

# Redivivus

*by ayerf*

Hermione Granger starts her sixth year at Hogwarts with a crash.

## Prologue

*Chapter 1 of 25*

Hermione Granger starts her sixth year at Hogwarts with a crash.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter (or any of the other characters). J K Rowling does. Nor am I making so much as a Knut out of this.

AN: While the plot is based on the Half-Blood Prince (in that you will find Scrimgeour has replaced Fudge as Minister for Magic, Slughorn has been shoe horned out of retirement and Snape will get his coveted position as DADA teacher and his Half-blood heritage, but the differences are that the Horcruxes are a rather disgusting form of cocktail, and Dumbledore is whole and unharmed other than a hang over sufficient to keep him from trying strange cocktails for the rest of his life), this is not Book Six rewritten, as the aforementioned just forms the framework, allowing the poor ickle firstie author (namely me) a more manageable plot and the ability to skip the majority of the day to day events description. Following canon completely would just not work with the plot, and seeing as the pairing favoured herein is hardly canon either...

Title translates as 'come back to life'.

Thanks to LadySunflower for betaing this for me.

Prologue

It is said that the shortest time known to man is the time it takes for a taxi driver to start thumping the horn while 'encouraging' the car in front to go after the traffic lights turn green. Hermione Granger agreed wholeheartedly with this aforementioned theory, although it was quite possibly rivalled by how quickly it took for Ron Weasley to fill his plate and start eating.

Hermione rubbed at her temples as the car behind her (a lurid pink taxi) honked long and loud, the driver impatient in the few seconds it took for her father to release the handbrake and drive off from the busy junction. They were on the way to King's Cross for Hermione to travel to Hogwarts for her sixth year there. Driving in London was no picnic and even more stressful when one was running dangerously late for the Hogwarts Express. Even worse was that it was raining heavily.

"We'll get there, dear. Even if we get stuck in a queue for the rest of the day, I daresay your Headmaster would arrange an alternative method for the brightest witch in a..." Helen Granger was saying, looking back at her only child with a wry smile on her pretty face. Hermione often thought that she'd inherited her father's looks and her mother's intellect, but the truth was that it was a combination of both.

She cut her mother off impatiently, having heard it all before. "Yes, Mum, I know. 'Brightest witch of your year' and 'cleverest witch your age'. I've heard it all before. It only causes me trouble. No one likes an 'insufferable know-it-all' but other know-it-alls and dunderheads who need assistance." Hermione's lips twisted as she suppressed a smile at the category she'd just slipped her best friends into.

"Mione, you should be proud. Your hoot results were off the scale." Alan Granger put his opinion in, meeting his disgruntled daughter's eyes in the rear view mirror before returning his eyes to the road.

"O.W.L. results, Dad." Hermione corrected, rolling her eyes. Her parents were just as off with their grasp of Wizarding world terminology as Arthur Weasley was of the Muggle side.

She worried her lower lip, a frown pinching her features as her thoughts returned to the real reason why she was so dismissive of her stellar results. With Voldemort and far too many of his Death Eaters on the loose, she and her family were in enough danger already from her mere existence as a Muggle-born. Add to that the fact that she was outshining every single pureblood - not only in her year, but in a century - with her academic achievements, and she might as well start the funeral arrangements already. But just as she couldn't intentionally do badly, it was not possible to keep herself from noticing that she'd made the potentially fatal mistake of becoming close friends with Harry Potter in her first year at Hogwarts. Not that she'd change anything, because it was better to have friends that were dangerous to know than to have no friends at all.

A source of comfort was a much-read letter currently folded in her pocket, which she dug out (while absently thanking her lucky stars that she'd never been susceptible to travel sickness) and read for the umpteenth time.

"What's that? Not another letter from that Crumble boy, I hope!" her mother said sharply, her disapproval obvious in her voice. Her father's grip on the steering wheel tightened to the extent that his fingers went white. Neither of her parents approved, anymore than Ron did, of her friendship with Viktor Krum on the premise that he was too old for her. Regardless of the fact that she'd soon be of age in the Wizarding world, even without the additional few months the Time Turner usage in her third year had added to her age.

Hermione flushed, fingers wrinkling the parchment as her hands clutched unconsciously. "Er... yes. But it is a week old! I was just going to reread it. Viktor's only three years older than me," she said, trying yet again to justify her actions of two years ago.

"He's from foreign parts! And a wizard! I wish you'd date a nice, normal boy."

Hermione looked away from her mother's indignant, reproachful face, feigning interest in the rain-blurred view of traffic moving alongside, headlights and brake lights standing out. This was perhaps the largest point of contention: that while her parents were supportive of her magical education, they still wanted her to have a relationship with a boy they were guaranteed to approve of: namely one who couldn't turn them into frogs.

"I'm not dating Viktor; he's just a friend. And I'm not interested in boys my own age, they're far too immature," Hermione gritted out the oft repeated statement from between clenched teeth. She could already feel a tension headache coming on and rubbed harder at her temples. She grimaced at the thought of what her parents would think if they knew that Viktor hadn't actually written since she'd refused his last invitation to visit him in Bulgaria over six months previous. Her prized letter, and earlier correspondence, actually came from a source almost twenty years older than her.

"Hermione, you're still doing that wrong. Let me." Her perfectionist mother reached back to massage her daughter's temples, chasing the encroaching headache away with practised fingers. She was turning back to face the road when a puzzled, concerned frown creased her forehead in response to the expression that had just frozen her daughter's appealing features into a horrified mask, her wide eyes fixed on something on the road ahead.

Mr. Granger slammed on the brakes with a squeal of stressed rubber, a muttered expletive escaping his lips. The sudden jerk that followed as their car began to abruptly stop stole the breath of the occupants of the car as they were slammed against their seat belts. What followed was both too fast for Hermione to grasp and agonisingly slow for her to remember clearly in her nightmares.

There was a blinding flash, a scream of stressed metal and a sickening crunch only dimly heard over the overpowering bang of failing airbags and crack of shattering glass. Some absurdly calm part of her realised that the cause of this confusing cacophony was a head-on collision with a speeding car. That same part of her registered that the entire car had flipped over, wheels spinning to a stop in midair.

Bright red sticky fluid pooled on the inside of the car roof above her, now dented almost beyond recognition. It clung to her hair that now dangled down into it. Hermione absently reached over and touched it, sharp sparks of pain dancing across her awareness. 'Blood.' A lot of it, slowly trickling down, pooling everywhere in her fading vision. She choked on rising bile at the sight before her.

Hermione struggled to remain conscious as her brain finally registered the pain of her many small cuts, bruises and other relatively minor injuries, her mind screaming for her parents and Crookshanks, who had been sulking in his cage on the seat beside her. Despair filled her as her brilliant mind acknowledged that very little of the blood before her was her own. From somewhere far away she heard a horrible mixture between choking, coughing and sobbing. When hot tears began to splash down into the ever growing pool of blood, she realised that the sounds came from her, together with calls for her beloved parents and familiar. There was no answer but the wail of nearing sirens.

Wisps of acrid black smoke crept around the edges of her vision, clawing their way down her throat as she inevitably inhaled them. It was becoming harder to breathe, her lungs burning as her body shook with more gasping coughs. She belatedly reached into her now torn and blood stained clothes for her wand, her mind refusing to compute the splinters spearing her shaking hand. A strangled cry escaped her as she tried and failed to release her seat belt. 'Trapped!' The panicked thought blanked out everything else in her mind. Her struggles slowed and faltered completely as she gasped for air, smoke stinging her eyes as it smothered her. Hermione's tenuous grasp on consciousness failed as blackness swallowed her, a terrible cold embracing her battered form.

## Chapter 1

*Chapter 2 of 25*

Cat, Goat and Bat discuss their concerns about the missing student.

Disclaimer: I'm not J K Rowling. I don't own Harry Potter. Never mind a Knut, I've not made so much as a ball of fluff out of this.

Thanks again to LadySunflower for being my beta and to the people who've reviewed this story so far: you know who you are.

Chapter 1

Severus Snape was deeply troubled and struggling not to show it to everyone in the Great Hall of Hogwarts castle. The average student might not realise it, but both the Hogwarts Express and the castle itself registered the presence of each and every student. It was very rare that these precautions flagged up absences, an example in recent years being Potter and Weasley missing the train in their second year.

This September first had one student missing the train entirely and another failing to leave the train without the assistance of one of the Order of the Phoenix's pet Aurors. This resulted in his own considerable pleasure in lambasting the tardy student, who was of course precious Potter. The filthy brat still had a bloodstained face with his hangers-on fawning all over him at the Gryffindor table. Obviously, he was used to his every problem being solved by the still missing student, Miss Granger. Severus

supposed it was a credit to Potter and his little friends that they did look concerned about the empty seat in their midst.

The dark wizard scowled down into his mixed vegetables, pushing them around on his plate. He half-heartedly skewered a carrot on his fork and bit into it, finding the usually scrumptious food held no taste for him.

When Severus had been alerted by Nymphadora Tonks's Patronus that Potter was delayed, he had hoped that the bigheaded brat would know where his friend was. It was a disappointment when Potter asked him where Miss Granger was.

The only comfort was that if the girl was now in the Dark Lord's hands, he would surely let Severus know, as one of the Inner Circle of Death Eaters, even if he was only summoned to be executed as a traitor. The girl knew too much, especially about his own position as a spy. What was worse was that Severus had allowed her to know more, more about him than even Albus knew.

Severus found himself more concerned for Miss Granger's fate than his own. 'I let her get too close. I should have... but even if I could go back, I wouldn't change anything.' Even as Severus tried to reprove himself, he was well aware that the events since the Dark Lord had returned would have been much harder for him if he didn't have his tentative friendship with Miss Granger.

'Now Herm...Miss Granger is missing despite what I wrote to her to assure her of her family's, and her own, safety.' Although Severus constantly referred to the girl as 'Miss Granger,' her given name kept slipping out in his thoughts, no doubt because in those letters they had exchanged, they had referred to each other by name. Not once had they slipped up in person, thankfully.

As someone who could count his friends, living and deceased, on one hand, Severus was highly protective of those few who had managed to work their way far enough into his trust to be considered as such. Miss Granger had the potential to be more if she survived long enough to graduate. If she was still alive...

Severus pushed his plate away, his already poor appetite failing completely. Albus caught his eye. "Severus, I would have thought you would be celebrating. It's not every day that you are named Defence master."

"I'm not hungry." Severus almost winced at his own reply. He sounded like a petulant child even to his own ears. Thankfully, Minerva elbowed Albus in his star-spangled side, distracting the meddling old man.

"Albus, have you failed to notice the empty seat in this hall? Perhaps you need to replace those spectacles." Minerva also seemed worried about Miss Granger's absence, allowing Severus to discover what Albus knew without revealing his true feelings for the girl.

"Indeed I have. The Ministry has been alerted, and I hope for news soon."

Sometimes Severus wanted to strangle his employer with his long, wispy, white beard. Namely now. Feelings that Minerva shared, by the feral gleam in her eyes. "I thought the Order was watching the girl and her family. Don't tell me you sent Fletcher after his failure with Potter, or I'll turn the misbegotten fool into a cauldron and give him to Longbottom to explode!" Both men listening had to struggle not to laugh at the cruel and unusual punishment Minerva had devised.

"No, Mundungus is not trusted with guard duties of any sort now. Kingsley Shacklebolt lost them in the heavy traffic. He also reported a nasty automobile crash near King's Cross..." Albus trailed off, his unusually twinkle-free gaze cutting to the now choking dark wizard at his side, who'd made the mistake of taking a swig from his goblet. "Severus, you've gone as pale as a ghost. What..."

"What if that's why she never arrived for the train?" Severus gripped the table hard, trying to stop his hands from shaking. Inwardly he cringed. So much for keeping his feelings hidden!

"I hope not, for Harry's sake." Albus said, his tone grim.

"Potter!" Severus spat the name out. "It's always about Potter with you. Why not for Miss Granger's own sake? She is, after all, one of the only students worth teaching in this dunderhead overrun school."

"Harry is vital to the cause, although he would have died before his twelfth birthday if not for Miss Granger. Do not mistake me, Severus. I am just as concerned as you are with the girl's safety."

"Hardly, Headmaster. You are as always blatantly favouring Potter, valuing his scrawny hide above all others. While I concede that without Potter we stand little hope of overthrowing the Dark Lord, he is, for all intents and purposes, a weapon. Miss Granger is the living example of our cause, a Muggleborn witch capable of achievements far beyond her pureblood peers." Albus opened his mouth, but whether to agree with Severus or not it was impossible to know, as Minerva slapped the back of the old coot's head, almost knocking his hat off.

"Severus is quite right, you old goat. We should be concentrating on Hermione Granger, and we all know that you are preoccupied with Potter even when the lad is safely within the bounds of this castle." Minerva's Scottish brogue was now coming through quite clearly, a sign of her distress. Miss Granger was quite possibly her favourite student. Severus glanced along the Head Table and amended that. She was quite possibly the favourite student of every professor that Severus acknowledged as such. Neither Hagrid nor any Divination teacher really cut it, in his opinion.

The students began leaving the hall under the supervision of the prefects, but Severus was not watching the organised chaos. He was watching the silent flight of a solitary owl, swooping down towards the Head Table from the rafters. The owl landed in front of Albus, who relieved it of the scroll tied to its leg. The owl immediately took off before the eccentric headmaster could offer it a lemon drop. Albus unrolled the scroll, scanning the contents. While a relieved sigh escaped his lips, ruffling his beard, his lined face tightened with some anxiety as he read further.

"Miss Granger is currently under observation in St. Mungo's. It seems you were correct, Severus; she was involved in that crash. As her magical guardian, my presence has been requested. I must leave for London at once, before Minister Scrimgeour gains access, as it appears that the Healers believe..." Albus trailed off, his lips thinning as blood drained from his face.

"What Albus? What's wrong?" Minerva's voice became shriller as Albus failed to answer her. Severus cast his own Muffliato spell, to keep the other professors from eavesdropping, as it appeared that there was some sensitive information in the letter.

"Miss Granger should by all rights be dead. Apparently, she was beyond all aid, magical or Muggle, by the time anyone reached the burning wreck of her parents' car. The Healers don't know how she survived. If Rufus finds out, he will have the girl killed as a precaution. Even the most liberal Minister would react this way, with someone coming back from the dead."

"How did she survive? Albus, you don't think..." Severus was surprised at how steady his own voice was. If what the Healers suspected was true, Miss Granger was in even greater danger than before. Albus said nothing in reply, just summoned Fawkes, who appeared in a flash of fire. It was on the tip of Severus's tongue to demand that he accompany Albus, but he knew that it would just attract unwelcome attention for the Head of Slytherin to demand to see a sixth year Gryffindor. Man and phoenix disappeared in another flash of fire.

# Chapter 2

*Chapter 3 of 25*

It must be serious. Potter has gone to Snape for some answers.

Disclaimer: Nope. Still not mine. The only thing I'm getting from this is the pleasure of writing it.

Thanks to my beta LadySunflower and any reviewers out there.

## Chapter 2

Harry Potter could not sleep. He sat in the Gryffindor common room in front of the dying fire, Ron Weasley snoring in the seat beside him, his stomach too full to stay awake. The Marauder's Map lay open on his lap, his unblinking eyes peering through the glasses almost slipping off his nose.

Harry had been in the same position ever since the feast had finished, having washed the blood off his face from Malfoy breaking his nose after he had spied on the junior Death Eater. A simple Notice-Me-Not spell had kept anyone from discovering what the map was. Harry didn't want to give up, but he was beginning to admit that this was hopeless. Hermione had vanished.

The only things the map had revealed was Dumbledore was conspicuously absent, McGonagall was twitching in her rooms (probably sleeping restlessly) and Snape was pacing in his new office. Now, that last one was a surprise. Although now Harry thought back on it, Snape had seemed almost concerned when Harry had asked the greasy git where Hermione was after the great bat had been summoned by Tonks's Patronus to escort him to the school. Why would the Head of Slytherin show concern for a Gryffindor, especially one he frequently called an 'insufferable know-it-all'? Did Snape have any idea where she was now? Where Dumbledore had gone?

Harry prodded the map with his wand as he contemplated what to do. He got to his feet, grabbed the map and pulled his Invisibility Cloak on. After pushing the Fat Lady's portrait open, he made his way through the moonlit corridors, down the main staircase (which was unusually quiescent) to the third floor. The Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom was open, but the door to the office was locked.

Harry knocked on the door, which opened after a few seconds. He was greeted by the sight of Snape scowling in his direction. The scowl faded into a puzzled frown, as Harry was still wearing his cloak. The scowl returned as Harry pulled the cloak off.

"Potter! It is well past curfew. Twenty points from—"

Harry hurriedly interrupted Snape, not wishing Gryffindor to be any further in the negative in terms of house points before lessons even began. "Professor, I've been watching my map, and I know Hermione is still not here. Professor Dumbledore's not here either. Do you know why?"

Snape waved Harry into the office, motioning him to sit. "The Headmaster set out after the feast this evening. He had received word from the Ministry that Miss Granger is currently in St. Mungo's."

"Is she alright? What happened?" Harry asked. The way Snape had said it, Hermione was alive.

"Apparently she was involved in a car crash on her way to King's Cross. As for her condition, I do not know. Rest assured that the Healers will do their best, Potter."

Harry was glad that he was sitting down. It seemed surreal that in a time like this, with Voldemort on the loose, that a common Muggle accident like a car crash was still a threat. He was vaguely aware of saying, "My aunt lied to me about what happened to my parents. She said that they'd died in a car crash."

"As fascinating as that non sequitur is, Potter, you are still out of bounds. I hope your questions have been answered, because Gryffindor is highly unlikely to win the House Cup this year."

"No, I want to know why you're so concerned about Hermione. I mean, you hate her. Sir." Harry belatedly remembered to attach the honorific, not wanting to lose any more points.

"I do not hate any of my students, save you, Potter. Quite frankly, Miss Granger is the top student in this school and as such one of the few worth teaching." Snape leaned forwards, looming over Harry menacingly.

"Now, as to your punishment..." Snape murmured, a cruel smirk twisting his thin lips.

"Sir, please, I just needed to know about Hermione. No more points lost, even detention would be better."

Snape's black eyes glittered. "Very well. Detention, Potter. Report to me tomorrow," he twisted his head around to look at the clock set on the wall, which currently read 'so late it's early' and amended his previous statement. "No, later on today, after dinner. I'll have arranged something suitable for you. Now, return to your dormitory."

Harry scurried off before Snape could change his mind. At least the git hadn't confiscated either the cloak or the map, even if Harry had to put up with whatever punishment Snape managed to dream up. Knowing Snape, it would involve considerable pain and humiliation on Harry's part.

Severus shut the door, relieved to have rid himself of Potter's presence. When he'd opened the door to find the brat there, he'd almost cursed Potter's big head off. While the boy's concern for Hermi—Miss Granger, dammit!—was touching, it had alarmed him to realise that even a thick headed idiot like Potter had noticed his concern for a Muggleborn. If the Dark Lord caught wind of that, Severus would be in some very hot water.

