her off...even if the slope did seem a lot steeper than usual.

'It is quite understandable,' said Severus, following close behind. 'Watch your step; we're almost at the barrier.'

Hermione felt the tingle of magical wards as they drew closer, along with the overwhelming feeling that the Transfiguration essay she'd been assigned for the holidays needed to be started right this minute. Severus' steadying grip on her elbow was the only thing that stopped her from sprinting back to the castle.

'Just take a deep breath and push through.' Still holding on, Severus stepped over the invisible line with Hermione in tow. The Disillusionment spell wobbled and then dissipated, revealing what Hermione had come to see: The Field of the Fallen.

The quiet, understated dignity of the white markers brought Hermione up short. She glanced about her, tears prickling in the corner of her eyes, searching for the one stone she really wanted to see. 'Oh... I had no idea...'

'Come,' said Severus, reaching for her hand. 'I wish to inspect the obelisk.'

Silently, Hermione and Severus covered the last few yards to what had been the epicentre of the battle, Hermione looking about her, remembering, as they went, Severus staring straight ahead, eyes fixed on his goal.

'I hope people won't see this as a monument to Voldemort,' Hermione remarked as they reached the black marble marker. 'Or attract, um, former admirers.'

'Indeed not.' Severus drew his wand and gave the obelisk the once over for any evidence of hidden marks or sigils. Old habits died hard. 'It is fortunate that the memorial to the war dead is on school property. I imagine Minerva will have already taken such an unpleasant prospect into consideration.'

Hermione nodded, walking around the stone to get her bearings. 'I was standing just about... here,' she said. 'It's funny. Things seem a lot closer together than I remember. Must be the daylight, I suppose.'

'It seemed to me like I'd traversed half of Scotland by the time I got here,' Severus said with the tiniest hint of a smirk.

'You looked like it, too.' Hermione grinned back, but quickly sobered. 'And I was never more glad to see anyone in my life, even though... you didn't look particularly pleased to see me.'

Severus quirked an eyebrow, his own memories of that dreadful night tumbling around in his head. 'Actually, my first thought when I saw you in the midst of all that chaos was to throw you over my shoulder and carry you off to safety. It took all of my willpower, standing behind you while Potter faced that...!' He jabbed a finger at the obelisk. '...monster, not to do just that.' The air around him crackled as anger crept into Severus' voice, but a few calming breaths saw it dissipate just as quickly. For a moment, he stared at the ground, and when he spoke again, his voice was so soft Hermione almost missed it. 'So, no, I was not pleased to see you, but not for the reasons you imagined.'

A sharp gust of wind from the east made Hermione shiver in spite of the weak spring sunshine. She gave Severus a wry smile as she gathered her cloak more tightly about her and gazed into the distance, watching an eagle circling high above the craggy mountains. It was a hard, pitiless landscape beyond the relative safety of Hogwarts' grounds: ancient, unyielding, indifferent to the plight of humans, Muggle and wizard alike. Their skirmishes were as nothing to the silent gaze of those eternal peaks. A mere blink of an eye: not worthy of a measly footnote in their history. And all too soon, the only evidence that a battle had ever taken place on this insignificant patch of earth would be a few mossy stones and the memories of the survivors. Hermione suddenly felt very old.

'Pointless... All so utterly... pointless...'

Severus closed the short distance between them so fast that Hermione took a reflexive step backwards as he entered her personal space. He loomed over her, eyes blazing. 'Are you implying that my...that *their* sacrifice...all that was for *nothing*?'

'No, of course not.' Hermione huffed, pushing her wind-strewn hair from her face as she recovered her composure. 'Don't be angry. I'm sorry. That's not what I meant at all.' Hesitantly, she placed the palm of her hand against Severus' chest, but his countenance remained fixed, demanding she expound on her opinion. 'What I meant was... Is anything ever learnt from these conflicts? Voldemort followed on the heels of Grindelwald pretty quickly, didn't he? People died then, and it changed nothing. What's to say the next Dark wizard isn't already waiting in the wings, planning to take over the wizarding world as soon as he gets the chance? It just seems to me that... we're in the middle of some kind of unbreakable cycle, that's all.' She bowed her head, willing for him to understand. 'So many good people lost their lives or loved ones, Severus. I can't help thinking it was all such a waste.'

'Do you? I'm afraid I must disagree.'

Severus moved again with lightning speed, seizing Hermione by the waist and spinning her around so she was flush against his body. She squealed in surprise, her feet lifting off the ground as, in one smooth movement, Severus whirled to face the castle.