What Severus had told Potter to explain his concern was true; Miss Granger was in possession of a remarkable mind. But her compassionate nature was also a key part of why Severus cared for the girl.

It had been a week or so after the tragic end of the Triwizard Tournament, over a year before, that she'd expressed concern for him to his face when he'd returned from reinstating in the Dark Lord's service. She'd overheard Albus mention to Minerva what Harry had reported: that none of the free Death Eaters who failed to turn up for the summons in the graveyard could expect a warm welcome. Severus had still been under the influence of the aftermath of repeated casts of the Cruciatius Curse and had welcomed Miss Granger's concern like a man in the desert accepts water. In a moment of weakness, Severus had accepted her as a confidant and exchanged letters ever since in the guise of letters from Viktor Krum to prevent anyone, friendly or otherwise, from discovering the truth.

Severus returned to pacing, knowing that he would be unable to sleep in his current frame of mind. As the resident insomniac of the castle, the lost sleep would just have him in top form for terrorizing the students later on that day.

# Chapter 3

*Chapter 4 of 25*

From the secure ward at St. Mungo's.

Disclaimer: I don't own this and I don't make any money from this.

Thanks to my beta (LadySunflower) and reviewers.

Chapter 3

"...miracle that she's alive." The unfamiliar voice seemed to come from somewhere far away.

"She will make a full recovery, I trust?" That voice was familiar, and sounded clearer than the first, coming from the right.

"Yes, although I would recommend at least a week of bed rest. Her injuries from the car crash have healed, but the emotional trauma will be long lasting. Add to that a reopened curse scar on her chest... she's not out of the woods yet, Albus." The first voice was also clearer now, coming from the left.

"Yes, shock from the experience of such an accident will no doubt haunt her," Albus said. The name rang a bell.

"Albus, she was the only survivor, if that is the correct word to use in these circumstances."

"Her parents are dead?" Albus's tone was more strident now, echoing oddly.

"And her familiar. She'll need a new wand, too."

Albus sighed. "A tragic start to Miss Granger's school year."

"Allow me to reassure you that she is safe here. Minister Scrimgeour has no jurisdiction within these walls, although several Healers did refuse to treat her. I myself am fascinated by the concept that someone can be brought back from the dead." The first voice was apparently a Healer, if one with morbid interests.

"The problem, Augustus, is that you have told me that she was dead when the Muggle ambulance reached her, but was brought back to life somehow. Necromancy has an even worse stigma to it than lycanthropy for the victims involved."

"I know, Albus. Still fascinating, if perplexing. The results from my tests imply that there was no outside factor."

"Meaning?" Albus sounded almost frightened, his voice trembling.

"A Necromancer didn't bring her back; she is the Necromancer. It's the only possible explanation I can think of."

At those words, a jolt of unadulterated panic roused Hermione to full consciousness. She'd been listening the Dumbledore and the Healer talk as she drifted awake, barely aware of what was being discussed, not understanding the meaning. Now she understood all too well.

'This can't be real! I'm dreaming; none of this has happened. None of it! I'll wake up in my own bed at home any minute now.' Hermione didn't move as she put every effort into opening her eyes. 'Wake up. Wake up. Wake up!'

Her eyes cracked open, bright lights dazzling her. When her eyes finally adjusted, she was most distressed to see Albus Dumbledore facing a young man in the green robes of a Healer across the bed she was lying in.

"No!" Hermione cried out as she attempted to sit up, only to find herself restrained, magic binding her to the bed. "Headmaster, please. Tell me it's not true. It can't be!" She struggled to no avail, sparks flying as the magic bonds reacted to her frenzied movements. Both men turned, mirrored concern on their faces.

"I'm sorry, Miss Granger." Dumbledore shook his head, his beard waving gently with the motion.

"NO! They can't be. They can't be. I'm not a..." Hermione trailed off, unable to say the words. Saying it would mean it was true.

"Miss Granger, please calm yourself. You need peace and quiet." The Healer was summarily ignored.

"This isn't real. Wake up," Hermione whispered to herself.

"I assure you this is not a dream, child. You must come to terms with this, or your brilliant mind will crack under the strain of denial." Dumbledore stepped closer, his concerned gaze fixed on Hermione.

"I don't want to. If this is reality, then any dream world is better than this!" Hermione's voice was getting increasingly shrill, to the point of cracking on words.

Dumbledore's eyes hardened. His words were harder. "You must. Harry needs you. Do you think he can succeed against Voldemort," the Healer shuddered at the name, "without you?"

Hermione shut her eyes, her eyes aching dry. "I. Don't. Care. Anymore," she ground out through clenched teeth.

"YOU MUST!" Dumbledore roared, causing the Healer to flinch. Hermione opened her eyes to see the only wizard Voldemort feared resplendent in his anger. However, her own anguish was too great for her to be intimidated by the sight.

"Why? What can I do? Necromancy is the darkest magic out there, how can it assist the light?" Hermione asked, despondent.

"You are strong, Miss Granger. If anyone can control the dark powers of Necromancy and use them for light ends, it is you." Dumbledore had calmed down, weariness prominent in his voice.

"So it's come to that, the ends justifying the means. I knew things were bad, just not that bad." Hermione felt all of her energy leave her as a great weight seemed to settle on her soul. She sighed. "You must have great faith in me, Professor."

"Indeed I do. Now, before I can leave you in peace, you must know this: you are not safe outside St. Mungo's. Hogwarts will be safest, but you must not leave here without an escort. You know by now who to trust." Dumbledore took his leave, but turned back before he left the ward. "Augustus, I trust you will not tell anyone of what we have discussed. Rufus Scrimgeour will be the least of our problems if Voldemort catches wind of this."

After Dumbledore left, the Healer turned to leave.

"Wait! What did he mean about the Minister?" Hermione blurted. The Healer turned back, coming close enough for her to read his name from his robes. Healer Pye, formerly the trainee Healer who'd experimented with combining magical and Muggle healing methods.

"I don't wish to alarm you, but I suppose it is best that you know. Any Minister for Magic is duty bound to execute anyone suspected of being in contact with Necromancy as a precaution. So, don't you go leaving here with an Auror escort!"

"Oh." Hermione had not been expecting that, as no book she'd ever read had documented Ministry regulations concerning Necromancy, beyond that it was strictly forbidden. She tried to sit up again, only to be stopped once more. "Healer Pye, could you release these cords? I'd like to sit up."

"Fraid not, lass. The crash resulted in that curse scar of yours reopening. I'll let you loose tomorrow, if you behave. For now, sleep."

"WHAT?" Hermione almost screamed, her head jerking up off the pillow. "How am I meant to sleep after everything that's happened?"

"Er, yes. I'll get some Dreamless Sleep Potion for you." Healer Pye hurried off.

'Fan-bloody-tastic. My parents are dead, along with Crookshanks. My wand's broken. Apparently I'm a Necromancer. And to top it all, my Healer is an absent minded maniac. Perfect!' Hermione dropped her head, groaning. 'Whatever next?'

AN: Yes, Dumbledore is a little callous. Rest assured that he won't be in future.

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 5 of 25*

The Dark Lord knows all.

Disclaimer: J K Rowling owns Harry Potter. I'm spending time to write this, not making money.

Thanks to LadySunflower for betaing this and to my reviewers.

Chapter 4

Albus Dumbledore swept the silver thread of memory back into his mind after reviewing it in his Pensieve. He turned to Fawkes, who blinked at him, pearly tears collecting in his eyes.

"I was too rough with her, wasn't I?" Fawkes let out a quavering note in reply as the tears spilled over, slipping down over his fiery plumage.

"I will have to make amends to Miss Granger later. My only excuse for my loss of control is the memory of the other Necromancer I have encountered." Almost unbidden, the image of a man wearing an enlarged human skull as a mask rose up in the Pensieve.

"Perhaps if I had acted quickly enough, he would have never become Grindelwald..." Albus mused, stroking his beard. He stepped close to Fawkes, who stared unblinking back at him. "Is this a second chance? My second chance to right a wrong against someone long dead?"

The phoenix let out a surprisingly raucous cry, turning his back on Albus.

"You are right. I shouldn't view Miss Granger as a means to an end." He examined a lemon drop from the bowl on his desk. "I really shouldn't eat any more of these. My mind is obviously addled enough as it is." Albus popped the sweet into his mouth regardless, noisily slurping as he began sucking it.

A letter shot through the fireplace as the flames turned green. Fawkes caught it in his beak, dropping it in Albus's hands as he perched on his shoulder. Still slurping away, Albus broke the seal (a phoenix, signalling that this was Order business) and unrolled the thin slither of parchment.

'Summoned by D.L. Will report when I return. S.S.' Albus removed his glasses and wearily rubbed his eyes.

"I'll feed a vomit flavour Bertie Bott's Every-Flavour Bean to Augustus Pye if this summons means that Tom has already discovered what Miss Granger is." Fawkes let out the phoenix equivalent of a snigger at Albus's dark threat.

The man once known as Tom Marvolo Riddle watched as his most useful servants knelt before him, leaning towards him to kiss the edge of his silky black robes (today decorated with silver serpents).

"Masks off, my servants. We are all friends here..." Lord Voldemort spoke with a sibilant hiss that would have been impressive if he didn't sound perpetually blocked up due to the altered, flattened shape of his nose.

He stretched out his long, bony fingers and removed the silver masks from the two Death Eaters himself. They were glaring at each other, as they had never been anything more than rivals in their acquaintance. The only reason they were in the same room was that they were both loyal servants of Tom.

'I am Lord Voldemort!'

That was the reason why Voldemort found Dumbledore referring to him as Tom so vexing; that in his own mind he often did the same, no matter how many times he corrected himself.

Bellatrix Lestrange looked away first, a scowl further marring her Azkaban-ruined, beautiful features. Severus Snape sneered at her, his contempt for the unhinged woman showing clearly. At the snap of Voldemort's fingers their attention returned to him.

"Bella, you will show Severus all courtesy as your brother. Severus, you will do likewise to your sister." Both fully grown Death Eaters looked down in a show of chagrin, lips twisting with what was probably revulsion at the thought of the other as family.

"Rise. Severus, walk with me. Bella, you may follow, but be silent until I give you leave to speak." Severus stood as Bella glowered at the Potions master from under her heavy lids. Voldemort's lips thinned as he realised that it was yet again time to confiscate the Lestranges' stash of sleeping potions. Bella was addicted to the things,

leaving her far from useful too much of the time.

As a sign of trust, Voldemort turned his back on Severus as he led the way back to the Riddle House from the Apparition point in the graveyard. The only sounds on the walk to the now Unplottable house were the breathing of the three walkers and their footsteps. 'No, make that Bella's and my own footsteps. Severus is moving almost silently. That must be useful for his duties both to me and the old fool.'

The unlikely party soon reached the crumbling mansion and proceeded to the Dark Lord's audience chamber, where Nagini was in the process of attempting to swallow a struggling rat. Voldemort caught sight of a suppressed grin on Severus's face and looked again at the fight for food or life on the ragged carpet. The rat had a silver forepaw.

"Nagini, what have I told you? You cannot digest silver. Let Wormtail go before you give yourself a stomach ache," Voldemort hissed to his pet. Nagini reluctantly complied. This was not the first time she'd tried to eat Wormtail in his Animagus form. The way she almost managed to glower at the squeaking rat as she twitched her tail implied that the clumsy oaf had stepped on her tail.

"Wormtail, leave us. There should be some antivenin in the cellar. If not, then you'd best beg Severus for some." The scrawny rat squealed and shot off in the direction prescribed.

Voldemort crossed to the high-backed chair before the fireplace, which he lit with a wave of his hand. Such wandless magic was simple for a wizard of his power. He motioned for Severus to sit in the chair opposite, with Bella fuming at being left standing until he beckoned her to sit before him so that he could run his skeletal fingers through her silky hair.

"The old fool has tried to foil me once more, but has failed utterly. He should know that all medical issues are recorded in the Ministry on secure files... and on a duplicate in my possession." Voldemort smiled, a sight that seemed to cause Severus some discomfort. There was a reason there were no mirrors in his domain...

"This alerted me today as to what I have been looking for since before you were born, my friends. Finally, one has arisen. It is the only explanation. Now, it is only a matter of time before Dumbledore and his Muggle-loving friends come to a sticky end. Harry Potter will not live to come of age! A new age of glory, of purity will begin..."

Voldemort happened to meet Severus's eyes as he was ranting and saw a questioning look. If he'd interrupted verbally, Voldemort would have been forced to teach him a lesson in respect, but this was permissible. "I did not mention what it is I have been searching for, did I? Or who, more accurately. Ironically, the method of the downfall of Harry Potter will be one of his nearest and dearest. It is his just reward for making friends with a Necromancer."

Voldemort observed a little jolt running through both Severus and Bella at his last word. Yes, both feared the idea of a magician who had control over the dead. So would he, if he was still mortal.

"M-my Lord, surely a Necromancer is a danger to our side as well, I mean..." Bella said, mastering her stutter, but quivering under his hand and trailing off as she tried to get herself back under control at the warning of Voldemort's tightened grip.

Severus picked up the argument, the only betrayal of his feelings his clenched jaw. "Necromancers are almost always Muggle-born, My Lord. Why would they join us when they could destroy us?"

"That is where you come in, Severus. I require you to bring this Necromancer to our side. Need I tell you who it is?" Voldemort replied, his red eyes fixed on Severus. The other man showed no sign of weakness as he shifted in his seat, clapping his hands. This might have been to conceal shaky hands, but Severus had always seemed pretty unshakeable.

"I highly doubt that it is the youngest male Weasley. Therefore it must be Granger. If you were not in the habit of being entirely serious, I would have to think you were joking. Granger is inseparable from Potter; they are closer than siblings. How can I break through a tie that strong?" Severus was not happy with the situation. That much was obvious.

"Young Malfoy informed me that she is into older men. Seduce her to the dark side!" Voldemort frowned as it appeared that Severus was trying not to laugh. There was not anything remotely funny in what he'd said, or in the task of seducing the girl, however useful she might be.

"Forgive me, My Lord, but Draco counts older men as anything from a couple of years above him. Granger's only known paramour was Viktor Krum, three years older. Nineteen years is quite a jump from that." Severus's answer may have cleared some things up, but Voldemort still had the impression that the joke was still on him.

"My Lord! You cannot be serious! Why delay when we could have the Wizarding world at our feet within a week? Let me capture the little Mudblood and bring her before you!" Bella was hard-pressed to remain silent at the best of times. Now, he'd have to discipline her, although the stupidity of what she'd said warranted a lesson even if she'd had permission to speak.

Severus shot to his feet. Any reluctance he might have had was cast aside as he defended his mission. "Do you know nothing? A Necromancer, even a freshly awakened one like Granger, could easily kill you. Or me, if she set her mind to it! She will not willingly join us at the present time."

"A Mudblood like her kill a witch of my calibre? Impossible. Master, the brat will beg to join us after I have finished with her. Besides, she'd never be seduced by Snape. Even a hag would turn him down!" Severus moved for his wand, unwilling to let an insult like that pass.

"Crucio." Voldemort rested his chin on his hand, almost bored as he watched Bella writhe under his tender administrations. For someone who could apply the curse so well, she certainly couldn't take it. He released Bella from the Unforgivable and dragged her head up by her hair from her undignified sprawl on the hearthrug. "Now, Bella. Severus is quite right. I would hate to lose you. Know this: very few wizards or witches can kill a Necromancer. I know of only two wizards and no witches with the necessary power and that includes me."

"I will do as you command, Master, but I need to give this my undivided attention. Thanks to Bella's doubt of my loyalty, my attentions are compromised by an Unbreakable Vow." Ever the opportunist, Severus would use this situation to get out of another. Voldemort could hardly blame him.

"Very well. Bella, summon your sister. I am afraid young Malfoy will have to complete his task by himself." He gave Bella an encouraging kick and she hobbled over to the fireplace. It took her several attempts with her shaky hands to throw a pinch of Floo powder into the fire. Luckily for the sisters Black, Narcissa was prompt in coming through. It did not do to try the patience of Lord Voldemort when he was in the mood of throwing Cruciatius Curses at his most loyal servant.

For all the hype about Unbreakable Vows, it was easy enough to break them when you had all those involved present and focused on annulling the promises concerned. Severus was freed from his compulsion to assist the Malfoy heir, meaning that the brat would almost certainly perish in the attempt to kill Dumbledore. An ignoble end for such a pure line, but inbreeding had created weakness. There was something to be said for his own Muggle father after all, apart from target practice.

"There is another slight problem, Master. I am not a paedophile and the girl is not of age yet. I cannot start the seduction until..." Voldemort cut Severus off with an impatient gesture.

"Yes, yes, my slippery friend. I am quite content for you to wait until the chit's birthday in eighteen days. I would have thought the worse of you if you did not want to wait." Severus nodded, bowed and Disapparated.

# Chapter 5

Chapter 6 of 25

St. Mungo's certainly isn't safe, so Severus sees about saving the girl.

Disclaimer: Yes, I own Harry Potter. I also rule the world. Nope, neither of those is true. I'm just a skintflint university student, making no money out of this.

Thanks again to my beta LadySunflower and any and all reviewers.

## Chapter 5

Severus swept along the corridors of St. Mungo's, having stopped briefly at the reception desk to find out where Miss Granger was being kept. At least it had required a letter from Albus to gain access, so security was not exactly lax.

After leaving the Dark Lord, Severus had reported to Albus what said megalomaniac commanded. To say the least, Albus had been disappointed that his nemesis had already learned of the new Necromancer. Of course, with an institution the size of the Wizarding hospital, it was almost impossible for there not to be any leaks giving confidential information freely. Albus had realised that St. Mungo's was not as secure as Healer Pye had claimed. Miss Granger's safety was in question, so Severus had been sent to retrieve her. Healer Pye had complained, but knew that the girl could be treated just as well at Hogwarts now.

Severus paused outside the Secure Ward, placed in the basement of the hospital for defensive purposes. He needed to gather his ragged emotions; it would not do to allow the girl to see how rattled he was. It had been a struggle for him not to reveal to the Dark Lord how alarmed he was by the despot's plans. After a few deep breaths, he touched his wand to the door and stepped inside as it opened for him. He stalked down the empty ward to reach the only occupied room.

Hermione – 'Hang it all! I need to seduce her before too long, so I might as well use her given name!' – was asleep, in the unnaturally quiet slumber given by Dreamless Sleep. It would cause less disorientation for her if he woke her now, rather than let her wake up in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. Severus withdrew a vial of the antidote from a hidden pocket in his robes and leant over her to administer it, tipping a few drops into her mouth and gently massaging her throat to cause her to swallow.

It was only when Hermione woke with a start and attempted to sit up that Severus realised she was restrained. With a wave of his wand, he disengaged the magical bonds.

"Professor!" Hermione's voice was hoarse. She grabbed his arms and used them to lever herself up, wrapping them around his waist to avoid flopping back down. Severus stiffened then relaxed as he brought his hands up to support her shoulders and rest in her unruly hair. Her arms tightened around him, only for them to slacken as a pained gasp escaped her.

"What's wrong?" Severus gripped her shoulders as he pushed her back far enough to be able to see her face.

"Curse scar. It reopened in the crash." Hermione unconsciously traced the diagonal line cutting across her chest from sternum to midriff, where Dolohov's speciality flame spell had seared her over two months previously. "Not that it had fully healed in the first place."

Severus had to stop himself from slipping the hospital gown off her shoulders to examine the wound himself; his hands convulsively gripped and released her shoulders.

"How are you?" Severus scrunched his eyes shut, wincing at how trite that sounded.

"I was prepared, you know. But not for this." At Severus's quizzical look, Hermione explained further, "I almost expected my parents to die now that Riddle is back. But I didn't expect them to die in something as commonplace as a car crash. It just came out of the blue..."

"A complete, extremely unpleasant, surprise. There is no real safety, even in a non-magical world. I'm sorry that you had to learn it this way." Severus's arms tightened around Hermione's slim shoulders. Her arms slipped around him, squeezing with surprising strength for someone a head shorter than him.

"The Headmaster said that someone would come to collect me, although the Healer wanted me to stay here for a week. Have you come to take me to Hogwarts already?" Hermione asked, eager to escape the drab, sterilised prison that was St. Mungo's.

"Yes. You are not as safe here as Professor Dumbledore was led to believe." Severus pulled back the blanket, conjuring a cloak around her as he slipped an arm below Hermione's legs and swept her up into his arms. She reflexively wrapped her arms around his neck, bringing her head up to rest under his chin. Severus dipped his head and whispered into her ear, "He knows, Hermione. Already."

"Voldemort?!" Hermione bit her lips after her startled exclamation. She usually knew better than to blurt out the Dark Lord's name around Severus, but in her defence she had just received another rather nasty shock.

"The Dark Lord, yes. He wants you on his side." He began to make his way to the exit, wand in the hand under her legs, ready to use if the occasion called for it.

"If St. Mungo's isn't secure, won't he learn that you took me from here?" Hermione squirmed a bit in his arms, clearly uncomfortable with having to be carried.

"Yes, he most likely will. But it will not matter." Severus poked the door with his wand and it opened.

"What? He hasn't..." Hermione trailed off, unwilling to voice the fact that he was a spy outside the soundproof ward.

"It's alright; I cast a secrecy charm. We cannot be overheard. And the Dark Lord does not know that I am a traitor, if that's what you wanted to ask."

"Then why doesn't it matter? Tell me!" Hermione grabbed a lock of his greasy hair and gently pulled as a warning not to ignore her.

"Very well." As he stepped foot outside St. Mungo's, he used Side-Along-Apparition to instantaneously take them to the gates of Hogwarts, currently bathed in moonlight. They opened at his approach and closed after they were inside. He cast a Warming Charm on the girl in his arms before the chill in the Scottish early autumn night air could take hold of her.

"The Dark Lord commanded me to bring you over to his side. He wants me to seduce you, giving me until your birthday to begin. The Headmaster has been alerted of this and agrees that it is necessary. To that effect, from hereon you must rebuff the affections of anyone else. Or we are both as good as dead, understand?" Severus felt Hermione nod.

"I see." Hermione sounded perfectly calm if a little taken aback. She shrugged then proceeded to stun him by casually saying, "It's just an acceleration of my original personal plans for after Hogwarts."

"Wh-what?" Severus stammered, almost dropping her.

"I had plans for us, Severus. Ever since I knew you well enough, I could tell that I was far more suited to you than to anyone else my own age. If boys don't view me as an



androgynous brain, they bore me with endless talk about Quidditch and the average ditz twit like Lavender Brown." Hermione almost hissed his given name in a way that sounded far more welcome than when the Dark Lord did it.

He paused. "Good," he murmured as they reached the torch lit entrance hall. He lit his wand with a silent *Lumos*, to cast a little light to see by in the darkened corridors. He swept through the quiet castle, past dozing portraits, ignoring a gaping Argus Filch, shocked at the sight of teacher-carrying-formerly-missing-student in the dead of night.

They reached the hospital wing where Poppy Pomfrey was waiting. Severus gently set Hermione down on a bed, squeezed her hand (careful to shield the sight from the mediwitch with his body) and left the room to let Albus know of their safe return.

## Chapter 6

*Chapter 7 of 25*

Diagon Alley with Dumbledore: result = a new wand and an encounter with Scrimgeour

Disclaimer: Still not mine. Drat! Nor am I making anything from this.

Thanks again to LadySunflower (beta) and numerous reviewers.

Chapter 6

"But we want to see her!" Hermione jerked awake at the shouted demand.

"The Headmaster has ordered that there will be no visitors, Potter, Weasley. I can't let you in, I'm afraid. She'll be fine, don't worry." Madam Pomfrey was blocking the door, her silhouette visible through the curtains drawn around Hermione's bed.

"Why would Dumbledore order that? We're her friends; it'd help her to see us." Ron appeared to be letting Harry do the talking, perhaps hoping to use his tall, lanky frame to intimidate the school nurse.

Madam Pomfrey drew in her breath to answer, but let it out again as the very man in question arrived behind the boys.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but Miss Granger's isolation is necessary. I will explain why later, but for now, return to the Great Hall, as I do believe two young men like yourselves need breakfast." Dumbledore had obviously given them a suitably powerful look, as they left with no further complaints.

Hermione heard the old wizard come closer, and the curtains parted, revealing Dumbledore's face as he adjusted his half-moon spectacles that perched on his long, crooked nose. "Good, you are awake. Madam Pomfrey tells me you are sufficiently healthy to venture out for a vital trip. Your wand was broken, so you'll need a new one, both for your own protection and the lessons in the year ahead."

Dumbledore pulled his head back, closing the curtains to allow Hermione to dress.

"Sir, who is to accompany me to Diagon Alley? Healer Pye told me that the Ministry is after my blood, so I can't go alone." Hermione asked, her voice muffled as she pulled on her jumper.

"Quite right. I will go with you." Dumbledore's tone was confident and quite justified in being so. No one in their right mind would attempt to attack someone under his protection. Dumbledore was the only wizard with the power to match Voldemort himself, and even the Dark Lord did not have the long years of experience that Dumbledore had acquired.

After Hermione had finished dressing, they set out for Diagon Alley, using a temporary Floo connection to do so. The Aurors patrolling went for their wands at the sight of Hermione, but hurriedly raised their empty hands as they noticed Dumbledore.

"Um, sir? Where is Mr. Ollivander? The *Daily Prophet* said that both he and his wands had vanished," Hermione asked as they approached the boarded-up exterior of the shop that had, until recently, been the home of the finest quality wand shop in Europe.

"The last place Voldemort will look," Dumbledore said and then leaned close to Hermione, tickling her ear with his beard as he whispered more. "Ollivander's can be found in Diagon Alley." As soon as Dumbledore had finished saying that, the boards vanished, revealing the wand shop in its usual drab splendour, with the solitary wand on display in the window.

"The Fidelius Charm? So simple, yet brilliant. Right under everyone's nose." Dumbledore chuckled at Hermione's compliment and waved her inside.

Mr. Ollivander stood in front of the shelves of wand after wand, his silver eyes fixed on Hermione as soon as she stepped into the shop, ignoring Dumbledore completely.

"I've been waiting for you, Miss Granger." Hermione shivered at the old man's words. Ollivander had always struck her as creepy, knowing everyone's name without being told. Even as someone scornful of Divination, she had to wonder if he had Seer's blood.

"Shame about your old wand; it was a particularly fine. Fourteen inches of intricately carved vinewood with a dragon heartstring core, unparalleled for casting hexes, as I recall." Ollivander seemed to think for a moment more. "Such a tragic loss, too." He leant close, reflecting Hermione's face in his misty eyes. "It's torn your soul wide open, you know. The dark is creeping in; will it control you or you control it?"

Hermione shuddered at his words, stepping back and bumping into a stack of wands, scattering them onto the floor. She crouched down, grabbing one of the boxes to start clearing the mess up. Ollivander moved fast, hand closing in a steel grip around her wrist.

"Open it," he hissed, gesturing to the box in her hand as he released her from his grasp. Hermione did as instructed, blinking at the wand revealed. It was identical to her previous wand, down to the last strand of the vine engraved around it. She reached into the box, closing her hand around the handle. Hermione bit back a scream as it seemed to grow red hot in her grip. A flash of bright light blinded her, leaving her to blink away the purple afterimage. The wand was once more quiescent, warmed only by her hand. At Ollivander's prompting, she tried it out, casting her favoured bluebell flames, only to almost burn the shop down in the instant before she extinguished them.

"What the fu..." Hermione cut herself off, mindful of exactly whose presence she was in. "What core is in this wand? I've used Harry's before and never had a reaction as

violent as that. Phoenix feather is meant to be the most powerful magical core around, yet this is almost uncontrollable."

"Chimaera scale." Both Hermione and Dumbledore sucked in a startled breath at that revelation. There was no other wand in existence with that core and with good reason. While both very rare and very powerful, chimaera scale was not only dangerous for those it was used against, but also for the wielder. The last wand with that core had immolated the wizard who used it, together with the surrounding area. Hermione's new wand slipped from her numb fingers, clattering on the floor.

"Are you insane? Honestly, to supply a budding Necromancer with a wand like that, you must be." Hermione retreated from the apparently mad man in front of her until her back was pressing against the door.

"If you had reacted in any other way than you just did, Miss Granger, we'd have been forced to kill you for that very reason. While this wand may provide you with near limitless power, it will also serve as a buffer for your Necromantic powers," Ollivander said, his words both comforting and chilling.

"Buffering those powers because it can contain them?" Hermione asked.

"Indeed. Someday, it will fail, as the dark powers will build up every time you hold your wand. I hope, for all our sakes, you will have gained enough control by then to contain them yourself."

Hermione shook her head. This was too much knowledge for her to absorb. She could feel her head spinning as she attempted to do so.

"How much for the wand, old friend?" Dumbledore asked, noticing her distress.

"Nothing, Albus, save another feather from your phoenix. As chimaera scale is a forbidden substance, I did not record constructing the wand, so I would keep the knowledge of what it is hidden. If you are asked, the core is phoenix feather. Any readings from that are subject to error as they are often off the range used. It is, needless to say, unregistered."

Dumbledore nodded, promising to send the feather as soon as Fawkes agreed to shed one. He took Hermione's elbow as he said their farewells and led the shocked girl to the Leaky Cauldron, requesting a private parlour from Tom with immediate effect.

A cup of tea later and Hermione was more herself again, able to ask questions. "Would you have killed me?"

Dumbledore regarded her for a long moment over his own steaming cup, his glasses misted up, causing him to peer at her from over them.

"Only as a last resort. While in the past, Necromancers have always been evil, I think that this is quite possibly a result of how society treated them.

"I feel I must apologize to you about my treatment of you in St. Mungo's. I lost my temper, something that should never have happened with an injured and grieving student like you. I was angry, but I was also afraid." Hermione's eyes widened at the thought that Dumbledore could be frightened of anything. "Whilst Voldemort is the most powerful Dark Lord to arise in this century, Grindelwald was capable of far more destruction."

"I know Grindelwald was a Necromancer, it says as much in *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* Are you afraid of me?" Hermione asked, incredulous that the greatest wizard of the age might be scared of her.

"Of what you will be capable of, yes. I would be a fool not to be. I think that it may be possible to break the trend of all Necromancers turning evil with you."

Hermione swallowed nervously. She hoped Dumbledore was right about her, but his confidence felt like a great weight on her shoulders. 'If he's wrong about me, it doesn't bear thinking of.'

"How much do you know of Necromancers, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes twinkling into her own.

"Not much. Even the Restricted Section doesn't have much on them..." Hermione trailed off, blushing as she realised what her words revealed about her unauthorised access to forbidden writings.

Dumbledore chuckled. "You are hardly the first student to sneak into there. I did so myself, but don't tell anyone. As Headmaster, I'm meant to set a good example." His smile faded as did the twinkle in his eyes. "Not much is known on Necromancers because the first priority has always been to kill them, not study them when one has arisen. But I can tell you that without exception, family and friends abandon those with Necromantic powers and more often than not turn on them. My confidence in Harry and Ronald leads me to hope that they will not desert you."

Hermione's face fell. She didn't have the same faith in her friends. They'd cast her aside before, over far more trivial things. "If they valued broomsticks over me before, I doubt they'll accept me now." She elaborated more at Dumbledore's quizzical expression. "Back in third year, Sirius sent Harry his Firebolt anonymously before we knew he was innocent. I told Professor McGonagall, leading her to confiscate it until it had been proved to be safe. They left me on my own."

"Ah. Well, they have grown up since then. It will be alright." Dumbledore sounded so confident that Hermione almost believed him.

"Nothing is alright anymore, sir. I don't think it ever will be," Hermione murmured, looking down into her empty mug for the first time since finishing it. The unfiltered tea leaves had formed a pattern that was all too familiar: the Dark Mark. She glared at it, sending a forceful Scourgify at it with her new wand. 'If I believed in Divination and had a constitution like Parvati or Lavender, I'd probably faint now.'

Dumbledore looked questioningly at her, but Hermione did not offer an explanation. Dumbledore finished his tea and stated that it was time to return to Hogwarts. As they approached the fireplace to Floo back, Hermione caught sight of a poster with a picture her face on it, looking startled. She recognised it as being from the *Witch Weekly* article of 'Harry Potter's Secret Heartache' in her fourth year. She looked closer, eyes widening as she read what it said.

'Hermione Granger. Wanted by the Ministry. Do not try to apprehend, inform the nearest Ministerial representative if seen.'

Before she could comment to Dumbledore on it, Rufus Scrimgeour stepped into the Leaky Cauldron, flanked by two Aurors. They moved to block the fireplace, wands held at the ready.

"Dumbledore, surrender that creature to us immediately. It should be dead," Scrimgeour said, pointing his wand towards Hermione's chest, where her heart skipped a beat.

"I'm sorry, Rufus, but Miss Granger is under my protection. She is innocent; I won't let you kill her. Stand aside," Dumbledore said calmly, his wand suddenly in his hand. He rested his other hand on Hermione's shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly.

"Give her to me and your position as Headmaster of Hogwarts will be under no threat. That monster you shelter will destroy us all if she is not executed now." Rufus was living up to his name, his face turning increasingly red with anger.

"Do calm down, Rufus. You'll burst a vessel." Dumbledore's words only served to make Scrimgeour apoplectic with rage, his face darkening to puce and bloodshot eyes bulging from their sockets behind his spectacles.

"If the Dark Lord gets his hands on her, you will have sentenced us all to a new dark age! I cannot let you go. Even if she is an innocent, she will turn evil. I've warned you for the last time. Get her!" Sparks shot from the end of Scrimgeour's wand as he ordered the Aurors to attack.

Three wands shot off into the corners of the room, leaving the Minister and his cronies unarmed. Scrimgeour let out an inarticulate cry of rage as he leapt at Hermione, large hands outstretched.

Her only excuse was that she reacted instinctively as she'd been trained to do so at some Muggle Self-Defence classes. Scrimgeour jerked her out of Dumbledore's grip, spinning her around as he brought his forearm across her neck. Hermione thrust her elbow back into his chest, causing his breath to whoosh out of his mouth. As Scrimgeour began to double over, she brought her right foot down on his instep. Seconds afterwards, she raised her fist, connecting with his nose with a satisfying crunch. She spun around as Scrimgeour's grip failed completely and finished him off with a raised knee to his groin. A strangled groan escaped him as he toppled over, blood running down from his nose as he curled into a defensive ball.

Hermione blinked, hands rising to her mouth as her brain caught up with her. 'Oh, my God. I attacked the Minister of Magic! If he didn't already want me dead, he would now.' The Aurors were gaping open mouthed at her and the fallen Minister. A deep, slow chuckle came from behind her. She turned to see Dumbledore laughing.

"Bravo! He needed to be brought down a peg or two. Come, while we have the element of surprise, let's go home." Dumbledore lead her to the fire, the Aurors still standing like lemons. A couple of flashes of green and cries of "Hogwarts!" and they were gone.

AN: Yes, it was written earlier in this chapter that no one in their right mind would attack someone under Dumbledore's personal protection. I never wrote that Scrimgeour was in his right mind.

## Chapter 7

*Chapter 8 of 25*

The choices of Mr. Potter (and Weasley): to be friends with a Necromancer or not.

Disclaimer: Not mine, no money made.

Thanks to my reviewers and LadySunflower for betaing this. Harry is particularly grateful, as without my beta, he'd think of Ron more highly than Hermione in his own mind.

Chapter 7

Harry looked over at Ron as they waited for Dumbledore to return to his office. They'd gained access by running through nearly every sweet in existence before correctly guessing 'Jelly Baby'. They knew that they'd pay for playing truant later, but they'd reasoned that it was hardly as if they could get any work done without Hermione anyway. Fawkes was also absent, but they'd caught sight of a large, fiery bird flying around the lake from the window.

Harry turned to face the door as he heard the staircase revolving. He opened his mouth to greet Dumbledore, only to choke on his words as the opening door revealed Snape.

"Potter, Weasley, why aren't you in your lessons? Let me see, that will be twenty points each from Gryffindor for every lesson that you've missed today and thirty more if you miss any more." Snape stood with his arms akimbo, a grim smile crossing his face.

"We're waiting for the Headmaster. He's expecting us," Harry spoke up.

"Five more points for failing to respect a teacher. We shall see...if he is expecting you, then you might escape further detentions. If not, then rest assured that you will never lie to me again." Snape crossed the floor to lean against the Headmaster's desk, watching the fire. "Professor Dumbledore should be back shortly, so you won't have long to wait."

The fire suddenly flared green seconds after Snape had finished speaking and Dumbledore stepped through, brushing soot off his robes as he crossed over to his chair. His wide smile slowly faded as he took in the sight of the boys and Potions Master waiting for him.

"Harry, Ronald, Severus. I did not expect to find you here at the same time. For future reference, boys, 'later' is when I summon you, but no harm done." A firm look at a disappointed Snape prevented him from adding the detentions as he had threatened.

"Why can't we see Hermione yet?" Ron blurted, obviously at the end of his patience.

"Now that she has a replacement wand, you may." Harry and Ron exchanged grins and made to get up to leave the office, eager to see their friend. "But not before you are aware of what has transpired." Dumbledore shut the door with a wave of his wand, sealing the room with an Imperturbable Charm.

"You are aware that Miss Granger was injured in a car crash?" Harry nodded, seeing Ron echo the movement out of the corner of his eye. "What else do you know? Nothing? I see." Dumbledore paused, stroking his beard as he presumably pulled his thoughts together.

"Please do not interrupt me. Any questions you have I will answer to the best of my ability, but after I finish." Harry glanced at Ron, wondering whether his short tempered friend would be able to restrain himself. Ron gave him a wounded look, obviously thinking that Harry's temper was not that much better.

"There were no survivors of the crash. When the Muggle ambulance arrived on the scene, Miss Granger was beyond their aid." Both boys opened their mouths, only to find that their voices would not cooperate. Harry caught sight of Snape's smirk and knew who was responsible.