'Oww. What are you doing?' Dangling in mid-air, Hermione wrestled to regain her footing, but Severus' arms were like a steel girdle, pinning her in place. She soon realised there was little point in struggling.

'Tell me,' he said, slowly and deliberately. 'What do you see?'

'I see Hogwarts, the lake, some stones and a lot of grass,' Hermione replied crossly. 'Now, put me down!'

His grip relaxed slightly, allowing Hermione to slither down until her feet made contact with the grass. 'And if we had lost,' Severus persisted, 'and assuming Voldemort had not closed Hogwarts completely, do you think you, or any other Muggle-born, would have been allowed to attend?'

'I suppose not,' she mumbled.

'No, and you most probably would not have survived for very long *in his* version of a perfect wizarding world...' The back of one hand sneaked up Hermione's side until it found the outward swell of her breast. '... Would you, hmm?' It turned to cup its prize gently. 'Which really *would* have been a waste, don't you think?'

'Severus... not here...'

'Everyone who was present that night...Order members, Death Eaters, your... Mr Weasley...knew the risks and fought for what they believed in despite the odds.' Severus fingers insinuated themselves inside Hermione's cloak and took up their former positions despite her half-hearted attempts at stopping them. 'It was their choice to stay and fight, was it not?'

'Yes... I understand, but...oh, don't...'

'Hush...' Severus whispered. 'Now. Close your eyes and tell me what you feel.'

'W-what?' She bit back a moan. 'I'd have thought that was-uh obvious.'

'Indulge me.'

'We-ll, I can feel... the wind. On my face... Your body against me... Your hand on my... breast.'

'Ye-ess, but that was not quite what I meant.' Severus' breath was like molten chocolate against her neck, and she couldn't help but shudder at his touch. 'It would appear further... stimulus is required in order for you to fully appreciate my point.'

Hermione felt the rush of cold air against her skin before her brain caught up with the result of Severus' wandless spell. Her eyes flew open:

'Have you lost your MIND!' she yelled, gazing down in horror at her robe, neatly slit to just below the waist, and her underwear, lying discarded at her feet.

Severus chuckled softly. 'No one can see us. *Nowfeel!*'

'I'm bloody, nobblingly *cold*,' Hermione snapped. 'This isn't funny, Severus.'

'It's not meant to be, my sweet.' He tweaked a nipple playfully. 'Beautiful, and so responsive, too. Though, with this wind, I cannot claim all the credit for it.' Releasing her waist, Severus' other hand strayed inside her robe, making ever-so-slow, lazy circles around her belly. 'Are you beginning to sense the purpose of this exercise, yet?'

Hermione gave a throaty sigh, closed her eyes once more and arched into his touch. There didn't seem much point in objecting, despite the inappropriateness of the location, and his hands were doing rather marvellous things. She decided to humour him. 'It feels... good,' she said at last.

'A little more specific, if you please,' Severus crooned, his hand dipping lower to tease her pubes. 'Describe the sensations in... detail.'

Hermione's mind was drifting off as the pleasure his fingers were exacting began to fog her reasoning. What was he getting at? What did he want her to say? A moan escaped as a delicious shiver ran down her spine, and something deep within clenched in response to his maddeningly delicate caresses. Maybe that was it.

'O-kaa...' she ventured. 'I feel... my heart rate increasing... blood pounding in my ears, and I feel... feel... achy a-and... empty...'

'Ah... Very good.' Severus' movements ceased abruptly. 'Which has resulted in this delightful... wetness. Look.'

Hermione lifted drowsy eyelids as Severus brought glossy fingers into her line of vision. Why had he stopped? Was he trying to drive her to insanity?

'This tells me,' Severus murmured, ignoring Hermione's groan of frustration, 'that your body is ready and willing to receive me, and in case you are in any doubt, I am more than ready to accommodate it. Now, open your mouth...'

Hermione obeyed, sucking greedily on Severus' fingers. Groaning, he sank to his knees, giving Hermione no option but to follow him down. She didn't object to him manoeuvring her onto all fours on the cold, damp ground or to the hurried way he rearranged their clothing or even to his hard and forceful entry. It was only when he stilled inside her that she gave him a questioning look over her shoulder. With a smirk, Severus grabbed her hips, pulling her back towards him so she was straddling his knees. He quickly undid the clasps of Hermione's cloak, yanked the ruined robe over her shoulders to gain better access to her neck and returned his hands to her now fully exposed breasts. Massaging them gently, he swallowed hard.

'Feel *that*?

'Oh, yes.' How could she not? His cock flexed inside her, hard and eager, filling her as only he could, but more than that, Hermione could sense the underlying tension in Severus' body as he fought to maintain control. The stillness was killing her; she desperately needed to move, to break that control, but he wasn't having any of it.