"A surge of dark magic alerted the Ministry, and Miss Granger was removed to St. Mungo's as a result. That surge had resulted in her revival. The Healer who accepted her into his care was able to quickly and easily deal with her injuries, except for her reopened curse scar which still requires more treatment." Harry winced at this reminder of their misadventure in the Department of Mysteries. He glanced over at Ron, only to see that all the colour had drained from his face. Dumbledore appeared to have noted this too.

"You realise what that dark surge meant, Ronald. I'm sorry to say that there was no mistake; Necromancy was involved." Harry frowned; while this Necromancy was obviously a bad thing, he didn't recognise the term. "Death magic, Harry. The Darkest Arts of all. A Necromancer can bring the dead to life and reduce the living to dead."

Harry was ambivalent at the concept. Had Hermione been brought back by a Necromancer? If so, he'd be willing to thank whoever it was.

"The dark surge came from within Miss Granger. She is a Necromancer." A nasty jolt passed through Harry at Dumbledore's words. Ron was turning green at the edges now.

"Every Necromancer in the past has turned evil, although I have hopes that the same will not become of Miss Granger. What complicates matters further is that Professor Snape has discovered that Tom wants her on his side..." Dumbledore continued speaking, but Harry could not hear what he said through the ringing in his ears. The thought of Hermione turning traitor turned his stomach. 'Can I trust her anymore? Voldemort can be very persuasive when he wants to be.'

"No! We can't trust a Necromancer, even if it's Hermione. My dad told me about Grindelwald, about what he did and what he was going to do. He killed millions of Muggles and was going to bring them back as his army. And he was Muggle-born!" Ron's outburst revealed that the silencing spell Snape had applied had worn off.

"But, it's Hermione..." Harry managed to choke out, shaking his head in denial.

"Dad told me that all Necromancers turn bad, no matter how good they were. Ministry policy is to kill anyone suspected of either being brought back by one or being one."

"How? I mean, if a car crash doesn't stop one, what will?" Harry said, struggling to hold onto any strand of logic still in his grasp.

"I'm not sure, but Professor Dumbledore killed Grindelwald, didn't you, sir?" Ron met Dumbledore's gaze. Harry thought that he looked somewhat disappointed in their reaction.

"I did. But I will not kill Miss Granger if there is any other way to avoid her turning dark. And as I've already said, every Necromancer before has been rejected by society. If Miss Granger is not abandoned by those who care for her, there may be another way." Harry blinked. He'd obviously missed that particular snippet earlier.

"No, Harry. We can't. She was scary enough before she was a Necromancer, but now..." Ron shuddered, cold sweat running down his long nose.

Harry closed his eyes, his shoulders slumped. The terrible thought of Hermione betraying him, joining Voldemort, reared up in his mind. Ron would never do that, and Voldemort had no reason to want his service. 'I'm sorry, Hermione.'

"I can't, sir. Hermione can't betray me to Voldemort if I'm no longer friends with her." Snape hissed through his teeth in reaction to Harry voicing Voldemort's name out loud.

Dumbledore's mouth firmed, his eyes deeply saddened. "She was right. Miss Granger told me about the Firebolt incident in your third year. She believed you hadn't changed and would desert her now. For once, I was wrong. I thought better of you both." Harry cast his eyes down to the floor as Ron turned his head to face the fire.

"Cowards, both of them. Did you know your precious Gryffindor House had such lily-livered lions in this day and age, Headmaster? You don't get such fair-weather friends in any other House. Even the most suspicious, self-serving Slytherin is more loyal than your precious Potter and Weasley." Both boys' heads snapped up to glare at Snape as he demeaned them to Dumbledore who just sat there listening, not saying a word in their defence! Did he agree with Snape's opinion?

"Not that I can fault them. A Necromancer is far too much for mere boys to handle. I'd leave Miss Granger well alone if I were one of you, Potter, Weasley. I congratulate you, you've finally realised your limitations." Snape stalked closer, every word a sharp jab to their pride.

"Poor Miss Granger, left alone to face the rising darkness. What will you do when she loses control and the dark takes over? When she hunts you down, deserts that you are? I expect she'll kill you both and bring you back again and again, to exact her revenge. I only wish I could be there to see it, but if I have anything to do with it, Miss Granger will remain in control.

"Well, what are you two waiting for? Go to your next lesson, we will let Miss Granger know of your decision to abandon her in her time of need." Snape sneered at them, showing his contempt for them. Harry could only think that it was justified, this once. What kind of friend was he? He exhaled roughly, anger rising in him. 'I'll show him! He's wrong about me. Wrong!'

"No." He chorused with Ron, who'd apparently come to the same conclusion. "We'll stick with Hermione through thick and thin. We want to see her."

Harry caught Dumbledore winking at Snape. His eyes widened at the realisation that they'd just been manipulated out of their doubt. 'Oh, well. Hermione needs us.'

Dumbledore had allowed them to go straight up to the hospital wing, where they found Hermione. She was sitting up in bed, reading a book entitled *Grindelwald: the last Necromancer*. Harry swallowed at the thought that it was now out of date. There was a long awkward moment as Hermione looked up, glancing between them, her eyes narrowing as she took in Harry's guilty look and Ron's pallid skin.

"Hello, Harry, Ron. Good to see you." Her flat tone let Harry know that she was disappointed to see signs that she'd been all too right about how they would react to the knowledge of her new, dark powers.

"Er, hi. You look... you look the same as always, actually. A little pale, shadows under your eyes, but nothing out of the ordinary." Hermione snorted at Harry's clumsy words.

"What did you expect, for me to look like death warmed over?"

"Dunno. Just that you'd look different," Harry murmured. He inhaled sharply as Hermione locked eyes with him. Her eyes had not changed colour, but they looked different somehow. Harder, perhaps, or older. Maybe both. She'd obviously been through a lot.

Ron frowned as he looked at the wand resting on the table. "I thought Dumbledore said that you'd got a new wand. That's your old one." He refrained from touching it, as it was a breach of etiquette to touch another person's wand without permission.

"It's not. It's made of the same wood, carved exactly the same way, the same length. But it has a different core." Hermione paused, resting her hand on it. It seemed to vibrate at her touch. "Phoenix feather. My old wand had dragon heartstring."

"Huh. I had to put up with a broken wand for a year. Why does my family have to be so poor?" Ron scowled, shoving his hands in the pockets of his threadbare trousers.

Hermione's breath caught. She stared at Ron as the blood drained from her face, silent for a long moment. "There are more important things in life than money." She choked out, her eyes brimming with tears.

Harry and Ron both looked alarmed, both petrified of crying girls. Ron looked to Harry, his face pleading. Harry looked back, trying to communicate that this was his fault. In the end, they both approached Hermione as she buried her face in her hands, her body shaking with as she cried.

"What did I say? What's wrong?" Ron asked as he laid a large hand on Hermione's shoulder.

"Didn't Dumbledore tell you?" She managed between sobs.

Dumbledore's words from earlier ran through Harry's mind, leaving him to wonder bleakly why he hadn't caught on earlier. 'There were no survivors of the crash.'

"Oh, God, Hermione. I'm so sorry." Harry sat down beside her, wrapping his arms around her in an attempt at a comforting hug. Ron had still not caught on, a bewildered look on his freckled face. "Her parents," Harry mouthed. Ron's eyes widened, his face going slack. Then he pulled himself together, mirroring Harry's position.

"If it had been a Death Eater attack, I was prepared for their deaths. But this is..." Hermione's words were drowned out by more sobs. Harry could feel it as each sob wracked her body.

"It's what?" Ron asked, rubbing her back. She stiffened, obviously not comfortable with the contact, not that Ron seemed to notice. She shrugged out of their grip, raising her tear-stained face.

"My fault. They were taking me to catch the train. I should've used the Underground, then they'd still be alive, as well as Crookshanks." Another wave of tears threatened to spill from Hermione's bloodshot eyes. Both boys winced, they hadn't realised that the large cat had also been killed in the crash.

"It's not. You had no idea that it would happen," Harry said, striving to find something to say to comfort her. A hidden thought that had been lurking in his mind since he'd learned what a Necromancer was surfaced. "You could bring them back! Necromancers can bring the dead back to life, and you are one!"

"I don't know, Harry. I don't think that they'd thank me for it. They were religious people, believing that everyone and everything has a time to die." Ron looked relieved at Hermione's glum statement, but Harry was already thinking of his deceased loved ones. Perhaps he could persuade Hermione to try...

"Mione, d'you have any idea why Dumbledore was grinning when he came into his office? I mean, he was with you last," Ron asked, making an attempt to satisfy his own curiosity and to cheer her up.

Hermione stifled a laugh. "Ah. Well, just before we left the Leaky Cauldron for Hogwarts, Rufus Scrimgeour turned up with a couple of Aurors. They wanted Dumbledore to give me to them in order for me to be executed. He disarmed them, Scrimgeour grabbed me. I decked him."

"You attacked the Minister?!" Ron guffawed.

"He was going to execute you?" Harry asked, having forgotten what Ron had said about Ministry policy in Dumbledore's office.

"I'm a popular girl these days." Hermione smiled thinly. "The Ministry wants me six feet under, and Voldemort wants me on his side."

Just to prove how tactless he could be (worse than Ron at times), Harry asked when her parents' funeral was. Her face fell, and she looked away as another tear slid down her cheek.

"Tomorrow. Dumbledore pulled some strings to get it organised so fast. And before you ask, neither of you can come. I won't be alone, and your lessons here are important. You've probably already skipped some today. Come to think of it, you should be getting to your next one." Both boys groaned. Even when grief-stricken, Hermione was still the same about their education.

## Chapter 8

*Chapter 9 of 25*

The Grangers Funeral. In his own opinion, Severus slips up.

Disclaimer: Don't own Harry Potter or the associated characters and world. Time spent writing, enjoyment and reviews in return, not money.

Thanks as per usual to LadySunflower for betaing and to my reviewers.

Chapter 8

Severus was still smirking to himself as he made his way up to the hospital wing to collect Hermione. It had been worth another late night to see Potter struggle through his detention. Even by his own standards, it had been a particularly cruel and unusual punishment.

The harvesting of acromantula silk required something to distract the giant spiders. He'd used Potter as bait, leaving the boy dangling from a web at the edge of Aragog's territory, drawing the majority of the creatures to the sounds of the struggling body. Severus had neglected to tell Potter that he'd slipped a protective amulet around the brat's scrawny neck until after they had returned to the castle from the Forbidden Forest. If one of Aragog's children had gotten close enough, it would have been forcefully repelled, allowing no harm to come to the precious Boy-Who-Lived-To-Be-Bait.

He paused outside the door to wipe the smirk from his face, as it wouldn't do to let Hermione know what had amused him. No doubt that she would take Potter's side, especially if she learned exactly why he'd been given detention in the first place. He knocked on the door and opened it, stepping into the hospital wing.

Hermione was already dressed in her school uniform sans the robe and cloak, the only change being that her house colours were replaced by black. As the funeral also involved Muggles, he had forgone his own usual garb for a tailored black suit. Severus offered her his arm, which she looked blankly at for a moment before slipping her own arm around it.

Hermione was completely silent during the entire journey through Hogwarts castle and grounds to the Apparition point. For someone who had been looking for a way to keep her quiet for years, Severus was disturbed by her silence.

Severus had known that Hermione was an only child, but not that her parents also were. Her grandparents had died before she was born, leaving the only other mourners a few of Mr. and Mrs. Granger's colleagues from their dental practice along with the odd long-time patient. Condolences given from those other mourners rang hollow at best, as none of them could truly comprehend how Hermione felt. Severus grew even more concerned when she barely responded, her eyes dry, deadened and fixed on the ground.

They were left alone amongst the flower arrangements at the crematorium. Severus stepped closer to Hermione now that there were no observers to wonder at the physical interaction between teacher and student. His hands rested on her shoulders as he gently shook her. That did not rouse her from wherever her mind was hiding, so he grasped her jaw in one hand, tipping her chin up so that her eyes were forced to meet his. She gradually focussed on him, her face shut down, no emotion escaping the mask that had settled over it.

"Hermione, I know more than most how damaging it can be to bottle your emotions up. While I don't doubt that you think that you've shed all of your tears, the loss of your parents will supply near limitless amounts." She averted her eyes at his words, pulling back as she tried to free herself from his grip.

"Look at me. How many times have you told me that to cut yourself off from emotions is to entrap yourself in a prison of your own making?" Hermione reluctantly met his gaze at his entreaty.

"I don't want to feel anything at the moment. I can't cope with the loss of control; it scares me," Hermione whispered, her voice hoarse from lack of use.

Severus snorted. "If you hold everything in for too long you'll blow your top."

Hermione didn't react, other than to look away again. She shook her head, making her bushy mane whip around. "Emotions are something I can't afford at the moment. I won't be ruled by them."

"You're a Necromancer, not a Dementor's victim," Severus remarked. Hermione without emotions was hardly Hermione at all; he would not let her retreat into herself.

"That's just another reason to ditch my emotions."

Severus narrowed his dark eyes at the girl before him. "Without your emotions, you lose all sense of yourself. You need your feelings intact to stand any chance of withstanding the Dark Arts without falling to them."

"I don't think I could feel anything today even if I wanted to." Severus arched an eyebrow at her words then acted on impulse to prove her wrong. His hand on her face slipped around to the base of her head, fingers threading into her hair. He bent down to bring his head on level with hers, leaning forward to close the scant inches separating them as he tilted his face to keep his sizeable nose out of the way.

It would have been a simple, close-mouthed kiss if Hermione's jaw hadn't dropped in her surprise at his abrupt move. As it was, Severus had to bite his tongue to prevent it from exploring at the very first touch of her lips against his own. His mind screamed at him to end the contact as she got over her surprise and started to kiss him back, her arms snaking around his body to pull herself closer to him.

He pulled away, breathing harshly as he struggled to contain his body's automatic response to the feel of her curvaceous form against his own lean frame. He swallowed, eyes avoiding Hermione at all costs. "I shouldn't have done that. The Headmaster will have my head if he finds out what just happened, or worse: he'll give me to Minerva McGonagall for molesting one of her cubs."

Hermione reached up, grabbing his face with her hands. "They don't need to know. Besides, you told me that Professor Dumbledore agreed to your seducing me."

"Yes, but I was to begin after you came of age. There are nasty names for teachers who seduce their students under the age of seventeen."

Hermione pulled his face down to her own to force him to meet her gaze. "Then it's just as well that I'm already of age, isn't it? My use of a Time Turner guarantees that." Even if he shouldn't have kissed her, at least the spark had returned to her eyes. In fact, the way that her pupils were dilated, he wondered if he'd managed to ignite her desire with a single kiss. That train of thought gave him enough warning to turn his head as she leant forwards, leaving her lips to land on his cheek. He firmly pushed her away, attempting to soften the perceived rejection by keeping his hands on her.

"Be that as it may, school records do not take that into account. We must wait." He Disapparated only to arrive at the school boundary alone. "Confounded girl!" he exclaimed, Apparating back to the crematorium.

Hermione was transfixed, head cocked as though listening to something. Her eyes were wider than he'd ever seen them, her lips bloodless. She looked seriously spooked by something. She spun towards him, stumbling into his arms.

"Get me out of here!" she moaned, voice trembling. Severus did as she asked, taking them both to the gates of Hogwarts.

"Would you care to tell me what provoked this kind of reaction?" Severus asked, his arms full with the trembling girl.

Hermione shook her head against his chest, but that was not in answer to his question, rather in reaction to what she'd just experienced. She pulled her head away, so that her voice would not be muffled. "Someone was still alive when they were cremated," she stated, the waver still present in her voice.

"What? Who? Why didn't you say something when we were still there, we could have stopped it..." Hermione touched her slim, ink-stained fingers to his lips, silencing him in mid-sentence.

"It's already happened. I remember hearing something about it years back on the Muggle news. But just now, I heard the death cry, like I was there when it happened. I've a feeling that this was my first conscious taste of my Necromantic powers."

"You can hear the dead, even when they didn't become ghosts," Severus mused.

"It's like an audible bloodstain. An echo of the past." Hermione froze, her wide eyes turning towards the castle. "Severus, how many people have died in Hogwarts?" Her voice was shrill with fear.

"A fair few, I'm afraid. You need to learn how to control your Necromancy; maybe then you won't have to hear these people die." Severus watched her close her eyes, breathing deeply as she tried to master her fear. His eyes widened as he observed the surrounding vegetation ice over, his breath misting the suddenly cold air. The frost vanished as Hermione calmed down, leaving no trace of it as she opened her eyes.

"I just wish that there was a guide as to how to use Necromantic powers," Hermione murmured as they headed for the castle, apparently unaware that she had just brought the earliest frost to this part of Scotland since the eruption of Tambora in 1815.

By the time they had reached the hospital wing, Hermione was leaning on Severus. The funeral had obviously taken a greater toll on her than she had expected.

"Let this be a lesson, Miss Granger. Suppressing emotions is tiring. You don't have the energy to do so at the present time," Severus said, using her surname to avoid questioning by Madam Pomfrey who was currently itching to pour a dozen potions down Hermione's throat to heal her curse scar further.

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione said, her eyes following him as he walked away. Severus realised that she hadn't specifically thanked him for accompanying her to the funeral. That coupled with the way she'd gazed after him lead him to wonder if she had his impulsive kiss in mind.

'That girl will be the death of me.'

AN: I am not terribly experienced at writing anything romantic, so please bear that in mind if you think it's horrendous.

## Chapter 9

*Chapter 10 of 25*

Back to school, Hermione slips into action.

Disclaimer: If you don't know who this really belongs to, the entire story won't make a lot of sense.

Thanks to those who review. It does help me write faster to know that you are enjoying this. Without my beta, this wouldn't be posted, so thank you LadySunflower.

## Chapter 9

Hermione was fit to return to lessons by the end of the first week of school to the enthusiastic welcome of her housemates. No one knew that she was a Necromancer thanks to the Ministry being unwilling to cause pandemonium by including that information on the wanted posters featuring her. A few people had asked her why the Minister wanted her to be answered that she'd 'accidentally' kneed him in the groin. The new first years appeared to be just as scared of her as they had been of Harry the previous year, but after Ron had repeatedly told her exactly how scary she was over the years, that didn't faze her much.

She had managed to avoid many places where people had died, with Gryffindor Tower being completely free of them, thankfully, along with the main corridors.

They were running late to breakfast on Friday morning when Hermione's stress manifested itself rather unfortunately. The stone floor around her and the staircase in front suddenly iced over. Hermione had not been any good whatsoever at ice skating in her childhood and found that this had not changed at all. Her legs flew out from under her, and her lunge for the banister caused her to slip forwards. She missed the banister entirely, falling head over heels down the flight of stairs to land in an undignified heap at the bottom.

"Fuck! Is it too much to ask for the bloody floor not to turn against me too? Whatever bloody fucking demon was responsible for Necromancy, I'll ram its bugging pitchfork so far up its arse it'll have another set of horns! Ah, fucking hell, it hurts..." Hermione's stream of invectives completely stunned her best friends, as they gaped down at her from the top of the stairs. She cradled her left arm, possibly broken from where she'd hit the stairs in an attempt to shield her head. She'd have several nasty bruises, that was for sure.

"Hermione..." Ron said weakly, shaking his head in disbelief. "If I hadn't heard that with my own ears, I'd never believe you knew how to swear." Harry followed him down even as the ice vanished without a trace. "You alright?"

"Do I bloody well look alright?" Hermione snarled, gingerly getting to her feet. At least neither of her legs were broken, although her knees threatened to give out from under her. She pulled her wand out, feeling some relief that it hadn't broken in her fall. "*Ferula*," she muttered, conjuring a splint for her injured arm.

"Er, Mione, don't you think you should visit the hospital wing?" Harry asked, bending down to pick up her book bag.

"No, not if I want breakfast. Come on. We're late enough as it is." She took her book bag and slung it over her right shoulder, ignoring Harry's protests that one of them should carry it for her.

By the time Hermione had hobbled to the Great Hall, they had just under five minutes to eat something before they had to leave to get to their first lesson. The moment Hermione stepped through the doors, gasps echoed around the cavernous room, along with stifled exclamations. Hermione looked up at the ceiling to find that the enchantment had failed. She stepped back into the entrance hall and found that she had to be the cause as it once again gave the impression of being invisible, displaying the dull skies with threatening rain clouds. An exasperated breath escaped her lips as she marched back in, her approach to her house table only spoiled by her slight limp with every other step. No one was watching her, though, all eyes being fixed on the ceiling or on their food.

"Huh. I wonder what's up with the ceiling. The only other time it looked like this was the leaving feast after Cedric Diggory was killed," Ginny Weasley murmured, leaning across the table to direct the comment to Hermione, in the hopes that the Brain of Gryffindor would know.

Hermione glared up at the ceiling, resenting the additional reminder of her unnatural powers. As if she needed one after the icy floor. "I'll explain later," she said shortly, knowing that Ginny could be trusted with such sensitive information as to what she was.

She felt the prickling sensation on the back of her neck that usually meant that she was being watched. Hermione looked up, her eyes sweeping the room to find three sets of eyes from the Head Table meeting her gaze as it swept past. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape were all watching her, most likely having connected the faulty enchanted ceiling with her. Hermione looked away, her cheeks flushing. 'They don't look happy. I hope the ceiling isn't an indicator of any other fault with the castle, like the wards! The sooner I get these powers of mine under control, the better. But from where do I learn how?'

Having washed a couple of slices of toast down with a goblet of what had been pumpkin juice before she'd transfigured it into coffee, Hermione trailed after the boys on the way to Defence Against the Dark Arts. She'd missed the first lesson and only hoped that it hadn't been anything too vital. Just before she reached the classroom, a hand clamped down on her shoulder, bringing her to an abrupt halt in the corridor.

"Miss Granger, while I do realise that you are eager to return to your lessons, you are not in any shape to practice duelling. Or is that splint just for decoration?" The dry tones of Severus Snape came from just behind her, the use of her surname a reminder that they were not alone.

"No, sir. But I've already missed at least one of your lessons, and I'd rather not miss another," Hermione said, turning in order to meet his gaze.

"You have ten minutes to return here from the hospital wing. Return in time and I'll allow you to stay." Severus gave her a gentle shove in the direction of the main staircase. She stood a good chance of returning in time if Madam Pomfrey was not busy with another unfortunate student, as the hospital wing was just one floor up from the Defence classroom.

Madam Pomfrey was not amused to see her so soon and subjected Hermione to a scolding as she patched up her arm and various bruises. The mediwitch was obviously tempted to keep her from returning to her lessons for the day, but relented. "I've seen more of you than any other student currently in this castle, Hermione Granger. That includes Potter. Be off with you!"

Hermione arrived at the Defence classroom with minutes to spare, slipping in to the seat Harry had saved for her without interrupting Severus's lecture too much.

"We covered non-verbal spells last time. I just hope Snape doesn't pick on you!" Harry whispered.

"Right. That shouldn't be a problem." Even as Hermione spoke, it was obvious that Severus was going to use her to make an example.

"Miss Granger, come here." Hermione obeyed his command, stepping up onto the duelling circle he had been lecturing from. "You missed the first lesson on the use of non-verbal spells in duels. Have you any faith in your ability to do so without the benefit of a lesson?" At Hermione's hesitant nod, she could see his lips twitch with the hint of a smile. "Very well. Let's see if you can put theory into practice; the rest of your house failed completely."

Hermione caught sight of the anticipation on the faces of the Slytherins and on some of the Gryffindors. The majority of the school would probably love it if someone could cut her down to size, even if that someone was the most reviled teacher in the place.

She pulled her wand out, the vibration of the wood under her hand reminding her to be careful. It wouldn't do to blast Severus into next week if she could possibly help it.

Teacher and student assumed the customary duelling stance, ten paces apart. Hermione decided to give the pureblood supremacist idiots like Malfoy a surprise and lowered her body in a graceful formal curtsy of the exact prescribed depth for a man of Severus's standing. Severus almost forgot to incline his head in return, apparently almost as taken aback as anyone else in the room with sufficient knowledge of formal Wizarding society. Hermione straightened up, wand held at the ready. Severus mirrored her position.

Severus gave her no warning, firing off jinxes silently. Having learned from her mistake in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione automatically ducked, dropping to the floor and rolling to her feet a few metres from her original position.

"While adequate, your avoidance mechanisms are not under test. Stand your ground and conjure a shield, silently." Severus cast another round of jinxes; a shower of red sparks fast heading in her direction. Hermione held out until the last possible moment to get the maximum ricochet effect.

'*Protego!*' Hermione thought, obviously with a little too much force, as Severus's jinxes rebounded violently, ricocheting around the room, hitting many of the observing

students and causing the majority of the class to dive for cover. Severus got up from the floor, where he'd dived down to avoid being hit.

"...One point to Gryffindor, for non-verbal casting on the first attempt. One point from Gryffindor for every onlooker who was hit. Observers are not meant to be hit in duels, Miss Granger. Remember that if you please."

Hermione bit her lip, looking around the room. Six students had been hit, meaning that Gryffindor was down a further five points. Yet her housemates did not look too put out, as it was almost unheard of for Snape to award even one measly point to Gryffindor. He was obviously not an impostor, as he had deducted sufficient points at the same time to remain partial to his own house. The majority of students caught in the crossfire were Slytherins, after all. Severus lifted the hex from the students afflicted with it (having picked one that was easily dealt with, obviously expecting it to be reflected at him at some point during the duel).

The remainder of the lesson passed without any further incidents well, apart from Neville stunning the Slytherins by succeeding in casting a non-verbal spell. He was only hopeless at potions, after all. Severus caught Hermione's eye as she reached for her book bag in order to leave the classroom to get to Transfiguration on time. He motioned her to follow him into his office at the back of the room.

"I had every confidence that you'd succeed, Hermione. I wouldn't have called on you if I thought you might fail."

"You know I've never had any trouble putting theory into practice. What is it?" Hermione asked, as it wasn't common practice for Severus to keep her behind after a lesson.

"Are you having trouble controlling your new wand? I've heard Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick waxing lyrical about your skill with a wand for years. If I hadn't seen what happened just now with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it."

"The core is more powerful than I'm used to. I just need to adjust to it." Hermione brandished the wand in question, casting an Imperturbable Charm to keep any would-be eavesdropper from overhearing anything else she said. "It's a chimaera scale, Severus."

Severus's dark eyes widened with unmistakable alarm. "Ollivander must be out of his mind. Even in the hands of a capable witch like you, it's too dangerous."

"Maybe. But it's also the only wand core that stands a chance of buffering Necromantic powers. Speaking of which, my weekend will be consumed by my attempts to find the equivalent to an *Idiot's Guide to Necromancy*." Hermione glanced down at her watch, to find that she would be late for Transfiguration. "I've got to go. I'm already late; Professor McGonagall will use me as a test subject for Human Transfiguration."

Severus scribbled something on a scrap of parchment and rolled it up, dripping wax on the seam and sealing it with his signet ring. He handed it to Hermione. "Give that to her and she shouldn't mind too much."

The rest of the day passed smoothly, with her professors obviously pleased to see her back in classes. By the time lessons were over, though, Hermione was in a foul mood. Every single one of her teachers (with the exception of Severus) had treated her with kid gloves, some of them not even bothering to hide their sickening looks of pity. Well, pity and a dash of fear in the case of Professor McGonagall, who was more than a little uncomfortable with having a Necromancer in the castle, let alone in her classroom.

So when Ginny cornered her in the common room, Hermione was sorely tempted to metaphorically bite her head off.

"You said you'd explain about the enchanted ceiling." Ginny crossed her arms, her eyebrows raised expectantly.

Hermione said nothing in reply, just grabbed Ginny's arm and dragged her upstairs to the sixth year girl's dormitories. Ginny looked bewildered, but didn't resist as she was shoved onto Hermione's bed. The younger girl watched as Hermione cast a variation on the Imperturbable Charm to produce a privacy dome around the four-poster bed.

"There, we can talk now." Hermione pocketed her wand and sat down beside Ginny.

"I take it this is a secret?" Ginny's eyes sparkled with interest.

"Yes. Well, as secret as something can be when more than two people know. While I think of it..." Hermione pulled her wand out again, motioning for Ginny to do the same. "I do trust you, but I think it would be best if you swore a wand oath not to tell anyone who doesn't already know of what I'm about to tell you."

Ginny didn't hesitate and touched the tip of her wand to Hermione's. "I swear to do as you ask; my lips are sealed."

Hermione explained about being a Necromancer and the knock-on effects of not knowing how to control the powers that came with it.

Although Ginny had been raised with the same knowledge as Ron concerning Necromancers, she also had a lot of sympathy for Hermione's situation. After all, she knew first hand what it was to have no control over your own actions, having been possessed by the sixteen year-old memory of Tom Riddle in her first year.

"I can hardly abandon you now, 'Mione. It's not as if you decided to be a Necromancer. Plus, I figure that I owe you my support. If I'd not been such a fool in my first year, you wouldn't have been Petrified. You never seemed to blame me for that and setting a basilisk on someone is a not a trivial matter, even if I had the excuse that I was not myself when I did it."

They sat in silence for a moment, Ginny fiddling with the ends of her hair. "You said that the library has nothing useful. What about the Room of Requirement? I seem to remember that last year during the Dumbledore's Army meetings, it had entire shelves of specifically defensive magic books appear. Why don't you see if you can get the same results for Necromancy manuals?"

Hermione gaped at Ginny, stunned that she'd missed something so obvious. A grin spread across her face, which the younger girl returned with a small smile. "Ginny, I could kiss you. Forget dinner, this is more important. I'll see you later; got to go."

After she had cancelled the privacy dome, Hermione dashed off, almost elbowing Harry and Ron in their faces as they made to get up as she hurried towards where they sat in their favoured seats in front of the fireplace. "If you two come with me, you'll miss dinner," she gasped out, not waiting to see if they would follow before rushing out of the common room to the other end of the seventh floor.

As it turned out, both boys were thinking with their stomachs, so Hermione paced in front of the blank wall opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy on her own. 'I need a room with everything written on Necromancy in existence.' She had just finished walking in front of it for the third time when the door to the Room of Requirement materialised. She pulled it open only to be buried in a deluge of books and scrolls. Hermione fought her way out of the pile and began the tricky process of throwing the books back into the room without more falling out.

"Someone somewhere must be laughing their head off. A bookworm buried by books. This is not something I'll be admitting to."

Hermione finally managed to close the door, which vanished after she resolutely turned her back on it and began the process anew, pacing three more times whilst fiercely concentrating on a hopefully less damaging thought. 'I need the best manual on Necromancy and a nice, quiet place to read it.'

This time her idea worked perfectly. When she opened the door this time, a small room was revealed, furnished with a desk, comfortable looking chair and a solitary book on top of the desk. Hermione crossed over and sat down, noting that the door closed automatically. It was virtually impossible for her to be interrupted here, too, as even if Ginny informed the boys as to where she had gone, they did not know the exact thought used to make the door appear.

The book called to her to be picked up, a compulsion she had no desire to resist. It was bound in green leather with no apparent title. Silver clasps held it closed, which snapped open at the first touch of Hermione's fingers. That tingle of magic prompted her to check for other, perhaps harmful, enchantments. The Book (as Hermione decided to call it) was almost innocuous. It seemed to be as harmless as a manual on Necromancy could be, but the wards were unfamiliar. Her Ancient Runes and



Arithmancy professors had stressed how dangerous mysterious wards could be; opening this book could be the last thing she ever did. Hermione threw caution to the wind, laying her wand on the desk, and opened the book.

## Chapter 10

*Chapter 11 of 25*

Hermione's control over her powers is growing, fortunately for a suicidal student.

Disclaimer: Anything recognisable no doubt isn't mine.

Thank you for betaing this, LadySunflower. Thanks also to anyone who has or will review this.

Chapter 10

Harry hadn't seen anything of Hermione over the weekend. Neither had Ron or Ginny, but the latter had told them that she was most likely shut in the Room of Requirement with books on Necromancy. Apparently the library was severely lacking in a *How to Be a Necromancer* guide.

They had attempted to get in to drag Hermione off for meals, but the door refused to appear. Harry had finally reasoned that the room would provide food and lodgings for Hermione when needed and dragged the others off for a game of Quidditch. As the new Gryffindor team captain, he'd have to hold Quidditch trials soon to replace the graduated Chasers and Beaters (not that Fred and George Weasley had actually graduated; more like absconded). While he'd rather keep the team members like Ron, Ginny and Katie Bell where they were, they all insisted that they try out again too.

Hermione finally emerged from her self-imposed exile, slumping down at the Gryffindor house table on Monday for breakfast. Dark circles lined her eyes and her hair looked a little wilder than usual, but otherwise she was no worse off for her forbidden reading session.

"Find what you needed?" Harry asked.

"Was it written in blood?" Ron managed between mouthfuls of bacon.

"Did you sleep?" Ginny enquired.

Hermione didn't answer the shower of questions until she'd forced down a goblet of the foul sludge that she called coffee. "Yes, no and a bit. That kind of book isn't exactly conducive to a good night's sleep."

"Did it include everything you need to know?" Harry muttered, recognising the need to keep this conversation hushed.

"I think so." Hermione sounded a little uncertain.

"It's a book, 'Mione. Surely you'd know so." Ron scoffed.

Hermione raised her head, glaring at Ron until he ducked his head, his ears flaming a deeper red than his hair. "It's no ordinary book. I think rather than me reading it, it read me. I certainly feel a little odd."

"How so?" Ginny whispered, blood draining from her face. After the disaster with the diary, she was more than a little paranoid of magical books.

"I don't know how to describe it. Stretched, maybe. Violated, because when I try to remember what I read, I draw a blank. That's never happened before."

"Maybe you just need to reread it." Ron offered, nervously glancing at his pallid sister.

Hermione scowled. "I've never needed to do that before."

Harry stared at her. He was vaguely aware of both Ron and Ginny doing the same. "You've never had to reread anything? But, how? I mean, that's impossible."

A slow smile crept across Hermione's face, together with a blush. "No, Harry. It's just unusual. If you'd ever read *Hogwarts: A History*, you'd know that there have been other people with a perfect memory." The smile faded as she looked away.

"You have an eidetic memory, just like Tom," Ginny stated. Both boys stared at her, causing her to roll her eyes. "A perfect memory, like Hermione said. Having one enables you to resist Memory Charms and amnesia." It was a little creepy the way Ginny seemed to have absorbed some of Tom Riddle's knowledge, but at least she had gained something from her near-death experience.

"How's that fair? No wonder 'Mione's top student. If I had a memory like that, I'd be just as smart."

"No, because you wouldn't read. Hermione's only on top because she makes an effort." Ginny pointed out.

"It's not as if Hermione doesn't help us, either, so don't talk like that," Harry said, backing Ginny up.

"It's also not as if Hermione's memory is infallible, as her experience with The Book proves."

Harry blinked. He'd never heard Hermione refer to herself in third person before, or talk in quite such a sarcastic tone. It was almost as if she'd morphed into Snape.

"The Book?"

"I think it deserves the capitalization. I need to get to Ancient Runes now." Hermione jumped up and made to hurry off.

"We'll go with you; we're going back to the common room," Harry said as he gave Ron an encouraging kick to stop stuffing his face.

Leaving Ginny to the rest of her breakfast, they followed Hermione up the main staircase, only for them both to almost walk into her as she suddenly stopped at the door to the fifth floor.

"Hermione, what..." Harry started to ask, but Hermione ignored him. She sped off, leaving the boys to exchange mystified looks. Rather than follow Hermione through the maze of corridors, Harry pulled out the Marauder's Map.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." Ink spread rapidly across the surface of the map, revealing that Hermione was fast approaching the fourth door to the left of the statue of Boris the Bewildered: the prefect's bathroom. A flickering dot was inside.

"Harry, why is that dot flickering? Can you see the name?" Ron asked, peering at the map from over his shoulder.

"Dunno, but it can't be good. It's a long name, whoever it is. C'mon."

There was an explosion that rocked the floor, together with a cloud of dust at the end of the corridor, coming from just beyond the statue of the bewildered wizard. Harry dashed over, the map held tightly in his hand. It seemed that the door to the bathroom wouldn't open when someone was inside, so Hermione had blasted the wall open.

Harry had just reached the hole with Ron on his heels when they heard a splash.

"Is she that desperate for a bath?" Ron demanded.

Through the clearing dust and rubble, they could see that Hermione had discarded her robes and shoes, diving into the full bath (no bubbles) fully clothed. She surfaced, together with whoever it was whose dot flickered on the map.

"Help me get her out, will you?" Hermione called, treading water as she moved herself and the body in her arms to the edge of the swimming pool sized bath.

They both obeyed without question, seeing that whoever Hermione had rescued was larger than her. When Harry got a look at the mystery girl's face, he almost dropped her.

"It's Millicent Bulstrode!"

Ron let go, leaving Harry to attempt to slow the descent of the hefty girl. "Why're we saving a Slytherin?"

Hermione climbed out of the bath, her hair clinging to her. "Because no one deserves what happened to her, and it's the right thing to do." She knelt by the Slytherin's side, grabbing her wrist and feeling for a pulse, biting her lip when she didn't seem to find one. "I don't suppose either of you know how to do CPR?"

Harry shook his head, while Ron looked more befuddled than ever. "One of you go and get a teacher. Preferably Professor Dumbledore, but McGonagall or Snape will do. Go!"

Harry shoved Ron towards the hole in the wall, knowing it would possibly traumatize him to see Hermione perform cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, especially when he didn't understand the process. Shaking his head, Ron ran off.

"What do I do?" Harry asked as he wiped the dust from his glasses with a damp sleeve.

"Fix that hole and open the door." Hermione then returned her attention to Bulstrode, pinching the other girl's nose shut and leaning in. Harry turned away, glad to have something else to focus on.