'Let me tell you what I... feel,' he rasped between clenched teeth. 'I can feel muscles clenching, ready to milk me dry... Heat, wetness, your womb primed to receive my seed. I feel *alive*, Hermione. We survived. Together we will go on...forge a world the others would have been proud to be a part of...for ourselves and for our... children...'
Without warning, Severus tipped Hermione off his lap and quickly stood. 'Lesson over,' he said, offering a hand to help her up. 'It is much too cold to continue this here.'

'Wha...?' The look Hermione gave him could have frozen a volcano, but she reached for the proffered hand, anyway, allowing Severus to haul her to her feet.

Her scowl had little effect on Severus, who merely appeared amused, indulgent even, at her show of annoyance, which only incensed Hermione further. 'Don't look at me like that,' he said, drawing his reluctant fiancée into his arms and giving her a quick peck on the forehead. 'You set my blood afire, woman; I want to lavish all the attention on you that you so richly deserve...in the sanctity of our... own... mmm... Bed. So, if you wish to continue this, I suggest you hurry back to our rooms and wait for me there. I will return presently.'

Just like that? Hermione pushed away from him, still miffed, repaired her robe and stooped to gather up her underwear. Did he honestly think he could get away with leaving her high and dry like that? 'I'll see you later, then,' she said coolly, turning to go. 'I have something I need to attend to first.'

'Hermione...'

'What?'

Severus held out his hand. 'Knickers...if you please...'

Hermione paused before wordlessly handing over her knickers, though she was blushing furiously as she did so. It had been a while since they'd played *that* particular game.

'And don't keep me waiting *too* long.'

Her mouth opened, then clammed shut again. Quickly, she turned away, scurrying off down the hill without further comment, red-faced and flustered. She didn't dare look back; he was probably laughing his head off, the git, but she wasn't about to just cave in and let him have it all his own way. She'd return to his chambers when she was good and ready.

It never occurred to her that she was taking the most direct route back to the castle; neither did she question why she was running nor did she spare a glance for the stone she leapt over in her haste...the one she'd come here especially to see. Ron's marker might just as well have been invisible; it lay unnoticed, forgotten, as were all thoughts of Ron himself.

Severus watched as Hermione ran, occasionally slipping and sliding on the damp grass...almost falling once or twice...until she was well beyond the barrier and almost out of sight. Only then did he contemplate the skimpy garment he was holding, savouring the moment before bringing it up to his nose and inhaling. *Mmm... scent of Hermione...* Chuckling to himself, Severus let his hand drop, using the knickers like a hanky to wipe off the mess on his still semi-hard cock.

Blood...?

Well, that certainly explained the grumpiness. And, knowing Hermione, she was going to be a fiend for chocolate over the next few days, too, so ordering some extra helpings of her favourite pudding from the kitchens mightn't be a bad idea...

Hopefully, there will be no need of it next month.

Severus snorted. 'No children. Not for the foreseeable future...'

A child would soon curb that willful temper, and besides, you're not getting any younger. Do you want to be tripping over toddlers in your fifties?

The comment barely scratched his consciousness, a more pressing need he'd been astutely ignoring...the inevitable outcome of the Weasleys' hospitality...could no longer be denied. Molly's cooking had been plaguing his digestion since they'd arrived at the gates, and with no means of relieving himself, he'd had to grin and bear it. It was all

Arthur's fault, of course, insisting they celebrate the occasion properly with the consumption of a copious amount of (it had to be said, rather excellent) elf-made wine on top of one of Molly's rib-sticking Sunday lunches.

...or teenage tantrums in your sixties?

He shuddered. The very idea.... Still, plenty of time for that, but right now, he had the increasingly persistent discomfort of an over-stuffed stomach and a full bladder to contend with... Severus grinned evilly, glancing around to make absolutely sure he was alone, and strolled over to the obelisk.

'Well... How the mighty have fallen...!' He bowed mockingly at the small monument before adjusting his dress and taking up a comfortable stance. 'I must confess, mylord, that I shall relish this...' With a sigh that could only come from the contentment of release, Severus took aim. The jet of urine splashed against the black marble, steam rising into the air. It could all have ended just as easily for him here, Severus mused as he christened the obelisk, his life's purpose summed up by some nameless stone. Few people would've put money on him surviving with the crap odds he'd had, at any rate. But he was still very much alive, free of not one but two masters, and by some miracle betrothed to an eager young witch destined to warm his bed for the rest of his days.

Life, he thought, shaking the drips, doesn't get much better than this.