He'd got the wall fixed with a swift *Reparo* and shoved the door open, when he heard footsteps fast approaching. He peered out into the corridor and spotted Ron leading McGonagall and Snape. Ron eyed the missing hole curiously, stepping aside to let the professors enter first.

"Mr. Weasley tells me that the three of you saved a student..." McGonagall trailed off as she spotted the rather soggy and bedraggled Hermione bent over Bulstrode, hands performing another compression. Ron's eyes bugged out rather comically as she once again pinched Bulstrode's nose and lowered her mouth to give the other girl another breath. Snape brushed past the onlookers, wand in hand. He motioned for Hermione to move, waiting for her to be clear before casting a few non-verbal spells. These seemed to restart Bulstrode's breathing (and presumably circulation). After conjuring a stretcher beneath her, Snape began the process of levitating it to the hospital wing.

McGonagall pulled herself together, directing a few drying spells at the three Gryffindors in front of her. Harry noted that Hermione's hair seemed to resist these and absently mused that it always did seem to have a life of its own. After Hermione had replaced her robes and shoes, McGonagall herded them to the hospital wing, wanting an explanation and thinking that Snape and Madam Pomfrey should hear it too.

"Professor Snape tells me that you saved Miss Bulstrode. Good work, although your Muggle technique did crack her ribs." Ron's chest puffed up, only to deflate as he realised that Madam Pomfrey was pleased with Hermione, not him.

"So that was a Muggle method? Rather barbaric." McGonagall commented.

"Cardio-pulmonary resuscitation has its uses for those with little magical medical knowledge."

Ron seemed relieved at the mediwitch's words. The sight of Hermione essentially kissing a girl had disturbed him.

"How did you know something was wrong?" McGonagall asked. Harry had been watching Snape as she voiced her question and noted an almost imperceptible twitch passing through the greasy git. He also noticed Hermione stiffen.

"If this concerns some Necromantic power, don't worry about me. I already know; it's stated on your medical records, Miss Granger. As for the patient, she is still unconscious." Madam Pomfrey's tone seemed to indicate that to her, it was no big deal.

"I've been hearing echoes of the past where people have died. That also seems to include people who are dying. I heard Millicent Bulstrode's voice in my head when I'd reached the fifth floor on my way to Ancient Runes. Harry and Ron were following me on their way up to Gryffindor Tower," Hermione explained, her eyes fixed on her shoes as Ron and McGonagall shuddered at her words.

"I didn't have enough time to break the wards on the door, so I blasted a hole in the wall. Millicent was in the water, lying on the bottom of the bath. I removed my shoes and robe, then dived in. When I surfaced with her, Harry and Ron had arrived. They helped me get her out of the bath; just before I started CPR, Ron went to get you. Harry fixed the hole in the wall whilst waiting for you to arrive."

"Well done, the three of you. I do believe that your rescue of Miss Bulstrode warrants one hundred points. Keep it up and we'll be back in the running." McGonagall glared at Snape as she said this, obviously put out that he'd caused Gryffindor to be in negative points. She turned to leave.

"Professor, wait. What I heard of Millicent's dilemma was disturbing. Her voice was not the only one in my head. It sounded like she was arguing with someone; I think this was intended to look like a suicide but was attempted murder."

Complete silence reigned for a moment; then a chorus of gasps, exclamations and questions erupted.

"What?"

"Explain!"

"No way. Who'd want to do her in? She's no one special." Harry breathed a sigh of relief that Ron's outburst was drowned out, or Snape would have seen to it that Gryffindor lost more points.

"It felt like she was trying to fight off the Imperius Curse. I don't know who would cast it on her, though; I'm hardly friendly with her." That was an understatement if Harry had ever heard one. Bulstrode was the largest girl in the school, matching Goyle for size even now. She'd also used her physical strength against Hermione twice in Harry's knowledge.

Snape and McGonagall looked troubled by this. "Do not concern yourself with this. Concentrate on your schoolwork," McGonagall ordered.

"Come with me, Miss Granger. I'll ensure that you are not penalized for being late to your lesson," Snape said. Hermione did as he asked with no complaint.

Hermione yawned widely, covering her mouth with a hand. Her lack of sleep at the weekend was catching up with her. While the amount she had managed the previous night in the comfortable bed provided by the Room of Requirement would have been sufficient for the day, she had not bargained on being called to save Millicent Bulstrode. It had been worth it, if only for the rare treat of being thanked by Severus as he escorted her to Ancient Runes. She certainly didn't expect Millicent to thank her; rather, she expected the heavily built girl to resent owing a life debt to a Muggle-born.

Ancient Runes had been a struggle, forcing her eyes to focus on the complex glyphs. The only reason Hermione had not fallen asleep in Defence was the requirement to stand and duel for the majority of the lesson. It had been pure dumb luck that she had managed to keep casting non-verbal Shielding Charms, although the effort of keeping the power of the resulting spells down tired her even more. Lunch revived her a bit, but by the end of Double Potions she was in a foul mood.

Professor Slughorn had been impressed by her knowledge, flattering her with the repetition of what Harry had said concerning her. 'The best in our year' indeed! But having observed Harry produce a perfect potion (beating her own), Hermione was fuming at the realization that Harry was cheating.

"Harry James Potter!" Hermione pulled the Boy-Who-Lived-To-Cheat aside as soon as they had reached the relative privacy of the common room. "Give me that book."

Harry handed it over. Hermione immediately understood how he was cheating. It had been 'edited' by someone who could only be a Potions whiz. What was more, she knew who that Potions whiz was. After all, she'd seen that handwriting enough to be intimately familiar with it. 'What is Harry doing with Severus's old Potions book?'

It seemed that Harry hadn't expected to be able to continue with Potions, so Slughorn had provided him with this book. He also refused to part with it.

"Harry, I cannot condone cheating. Either ditch this book, or..."

"Or what? You can't make me..."

"Or I won't help you with your work while you use it. Your choice; be best at Potions at the expense of your other subjects. Don't think Ron will help you either. You carry on cheating and he goes without my help too."

Hermione stormed off at Harry's decision to keep the book, leaving a pale-faced Ron. While it was hardly fair to exclude him as well, she also knew that Ron would pass on any help she offered.

'Boys! Cheating dogs, the lot of them. Maybe I should have pointed out exactly whose additions in that book were of such value. Harry hates Severus. Surely he wouldn't accept the book if he knew. The only problem is that now he'll assume that I'm lying to get him to discard it. I could scream!'

## Chapter 11

*Chapter 12 of 25*

Occlumency lessons, planned and on the spot.

Disclaimer: Still not mine... and never will be.

As always, thanks to LadySunflower for betaing this.

Thanks to anyone who bothers to review this, but in particular to DeathSong who reviewed this story the most: 10 chapters so far.

Chapter 11

Severus kept an eye on Hermione whenever he could, occasionally checking on her using a crystal ball when she was out of his eyesight. Not all tools used for Divination were useless, although a crystal ball was only useful for scrying in his experience. He'd already been on the way to the prefect's bathroom when Weasley had almost run into him with Minerva in tow.

He observed her storming off after an argument with Potter, apparently over a book. The misty, soundless view provided by the glass ball in his hands didn't allow him to know exactly what the book was, although it did look familiar.

As the light given by the torches flickered around her, Severus realised that it was inadvisable to allow a Necromancer to get this angry and ended the spell, slipping the globe into his pocket.

"What's your hurry, Miss Granger?" It had taken him several minutes to intercept her, by which time the torches had been extinguished and the temperature was dropping rapidly. Severus took a step back as Hermione looked up, her eyes dark with suppressed fury. Her fists clenched until they were white knuckled, and it looked for a second as if she might lash out at him.

He had the presence of mind to pull her into an empty classroom and cast an Imperturbable Charm before she could vent her anger.

"None of your business. Let me out." Hermione turned her back on him, holding herself stiffly.

"You are my business, girl. In case you haven't noticed, you are a little too volatile in your current state for me to allow you out. Sit down, calm yourself and then you will tell me what's bothering you."

Hermione let out a strangled sound that had quite a lot in common with a growl. "Let me out right now, Professor, or I won't be responsible for my actions." She reached for her wand.

Severus had been holding his own wand hidden up his sleeve, so he was prepared. *Petrificus Totalus!* Hermione's limbs locked together, snapping to the sides of her

body. She toppled towards the floor to be caught by Severus, who flipped her around in his arms so that her enraged eyes could meet his own.

"The day you catch me unawares is a long way off, Hermione. Do I really have to use Legilimency on you? I thought that you felt that you could tell me anything. What could have changed that?" Severus could feel his spell giving way already, enough for Hermione to free her head from the grip of the Body-Bind Curse.

"Don't you dare!" she yelled, trying to bite at his hand where it gripped her chin.

"Regard it as practice. The Dark Lord will want to see you eventually, and you'll need to have built up sufficient mental defences to keep him out." Severus confiscated her wand, realizing that at this rate she could be freed within seconds. He had no wish to be interrupted from his task by whatever hexes Hermione could think of.

'*Legilimens*.' Hermione's anger worked against her to some extent, in that it opened her mind to his, but the sensation of feeling that incandescent rage (especially when some of it was directed at him) was far from pleasant. It was Potter she was truly angry with, and an image of the book in question surfaced before him. A rather scruffy copy of the N.E.W.T. level Potions textbook. Before he could 'open' it, another book replaced it, a sense of menace emanating from within the green leather cover, silver claps snapping open. Cold embraced his senses as the book opened, the black ink on the pages swirling around him until it swallowed him whole.

"... Severus, wake up! Come on, you have to be alright. I'm sorry; I didn't know that would happen. I just... Please be alright. I'll tell you what you want to know, just wake up." Hermione's pleading voice was laced with panic. Severus drifted awake, opening his eyes to find himself supported on Hermione's lap, her hands holding his head, fingers buried in his admittedly greasy locks.

"I'm alright." He sat up, searching in his robes for a clean handkerchief. He found two, passed one to Hermione and used the other to wipe the cold sweat from his forehead. Hermione stared blankly at the scrap of cloth in her hands, then used it to wipe her tears away. She hadn't even noticed that she'd been crying. As Head of Slytherin, it seemed part of the job description to have an everlasting supply of handkerchiefs (usually green with his monogram embroidered in the corner). He strongly suspected that Pomona Sprout's plump frame was largely due to the number of handkerchiefs she carried for the average snivelling Hufflepuff first year.

"What was that book? The second one, I mean. Was it a memory, or did you manage to manipulate it?"

"It was the manual on Necromancy that the Room of Requirement provided. It didn't do anything like that to me, but I didn't make it do that to you. I wouldn't; you have to believe me." Hermione nervously nibbled on her lower lip. Severus reached out to stop her, gripping her jaw with his long fingers, placing his thumb on her lip before she could draw blood.

"I know, just be careful," he murmured, absently outlining her lips with a stroke of his thumb. At her shuddering intake of breath, he snatched his hand away. 'September nineteenth cannot come soon enough.'

"What were you arguing with Potter about?"

Hermione blinked at his question, a suspicious look coming into her eyes. "How did you know that I'd argued with Harry? That wasn't revealed during your intrusion into my mind."

Severus bit his tongue. He really needed to watch his words around this witch; she was far too observant not to pick up on inconsistencies like that.

"Have you been spying on me?" Now she was getting angry again, her voice sharper.

"No! I've been keeping a watchful eye on you. There is a difference. I spy on the Dark Lord; I watch you. The motive is entirely different."

Hermione's eyes narrowed, then she leapt at him. The abrupt move startled him enough for her to knock him over. She straddled him, hands running over him. Severus' breath hissed out, struggling to contain his reaction to her closeness. He reached up, grabbing her wrists as he twisted to the side, dumping her on the floor and reversing their positions. Her hands pinned above her head, cheeks flushed and chest heaving, Hermione looked as though she was half-way to being ravished. His position straddling her waist was only contributed to that, although it could have been worse; at least he wasn't lying between her legs.

"I think... is that your heartbeat I can hear?" Hermione fixed her eyes on the pulse point pounding away in the hollow of his throat, although she seemed to be having difficulty because of his collar. She gave an exasperated sigh and twisted her hand to grip his wrist, feeling for his pulse. "It is! Contrary to popular belief, you do have a heart. I didn't need to hear it to know, though."

Severus found himself leaning closer, inhaling the scent of her hair. Just as he was close enough to feel her exhalations against his face, he scrambled off her. Hermione swore under her breath, too quietly for him to hear the word, but he was sufficiently practiced in lip reading to get the gist.

"My apologies. I stand firm by my decision to wait. Do not tempt me further, or you'll regret it come your birthday."

"Me, tempt you? You're the tease around here, Severus. If I couldn't hear your heart racing, then I'd assume it was frozen," Hermione snarled then stomped over to the door, wand in hand. Severus blinked, delving into his pocket to find that she had somehow managed to extract it without him noticing.

"If I can appropriate ingredients from your Potions cupboard in my second year without your notice, then I can get my wand back from your person. I don't know why you had what felt like a small crystal ball in another of your pockets, though."

Severus breathed a sigh of relief. It appeared that Hermione didn't know that crystal balls could be used for scrying, thanks to her dropping Divination before fully covering them.

"Don't think that I've forgiven you for prying and spying on me." Another inaudible swear word slipped from her as the door failed to open. "Severus Snape, open the door if you wish to be able to pursue me after my birthday."

"Tell me what you promised to and I will."

"I said I'd tell you what you wanted to know. I did; you asked about The Book." Hermione gave him a calculating look, her lips tucking into a smirk. "Give me what I desire and I'll tell you."

"Fine!" Severus gestured with his wand, lifting his personal locking charm. A puzzled frown crossed his face as Hermione stalked up to him.

"I didn't say that I desired the door to be unlocked." Hermione's smirk grew wider, and a throaty chuckle escaped her. She reached up, entwining her arms around his neck and slipping a leg between his. Severus swallowed hard. For someone as inexperienced as he knew her to be, Hermione seemed to be fairly well versed in seduction.

"Hermione, stop it. Not now, damn you! Insufferable girl, desist from the siren act this instant, or..."

The temptress refused to listen, pulling his head down to hers. Severus held firm, refusing to kiss her back as she cut him off with the contact of her lips against his. Not even the teasing flicker of her tongue against his firmly closed mouth could persuade him to reciprocate. He thrust her away from him, hands tight on her shoulders as she attempted to grind her hips against him. He opened his mouth to deliver a sharp rebuke, only for Hermione to cut him off before he could start.

"Don't try to tell me that you didn't want that, that you don't want me. Your heart is beating so fast I can barely tell where the gaps between beats are. I may not be officially of age, but that is not the restriction on fraternisation between teachers and students given in the rules. The age of consent is, which is the same in the Wizarding world as it is in the Muggle one: sixteen years old. I've been that age even without the Time Turner for almost a year. Please, Severus. Don't deny me."

"I gave both of my masters my word that I would not begin seducing you until you came of age in this world. I fully intend to keep that promise. Leave and keep your stupid

secret about the Potions book, Miss Granger. I will not allow any further contact between us until you are of age." Severus opened the door and shoved her out into the corridor, slamming the door shut behind her with an impressive crash.

'Infernal girl! She will follow my lead on this matter and that is final.' Before he could leave the room, he needed to be sure that Hermione was no longer in the corridor. He pulled out the crystal ball, focusing his mind on the question of where Hermione was. The murky image granted showed that she was still outside, eyes fixed on the door. On closer observation as the picture sharpened, he could see that she was shaking. She slumped against the wall, her legs no longer supporting her.

'She knows I'm watching. She's faking it, wanting my attention.' He watched her struggle to her feet, only to collapse entirely, falling against a suit of armour and sliding down the polished metal onto the floor. It swayed on the spot then fell to pieces on top of her. She didn't move, even when the helmet hit her on the head. 'She's not that good at acting!'

Severus burst out of the classroom, diving down beside Hermione, picking the various parts of armour off her. Her forehead was bleeding slightly from contact with the helmet, which he staunched and healed within seconds. After lifting one of her eyelids, he used Legilimency to ascertain the reason for her collapse and subsequent loss of consciousness. It appeared that when he had slammed the door, the sound had triggered a flashback of the car crash, causing her to faint. She stirred, eyes blinking open within a minute of her collapse.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't take you to the hospital wing and have Madam Pomfrey keep you there."

"She won't have me, she's already sick of me. I think she only wants to keep me from winning the award for 'Most Time Spent in Hospital Wing'. You were inside my head again; desist in future."

Severus winced. So she was not happy with his rejection. He only hoped that she wouldn't hold the grudge on her birthday.

"Then I will ask the Headmaster to instruct you in Occlumency, Miss Granger. Good evening." He made to sweep off, his robes billowing around him, only to be brought up short by Hermione snatching his ankle.

"If you'll let me into your mind as well, I'm happy for you to teach me. I've already fought with Harry, I don't want to argue with you as well."

"As you wish. Meet me after dinner, but behave yourself. Occlumency does not require physical contact, so please respect my wishes. You were willing to wait until you had graduated, so surely you can manage ten days." Severus reached down, freeing his ankle and helping Hermione to her feet in the same move.

"Fine. I'll keep my hands off if you do the same."

'Ah. This may be more difficult than I thought. Perhaps I should review my knowledge of wards; there must be one to deter any physical contact. A shock charm, perhaps.'

Having finished her dinner, Hermione said her excuses to Ginny (both Harry and Ron were sitting away from her, obviously as ticked off with her as she was with them) and had almost reached the Potions classroom before her mind caught up with her feet. 'Great, now I'll be late.' She turned on her heel, walking as fast as she could without running in the direction of Severus's new base in the Defence classroom.

Severus made no comment on her late arrival; he just pulled his wand out ready for use after warding the room. Hermione mirrored his movement, only for him to shake his head.

"You won't be able to repel the Dark Lord from your mind using your wand, Hermione. In fact, it would be best if you didn't repel him at all. To that effect, we will be working on the ability you showed earlier; false images."

Hermione nodded, returning her wand to her pocket. She glanced around the room. "Is the Pensieve in your office?" She asked, noting its absence.

"No. I agreed to your earlier condition. While I am in no hurry to share many of the events from my dark past, you know that I trust you to keep my secrets *Legilimens!*" Severus struck without giving a warning, his eyes locked with her own.

Snippets of her own past swirled around her. Severus began to test her defences, bringing the more embarrassing and painful memories to the forefront of her mind where he could examine them.

*She was doubled over, the Polyjuice Potion twisting her insides. Black fur appeared on her hands, a sharp tingle at the base of her spine...*

*She was in primary school, ostracised by her fellow pupils after a group of them tossed one of her books around leading her unrestrained wandless magic to disintegrate the clothes off the worst of her tormentors...*

*Penelope Clearwater was with her as they peered around the corners of the corridors around the library with the older girl's mirror, trying to reach a member of staff to tell them what she'd discovered concerning the monster... enormous yellow eyes were reflected in the mirror, drawing her gaze and filling her vision entirely. Even as she drew breath to cry out, everything was swallowed by a sickly yellow haze...*

*It was the start of her first term at Hogwarts, but nothing had really changed. Everyone hated her; even Neville avoided her when he could. Maybe it was not them, but her... It was a day or two before that first Halloween; she was in the library, staring at her hands and the small deep red lines cutting across her fingers. She hadn't even meant for the paper cuts to happen, even her beloved books hated her...*

*She was at the end of her third year exam on Defence, confronting a boggart for the first time. She lit her wand with a muttered 'Lumos' to come face to face with Professor McGonagall and the news that she'd failed everything. 'Ri-riddikulus!' she stammered. With a crack, the boggart morphed into another of her worst fears: herself, fully grown and unquestionably evil. Her doppelganger's hair was crackling with magical energy, a cruel smile on her lips. She stumbled back as the dark version of her future self advanced, hand held out to her. She didn't really need to speak, her intention obvious.*

*"Take my hand and become me. We can be truly great; we are the greatest witch of the age. If only you would realise your full potential!" When she shook her head, back pressed against the old trunk, the outstretched hand clenched into a fist, her own older, twisted, cold eyes darkening until there was no colour to be seen.*

*"You cannot escape yourself. You will become me, failure!" She ran screaming from the boggart to sputter out the first of the manifestations to Professor Lupin as an explanation...*

Severus began to withdraw from her mind, but not before another memory surfaced.

*Blood pooling above her on the interior of a battered surface, shards of glass sinking into it. Her own hand stretching up to dip two fingers into it. Her vision narrowed, shaking with jarring coughs as tears blurred it. Her throat burned, raw with her sobs, calls for her loved ones and choking coughs. Smoke blocked her fading view of the blood, filling her lungs as she gasped for air. She couldn't breathe, everything fading out, leaving only her awareness of an all encompassing chill seeping into her bones and grasping at her soul...*

Hermione opened her eyes to find herself kneeling in an inch of solid ice. A glance around the room showed that it affected the whole room, keeping Severus from reaching her. The necessary knowledge to fix the slight problem with the cold snap surfaced in her mind, courtesy of The Book. She winced at the realisation that the ice extended across the floor of the entire castle as she forced it to melt, evaporating the water at the same time. Maybe the blame for this could be shifted onto Peeves the poltergeist. 'Come to think of it, I haven't seen any of the school ghosts.' Realisation dawned as yet more forgotten knowledge rose up in her mind. 'I can control them and they know it.'

Awfully tempting to set Peeves on some of the junior Death Eaters. Heaven knows Malfoy would deserve it.'

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring the last two memories up. They were memories, weren't they?" Severus pulled her up, settling her in a chair before stepping back.

Hermione's lips compressed into a tight line as she wiped her eyes before her threatening tears could fall. "Yes, they were. I've never mentioned the second form of that boggart to anyone. As you might have guessed, the last memory was the moments after the... it happened." She scowled at her inability to say 'crash' at that particular moment.

"You won't become her. Not if I have anything to say about it." Severus didn't need to elaborate. "Your mind is a little too raw for us to continue further tonight." He crossed over to his desk, extracting a small bottle from one of the drawers. "Judging by the events of today, I suggest you use this before going to sleep." He handed it over to her.

"If I take much more of this, I'll be a Dreamless Sleep addict." Hermione fidgeted. She could use a hug, but Severus would hardly give her one after their encounter earlier. 'Maybe Crooks will let me... oh, no. Crookshanks...' The bottle in her hand clattered to the desk in front of her as she buried her face in her hands as the tears started to flow. The loss of her familiar hadn't really hit her before now.

"Hermione...I'm really not any good at this." He pulled her into his arms, allowing her to bury her face against his shoulder, her tears soaking into his robes. "Perhaps a Calming Draught would have been a better idea," Severus muttered, otherwise silent as he waited for the storm of tears to stop.

"I'm sorry. I just hadn't, I mean, I didn't... You told me no physical contact, and I just needed a hug. I thought of Crookshanks; it hasn't really sunk in that he's gone," Hermione burred, with the occasional dry sob interrupting her.

"I realise that a familiar cannot really be replaced, but perhaps another could assuage your grief a little?" He swallowed nervously, obviously hoping that she would not take offence.

"I'll think about it," she finally murmured, pulling away from him before she could be tempted to step over the line he'd set down. She dug out the handkerchief he'd given her earlier and used it to clean herself up a bit.

"If you feel up to it, I'll be available after breakfast for another Occluding session."

Hermione blinked at his words. "How? You must have a full schedule; there isn't time."

Severus smirked and used one finger to dig into the neck of his robes, exposing a thin gold chain.

"You have a Time Turner. Er, how old are you now?"

"Why, having second thoughts? I don't use it very much. Only when I really need to, like the rare occasions the Dark Lord summons me when I'm teaching." Severus slipped the chain back into his robes. "Give me a signal at breakfast tomorrow if you do want to meet; I'll be watching you."

Hermione scooped up the bottle from the desk while thanking Unbreakable Charms for existing. She paused before dispelling the privacy wards. "Severus? How have you been watching me when you were nowhere near? I know it can't have been with the Time Turner; I know the risks of being seen."

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies. If you really want to know, you'll have to practice until your Legilimency can break through my Occlumency."

Hermione huffed at his dismissal and left the classroom. 'Maybe my old friend the library can tell me...'

## Chapter 12

*Chapter 13 of 25*

Scrying and Quidditch: two problems for Hermione.

Disclaimer: It all belongs to J K Rowling. Except the plot and the usage of Necromancy. I also highly doubt she'd put Hermione with Severus.

Thanks to my beta LadySunflower and my reviewers. Knowing that you like this does encourage me to write more.

Chapter 12

Severus was finishing his coffee when Hermione looked up from her breakfast, making eye contact with him. Both Potter and Weasley were sitting apart from her again, leaving Miss Weasley to keep her company. Perhaps it was time to goad them into supporting her again, but judging by the pinched, disapproving look on Minerva's face, she would beat him to it.

An owl broke off from the morning post flight, landing on his shoulder and offering the letter on its leg to him. Severus took it, recognising the handwriting as Hermione's. Not that any of the other teachers would recognise it; she was right handed, yet her correspondence to him when delivered in public was written using her left hand.

'Severus,

R of R, 9 o'clock. Think of 'dungeon lair'.

I.K.I.A.'

Only Hermione would sign using the acronym of what was once an insult. He made an almost imperceptible nod of his head to Hermione. If he'd been a student, getting to the Room of Requirement without being seen would be a challenge, but a Disillusionment Charm was simple enough for him to use. He left the Great Hall and used the charm, controlling his reaction to the cold sensation dripping down from his head signifying that the charm was in effect. He decided to wait until Hermione made her way to the seventh floor, just to test her observation skills.

Hermione gave no sign of noticing him as he trailed behind her, only visible as a shimmer in the air as he moved nearly silently. She paused before the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy then paced back and forth in front of the wall opposite three times, until the door materialised. She opened it, stepped inside... and slammed the door in his face as he attempted to slip through. The door vanished, leaving him clutching at his throbbing nose, blood trickling down onto his fingers.

'That bitch! She'd better not have broken it. Poor thing's had that happen too many times to count already.'

He stormed up and down, thinking furiously. 'I want a dungeon lair with Hermione Granger chained to the wall!' He yanked the door open when it appeared, slammed it shut behind him and automatically cast the privacy charm. Another tap of his wand on top of his head cancelled the Disillusionment Charm with a rush of warmth. He opened his mouth to yell at Hermione, bloodstained fingers gripping at the bridge of his large nose in an attempt to slow the flow. The outraged cry died in his throat as his jaw hung slack for a moment, his eyes blinking in disbelief.

'I know I asked for Hermione to be chained up, but I didn't think it'd actually happen...'

He could barely see Hermione for chains, and from the way she was slumped against the wall, the chains had probably slammed her into it hard enough to knock her out. She straightened, letting out a rather pained-sounding groan. The chains released her, vanishing at Severus's unconscious demand. She brought her hand up to rub at her face, her hair mostly hiding the movement.

"You didn't have to break by dose..." Severus started to say, his words contorted by his battered nose.

Hermione turned to face him, revealing that she was also gripping her nose. "Ditto," she spat the word out, a trickle of blood running from her mouth as well as from her nose. "Gah! You got one of my death too, you bastub." If anything Hermione's voice was even more affected by her injuries than his own was.

She stalked over to a newly appeared figure in green robes; apparently the Room of Requirement could conjure up a mediwitch. Her injuries were fixed in moments, but judging by the venomous glare she shot him over her shoulder, he was not forgiven. The faceless mediwitch fixed him up too then vanished.

"You were trying to sneak up on me, Severus, so I'd say you deserved what you got. I told you yesterday that I could hear your heartbeat. Today I can pick it out from all of the others I can hear, too. These new powers of mine are growing, as is my control of them." Hermione smirked at him, an expression that she seemed to have picked up from him. "Speaking of sneaking..." She snatched up her wand, casting a non-verbal Summoning Charm. His crystal ball flew into her hands. "Perhaps you'd care to explain why you've been using this to scry on me."

Severus swallowed. It was all very well to use it without her knowledge, but now that she knew, he doubted that she'd allow him to keep watching her from afar with it. "I told you that I was keeping an eye on you, didn't I? Come to that, how did you find out about the uses of crystal balls?"

Hermione didn't answer at first, rolling her eyes at him. "You obviously don't know me as well as I thought you did. I looked it up in the library! Heaven help me if you're the most intelligent man under fifty years old - that had to have been a question on the level of the rest of the bottom dwellers otherwise known as the male of the species."

He flushed, sweeping his hair back from his face. Severus didn't fire an insult back, as angering Hermione even before she became a Necromancer was a bad idea.

"As I said before, you are my concern. Whilst Hogwarts is safer for you than anywhere else..." Severus fidgeted, unwilling to expose himself further, even to Hermione.

"Professor Dumbledore will be keeping an eye on me too. I daresay he has his own overgrown marble to use for scrying and the network of portraits on top of that." Hermione grimaced. "That's kind of creepy, come to think of it. If I didn't know that Albus Dumbledore was a man of unquestionable honour, his spying network in this place could be all too easy for a pervert to take advantage of. For example, someone like Phineas Nigellus. I'm so glad that he's long dead."

"You do realise that death hasn't stopped that old depraved sod?"

"Yes, but the Headmaster told me that he's restricted to his own portraits. Anyhow, you don't need to be watching me." For someone six inches shorter and with a slighter frame, Hermione could look pretty intimidating when she wanted to. She pocketed the glass ball.

"Do you think confiscating that will stop me? Crystal balls are readily available from the North Tower."

"Oh, I know. This is for me to use." Hermione's smile was devilish as she patted her pocket.

"Insufferable girl!"

"Thank you. Just think, you'll never know when I'm watching you. Enjoy your next shower, won't you..." Hermione froze, her voice trailing off. After several shaky breaths, her irate gaze almost glowed. "Severus Snape! When have you been using this?" She hauled the object in question out, weighing it in her hand as if highly tempting to hurl it in his direction.

"Wouldn't you like to know. You had no trouble with the thought of using it on me when I was unclothed. Rather different when it's you that's so vulnerable, isn't it."

"I was joking!" Hermione shrieked. She threw the ball at him.

Severus grabbed it, beckoning her closer. "I may have used it before and found that you were bathing or putting clothes on or off, but observe *Locus Hermione Jane Granger*."

The mist in the glass sphere was clearing, but the picture revealed of Hermione was blurred. Even when it sharpened, it was only her face that showed clearly.

"You see? I do respect your modesty, Hermione. I cast a charm on you preventing anything but your face showing clearly whenever anyone scried for you."

"Oh. I'm sorry; I should have realised. Do you have the same charm?" When he shook his head, she offered to place it on him.

"Thank you, but while I do not have the same charm on me, Professor Dumbledore placed a blocking charm on me. I can't be scried at all, so even if you had tried to sneak a peek, you'd have been disappointed."

"Oh, I severely doubt that, from what I felt yesterday." Hermione blushed deeply as she realised what had slipped from her unguarded lips. "Er..."

"Professor Dumbledore's bouts of deafness are catching; I didn't hear a word you just said." Severus smirked. "Just as well that I can lip read sufficiently well to bask in the heat of your mortification."

"Enough delay. We have half an hour... *Legilimens*."

Albus Dumbledore was observing the Gryffindor Quidditch Tryouts from his Pensieve, currently used as a scrying surface. He only tended to scry after three people: Harry, Severus and Hermione. While he had blocked Severus from being scried, that did not prevent him from doing it. He'd been observing Hermione's Occlumency lessons over the past week, only to lose the connection during the first of them when both the floor of his office and the surface of his Pensieve iced over.

Severus had seen fit to inform him of the girl's progress, which due both to her intellect and memory was impressive. By her latest tutoring session on Friday evening, she could spin false memories that were indistinguishable from the real ones. He was also aware of the kisses that had been shared, but saw no need to slap either of their wrists over it. It was only on Severus's own insistence that he was waiting until Hermione was of age.

Hermione was sitting in the stands, watching as Harry began to put the Chasers through their paces. It was only when the Bludgers were released that it was obvious that something was wrong. They failed to burst out of the box when the catches were released. Albus observed Hermione stand up, frowning. Harry waved her over, thinking that she could assist, only for a look of disbelief to cross his face when she hissed something in his ear. She waved her wand in a complex pattern then marched off. The Bludgers almost knocked Harry over as they shot up, working perfectly well again.

"So, Fawkes... on the surface it seems that Hermione reversed the jinx keeping the Bludgers from working. That is what will appear to those watching. But from Harry's expression the truth is somewhat different."

The phoenix chirped, a feather falling out of his tail. He was approaching another burning day. Albus cancelled the scrying spell as he registered the sound of the revolving staircase leading up to his office. He looked above his half-moon spectacles as Hermione came inside.

"Headmaster, were you watching just now?" At Albus's nod, Hermione continued, "It wasn't a jinx affecting the enchanted Quidditch balls. It was me. I told Harry I had to go, as I think if he knew it was my unconscious doing, then it'd just be another thing between us. Our friendship is fragile enough as it is, sir. Can you think of a way for me to avoid any and all Quidditch games and matches?"

"I could orchestrate something, yes. There is a curse in existence, most heinous to the majority of the Wizarding world because it makes the afflicted allergic to the sport. It would also allow you to escape Quidditch talk." Albus reached into his robe, withdrawing his wand whilst keeping it under his desk.

"Thank you sir! I'll leave you in peace." Hermione turned away. Albus smiled thinly and launched the curse. The force of it knocked Hermione to her knees. She rolled to her feet, wand in hand, only to almost drop it upon seeing that her Headmaster had cast a spell at her when she had her back turned. "What have you done?!"

"For purposes of realism, it is best to actually have you under the curse. You see, it is quite well documented, its symptoms well known. It will last a year and a day, with no counter-spell or potion in existence that can take it off. You will find that at the mention of Quidditch, coming anywhere near Quidditch balls and quite possibly even a broomstick makes you come out in a rather painful fluorescent blue rash. Don't worry, it will fade when you are away from all things Quidditch."

"...thank God; I hate Quidditch," Hermione muttered. "I just went to the games to support my friends. This curse might just turn out to be a blessing." She scowled at the Headmaster as each of his mentions of 'Quidditch' (and her own) made a burning rash appear on her exposed skin. Albus just smiled back at the fading-back-to-skin-tones girl, popping a lemon drop into his mouth.

## Chapter 13

*Chapter 14 of 25*

September nineteenth is a busy (and trying) day, especially for Hermione.

Disclaimer: As I am not J K Rowling, I also don't own Harry Potter.

Chapter 13

Harry and Ron had been disappointed to learn that Hermione had been afflicted with the forbidden Quidditch allergy curse. Ron, in particular, had been sceptical until Hermione had broken out into a spectacular bright blue rash when they had slipped into their usual habit of talking about Quidditch around her. They suspected that Malfoy might have had something to do with it, but Hermione claimed that she had never seen her attacker.

Both boys had given her an abbreviated account of the Beater and Keeper trials (not mentioning anything other than 'broom', 'ball' and 'ring' with the names of the player, which seemed to keep Hermione from breaking out in the blue rash), with the deciding factor between Ron and the overgrown lout, otherwise known as Cormac McLaggen, being their attitudes. While Ron did have problems with confidence, McLaggen was an egocentric prat who thought he could play every position at once. The seventh year was almost tall and burly enough to be a one-man team.

Harry trailed behind Hermione, mystified as to why she was so annoyed at both Ron and him that morning. Ginny had also given them both the cold shoulder. Harry had thought that his and Hermione's friendship was on the mend after McGonagall's lecturing of them at the end of the previous week, but he was apparently mistaken. There was nothing special about Thursday mornings, especially when they were on their way to Snape's Defence lesson.

They reached the classroom before anyone else, leaving them alone with Snape, who had just emerged from his office. He prowled closer, approaching Hermione with a strange glint in his dark eyes.

"Allow me to take the opportunity to wish you a Happy Birthday, Miss Granger. You are the first student of your year to come of age. Congratulations."

Harry's eyes widened as he exchanged a chagrined glance with Ron. They'd forgotten about Hermione's birthday. Again.

"You displayed your knowledge of Wizarding etiquette last week. I wonder... I might be able to educate you further. Are you familiar with birthday salutations? They are somewhat similar to those in the Muggle world."

Harry watched as Ron's eyes widened at Snape's words. Hermione looked puzzled for a moment, then her expression cleared.

"Do you mean the birthday bumps, sir?"

Snape chuckled at her words, shaking his head. "Finally, something that you don't know. Allow me to demonstrate."

Ron choked at the greasy git's words, his eyes almost popping out. Harry watched, his jaw dropping as Snape took Hermione's face in his hands, his long fingers burying themselves in her bushy hair. Both boys stared, transfixed, as teacher kissed student.

This was no chaste kiss, but a passionate exchange. Hermione seemed to recover from her shock somewhat, but she didn't push Snape away. On the contrary, she closed her eyes and deepened the kiss, opening her mouth to let the dungeon bat devour her.

'I'm going to be sick. My hated teacher is kissing one of best friends. Oh, God, no. Is that tongue movement I can see? I don't wanna know! Close your eyes, pretend this isn't happening!' Harry buried his face in his hands when his eyes refused to cooperate, his mind screaming incoherently. There was a thud from the floor beside him, finally allowing his eyes to break away from the horror in front of him. Ron appeared to have fainted, and Harry only wished that he could do the same.

'If Hermione hadn't started kissing the git back, I could've attacked him...'

The majority of the rest of the sixth year Gryffindor and Slytherins arrived, chattering amongst themselves only to fall into a shocked silence.

"What's the hold up? Move!" Draco Malfoy's drawing voice demanded as he elbowed his way through the crowd of students. "Bloody hell!" His grey eyes widened at the sight of the Head of Slytherin snogging a Muggle-born Gryffindor.



Snape finally drew away from Hermione, who staggered back against one of the desks as her knees threatened to give way. For the few students still arriving who hadn't seen them, her kiss-stung lips indicated what had been going on moments before.

"What are you waiting for, an invitation? Sit down." Snape barked.

The students hurried to their seats, leaving Harry attempting to rouse Ron, and Hermione was still leaning on the desk, a dazed look on her face. She absently reached up, touching her lips as an almost dreamy look crossed her features. Hermione blinked, shaking her head as she suddenly seemed to register exactly where she was and who had just witnessed Snape's action. Her cheeks burned.

"Psst! Mudblood, you deaf? Professor Snape said to sit down. Then again, I suppose that a dry bookworm like you has never been kissed before. Snogged your brains out, did he? If I'd known it'd take that to put you in your place, I'd have got Crabbe or Goyle to do it. Wouldn't want to befoul myself with your dirty skin..."

Snape cut off Malfoy's faint whisper. "Twenty points from Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy."

"But sir, she's only a Mu..." Snape was suddenly looming over where Malfoy sat, his long, greasy, dark hair creating sinister shadows on his sallow face. Malfoy involuntarily drew back, his already pale, pointy face losing all hint of colour. The ferret had obviously attempted to insult Hermione without Snape hearing and had made the mistake of underestimating bat-man's unparalleled hearing.

"Ten more points, Malfoy, and detention. I will not tolerate any more insults directed at Miss Granger. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, Professor." Malfoy managed to croak, somehow avoiding stammering. The rest of the students were watching in shock and disbelief. Whispers were being exchanged, elbows nudging sides.

"Do you think Snape's saying what I think he is?"

"Seems that way. I wonder what the school rules say about it, can't imagine..."

"Granger?! And *Snape*?! If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes..."

"My father will hear of this. Our Lord will want to know about this."

"He means to court her. He must; he'd never defend a Gryffindor Mud-, I mean, Muggle-born otherwise."

"Silence! This is a Defence lesson, not the Great Hall. Gossip has no place here, unless you mean to use it to talk your enemies to death." Snape's voice cut through the chatter, as the whispers increased in volume. "Potter, use a '*Rennervate*' on Weasley and return to your seat. Miss Granger, in your own time, sit down."

Ron awoke as Harry muttered the Revival Charm then dragged his taller friend over to their desk. Hermione had sat down beside Neville, her cheeks still flushed.

"Harry, please tell me that was a nightmare. Snape didn't just snog Hermione."

"Sorry, Ron. If it was a nightmare, we all had it. Although you did miss Snape taking points from Malfoy for calling Hermione a Mudblood."

Ron shook his head. "Even if he did, it's still not worth it. Poor girl must be sickened."

Harry looked over at Hermione. She did still look rather embarrassed, but there was no hint of disgust on her face. Ron was the one who looked sickened, his green face contrasting with his red hair.

The rest of the Defence lesson passed in a blur, none of the students really able to concentrate on copying down what Snape was lecturing to them about. Even Hermione was struggling to focus, although Harry knew that she had an iron clad reason to be distracted.

"I can't believe you did that... in front of EVERYONE!" Hermione paced in front of Severus, having waited until everyone had left the classroom (including Harry and Ron, although she had needed to all but order them to leave).

Severus just stood there, smirking at her. "Now, now, my dear. It was just half of the sixth years, not in front of the whole school. Besides, you had it coming what with your amorous advances towards me before this day, even after I told you to wait."

"Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil were both there, so it might as well have been in front of every single soul in this whole damn building. By the end of the day, I wouldn't be surprised if the whole Wizarding world knew." Hermione suddenly stopped moving and spun to face him, her bushy hair swirling around her. "You did it on purpose! You want everyone to know."

"Finally caught on, I see. Yes, the Dark Lord himself will hear of this, as there were several students watching us whose parents are Death Eaters."

"Did you really have to do it in front of Harry and Ron, though? It'll scar them for life."

"All the more reason to do it," Severus muttered. "I don't quite see what you're so upset about. Last week you wanted me to kiss you, and this week you don't want me to. I had hoped that you wouldn't be quite as unfathomable as every other witch."

"Severus, you are just as clueless as every other man, so why should I be different to other women? I'd be hunted down by a raving mob of feminists if I actually gave you a hint."

"My seduction of you cannot be subtle. It has to be obvious to be noticeable. Whilst the Dark Lord might take my word for it, my rivals cannot interfere if the evidence is plainer than the nose on my face."

"Rival Death Eaters or rivals for me?" Hermione asked.

"Both, judging by the expression on Weasley's face. When he recovered from his fainting fit, that is." It seemed that Severus's opinion of Ron was not much better than his opinion of Harry, but at least the predominate emotion was contempt rather than hatred judging by his scoffing comment.

"Severus, did you know that I can sense magic? I felt you Stun him," Hermione said conversationally.

"The hot-headed idiot was about to attack me. His thoughts were screaming so loud that Legilimency was hardly necessary."

"Well, how would you have reacted if you saw You-Know-Who steal a kiss from me in front of you?"

"That won't happen! The Dark Lord has me seducing you; his standpoint on love is that there is no such thing. Not to mention that he could hardly arrange to meet you at Madam Puddifoot's." Severus's face twisted at the thought.

Hermione sighed, bending over to retrieve her bag. "I'm going to be late for Ancient Runes. See you later."

"Don't I get a goodbye kiss?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. She stepped close to him, slung an arm around his shoulder as she jumped up to land a peck on his cheek. She darted off, slipping out of the

door to her next lesson, leaving Severus no doubt fuming.

'Honestly, he should specify what a "goodbye kiss" is.'

Despite Hermione's presence in the Great Hall, the enchanted ceiling was working perfectly. Obviously the book provided by the Room of Requirement was invaluable, if dangerous. Severus was impressed by the speed with which Hermione had managed to control her unnatural powers. Her Occlumency was up to scratch, although she couldn't seem to get the hang of Legilimency.

He smirked into his almost empty goblet. The majority of the conversation in the cavernous room was fixed on the birthday greeting he'd given Hermione. The only reason his colleagues weren't giving him askance looks was that he'd broadcasted his intentions regarding Hermione in the teacher's meeting the previous afternoon. Despite the forewarning, both Hagrid and Minerva were shooting venomous looks in his direction. Perhaps Albus could enlighten them as to the circumstances before Severus found himself accosted by the self-proclaimed defenders of Hermione's virtue.

Albus seemed to be observing the number of students glancing between Hermione - who was studiously ignoring everything except the contents of her plate - and Severus, whose smirk widened. The aged wizard nudged Minerva, who rang the side of her goblet with a fork as a call for silence and attention. All eyes turned to the Head Table.

"I daresay everyone within the school knows of what transpired this morning between Professor Snape and Miss Granger. So for the benefit of those ignorant of the school rules, I shall paraphrase them for those who cannot decipher legal language.

"Fraternalisation between teachers and students is forbidden before the student passes the age of majority, and strongly discouraged before the student comes of age. Miss Granger passed the former a year ago and the latter today, so Professor Snape is well within his rights to pursue her. In the event of an affair, all assessment of work is carried out by an impartial observer, usually the Headmaster. If any of you have further questions, do not hesitate to ask." Albus turned his attention back to his lemon tart.

The students went back to talking amongst themselves about Quidditch, the previous subject far less interesting now that they knew it wasn't as scandalous as they'd previously thought.

Severus was both alarmed and bemused when Hermione's skin abruptly turned bright blue as she swept a poisonous glare between Potter, Weasley and Dumbledore. The enchanted ceiling above flickered as Hermione's temper flared. She used a napkin to collect the remainder of her lunch together and stalked out of the Great Hall, the door slamming behind her despite the fact that she had her hands full.

"Ah. I'm afraid Hermione is not best pleased with me," Albus murmured, wiping lemon stains from his beard.

"Why is that? What have you done now, you old coot?" Severus asked, rolling his eyes. The meddling man couldn't keep his crooked nose out of anything.

"She found that enchanted Quidditch balls fail when she is within the stadium, so she asked me for help in disguising the real reason why. She thought that the truth might widen the gap between her and her friends. I applied the Forbidden Curse."

"So now she comes out in a painful blue rash with the merest mention of Quidditch. Wonderful. Do you have any idea how hard it will be for her to avoid the subject?" Severus swallowed the last of his drink from his goblet and rose to his feet. "I'll track the shit down and offer the usage of a pain relief potion."

Hermione returned to the Gryffindor common room after dinner, having applied a drop of Severus's potion to the tip of her tongue before entering the Great Hall. While the rash still broke out, it was far less painful and well worth the 'cost' of giving Severus rather more than a peck in exchange.

She stepped through the portrait hole to come to an abrupt halt upon finding Ron standing in the middle of the room with Lavender Brown wrapped tightly around him, their lips glued together. Hermione looked away to meet Harry's gaze, who sidled over to her.

"I see Ron's been ensnared in Lavender's tentacles, I mean, arms."

"Yeah. I think it might be a ploy to make you jealous, 'Mione." Harry gave her a quizzical glance. "What do you mean by 'tentacles?'"

"Seamus hasn't told you? Lavender holds onto her boyfriends with more suction power than the giant squid and apparently she kisses like she belongs in the lake too. So instead of making me jealous, all Ronald's done has made me pity him." Hermione shook her head with mock sadness. "Poor sod."

"Hermione, how could you let Snape do that?"

"Honestly, Harry! This is not a conversation to have here." Hermione grabbed Harry's tie and used it to drag him up to his dormitory, where she cast an Imperturbable Charm. "For your information, Severus was ordered by Voldemort to seduce me. Otherwise he wouldn't have attempted to pursue me until after graduation."

Harry's jaw dropped, his glasses threatening to drop off his nose. "You just called Snape..."

Hermione waved her hand impatiently. "Yes, so what? I counted him as a friend by this time last year. I don't call my friends by their surnames unless sufficiently annoyed, Potter."

The Boy-Who-Lived-To-Be-Shocked removed his glasses, rubbing at his eyes as if to prove to himself that the entire conversation was just a weird dream.

"Harry, the majority of those letters I wrote to Viktor were actually to Severus."

"I don't want to hear this," Harry muttered, his face twisting. "Why can't you reject the git and stake your claim on Ron? You fancy Ron, I know you do. In our fourth year..."

"I *fancied* him. Past tense. By the end of fourth year, that crush had gone; Ron has to be one of the most immature boys I know, and that really turned me off. I know you don't want to hear it, but I've had a crush on Severus ever since he showed his Dark Mark to Fudge."

Harry made a gagging sound to express his disgust.

"Come to that, you're not that much better than Ron, either, in terms of maturity. Harry, Severus has to seduce me, and I have to let him. Voldemort is one of the only wizards out there who can kill me. If he thinks I won't join him, I'm as good as dead."

"Can't Dumbledore protect you?" Harry asked, replacing his glasses and frowning at her.

"Harry, Dumbledore is over one hundred and fifty years old. He won't live forever. Voldemort is a lot younger and is possibly immortal. I have to learn to rely on myself."

"Hermione... it must have occurred to you that it's within your power to bring back the dead. If you brought back every victim of Voldemort, it'd be almost guaranteed that we could win this war!"

Hermione stared at her bespectacled friend, speechless. That thought had not occurred to her, and now that Harry had raised it, information from The Book spilled forth.

"That is something I will not do," she said flatly, her tone final.

Harry's cheeks flushed, his eyes narrowing. "How can you say that? You have no idea what it's like to have your loved ones murdered by that madman. Right the wrongs he has done!"

"You don't understand. Harry, the dead can never truly return to the living."

"What about you? You died, and here you are. Alive!"

Hermione buried her face in her hands, trying not to scream in her frustration with Harry. "That is the only exception. I don't know how it happened. More to the point, I don't know how to bring back the dead in practice; I only know the theory."

"You could do it; I know you could. You could start off small, just bringing back a few people. I never knew my parents. I didn't get enough time with Sirius. How can you take that chance from me?" Harry all but yelled, his voice rising. "I thought you would understand, having lost your parents. Maybe you don't love your own enough to want them back..."

Hermione cut him off with a backhanded blow across his face. She grabbed his collar, leaning in close to lock her own furious eyes with his. "How dare you! I told you, my parents wouldn't want me to bring them back." Her breath hissed between her clenched teeth, her nose almost touching Harry's. "You don't know if your parents or godfather would want to be brought back from the beyond. Your desire to have them back is selfish."

Harry's face twisted as his mouth opened. "YOU'RE THE SELFISH ONE! YOU WON'T SHARE YOUR GIFTS!"

"SHUT UP!" Hermione roared, making Harry step back. He wasn't used to being yelled at, although this was his comeuppance for all of his shouting the year before. "You don't know what you're talking about." She attempted to calm herself with a few deep breaths before continuing, her voice trembling as tears welled up. She tended to react with tears when angry, something that had mortified her for years.

"Understand this: if I brought anyone back from the dead, they would be an empty shell. The dead cannot feel emotions. Would you wish that on your loved ones?"

Harry's jaw worked up and down, but nothing came out of his mouth.

"You never think, do you? It never occurred to you that I have good reasons to deny your demands. And to..." Hermione choked back a sob. Harry was looking more and more uncomfortable. "I love... loved my parents. Never suggest otherwise. How c-can you call yourself my friend when you say things like that?"

Harry backed away from her, sitting heavily on his bed as her tears started to flow in earnest. He was still speechless, frozen in the fear that his misinformed demand would irrevocably damage one of his few friendships.

Hermione wiped at her stinging eyes. "Fuck you, Harry Potter," she murmured then turned to leave. She lost her fragile hold on her temper before she could leave the room and whirled on the pale-faced boy, her wand out and firing off a newly learnt spell. *'Oppugno!*

## Chapter 14

*Chapter 15 of 25*

Why angering a Necromancer is a very bad idea

Disclaimer: The ownership of Harry Potter has not changed.

As always, thanks to my beta. Believe it or not, Harry is less of git due to her.

Chapter 14

Severus hurried towards the Gryffindor common room, alerted by his scrying that all was not right with Hermione. It was almost curfew, so there were few students still in the corridors. The portrait of the Fat Lady swung open as Hermione blundered out, wiping at her tear-stained face with his donated handkerchief.

Her thoughts were easy for him to pick up, her new Occlumency shields in tatters. She was raging at Potter, coarse language running through her mind as she mentally badmouthed the scar-headed brat and his ancestors.

She didn't seem to register that he was there and struggled when he pulled her into his arms.

"What did Potter do? Why did you slap him? Not that I blame you..." Severus murmured, pleased when she relaxed a little under his hands.

"That empty-headed, single-minded, idiotic twerp decided to bring up the subject of building up an undead army against He-Who-Kills," Hermione hissed, almost spitting with fury.

"Your friend has proved my point; he is nothing more than a boy with an over-inflated opinion of himself, thinking that he knows best just like his father."

"He's no friend of mine." Hermione's vehemence made Severus step back, despite who it was aimed at. "Two-faced spawn of a Venomous Tentacula can rot in Hell for all I care. He thinks that just because I refuse to bring back my parents that I don't love them!" As she wailed that, her body tensed again, so tightly that he wouldn't be surprised if she dislocated her joints.

The torches perched on the curved, iron holders sputtered and extinguished, even as a deep chill extended to Severus's bones. No ice formed on the floor, but what little light was left began to dim. Complete and utter darkness swallowed the castle, something that no light source seemed to be able to break. Repeated tries of *Lumos* and more advanced variations failed entirely.

"Hermione, what are you doing?" Severus called, shaking her in a further attempt to rouse a response from her. There was no answer, only ragged breathing from Hermione's direction.

Dim points of light began to shine a few moments later. Severus had the presence of mind to exchange his advanced light charm for a simple one to avoid blinding himself as the darkness lifted entirely.

"Sorry... I didn't mean for that to happen," Hermione gasped out, slumping forwards to rest against him. The chill also began to lift as Severus began to massage the tension out of her shoulders.

"I think we had better pay a visit to the Headmaster. He may know how to deal with Potter. Also, I don't think we'll be alone out here for much longer; that darkness will

have scared just about everyone."

Harry walked into Dumbledore's office, escorted there by McGonagall as it was beyond curfew. His face and hands stung from the deep cuts inflicted by Hermione's rabid canary attack. What really hurt was the guilt sinking down into his soul as he had come to the realisation that Hermione loved her parents just as much as he loved his own, if not more because she had far more time with them. He'd jumped to conclusions and had most likely lost a friend because of it. Worse, Dumbledore obviously knew what had happened.

Dumbledore looked disappointed, no twinkle showing in his eyes. He said nothing, and the weight of his gaze made Harry fidget until he finally couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"I'm sorry I shouldn't have said that to Hermione and now she will never speak to me again," Harry blurted, the words blurring together into an unintelligible mass.

"Breathe, Harry. I can understand many languages, but not what you just said."

"I'm really, really, really sorry I misunderstood Hermione. Now she'll never want to be my friend again."

"Damn right, Potter." Hermione's voice came from a high-backed chair in front of the fireplace. She stood up, turning to face him. "You need to learn to think before opening your big, fat mouth."

Harry cringed at the sight of her. Her eyes were bloodshot, her hair was what could charitably be called a mess and her voice thick with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry... I didn't think."

Hermione turned her back on him. "Sorry isn't enough, and it's painfully obvious that you didn't think."

"Harry, I am very disappointed. Even your father knew when to hold his tongue, and he barely knew how to stop talking," Dumbledore said, making Harry feel as if he were about six inches tall.

"Yes, sir. I know. I disappointed myself, too," Harry squeaked. He winced; he thought his voice had broken years ago.

"So you say. You have needed to grow up fast these past few years, but your mentality needs to mature too. Trust in those who know better. No one knows more about Necromancy than Hermione, so don't question her." Dumbledore reproached Harry until the sixteen year-old's gaze was fixed on his loose shoe laces.

"...m'sorry..." Harry mumbled to the floor. He swallowed. "I'll trust Hermione's judgement in future, I promise."

"Why make promises that you can't or won't keep?" Hermione sneered to him over her shoulder.

Harry fell to his knees and crawled over to her. "Please, Mione, give me another chance. I won't say a word against you, ever."

"Don't call me 'Mione! I don't like it when my friends call me that, let alone people like you." Hermione glared down at him.

"I'm begging you, Hermione, please. I need you. How am I going to get through this year without you, let alone graduate?"

"Don't be so melodramatic. You do have a brain despite all evidence to the contrary; I suggest that you use it." Hermione walked away, reaching out to open the door to leave the office. She yelped, pulling her hand away from the door handle and glared at Dumbledore as she waved her either burnt or shocked hand.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but you need Harry just as much as he needs you. I cannot let you leave this room without reconciling." Dumbledore offered a lemon drop to both of them, only for them to decline.

"With all due respect, Headmaster, I think you lace those things with something. That is the only explanation for the nonsense that just came out of your mouth."

Dumbledore smiled at Hermione's words. "No hallucinogenic, my dear. A little hint of Calming Draught, yes. Well, this situation is thirsty work, so I must insist that you both drink something." He popped one of his sticky sweets in his mouth.

A drinks tray appeared on the desk, with a whole variety of drinks laid out on it. Hermione stomped over and selected her poison. Harry got up from the floor and made his way over, wincing as Hermione flinched away from him. He chose a goblet of pumpkin juice and gulped it down. Hermione had taken a small sip of hers, only to drop the glass, spilling her juice on the floor.

"How dare you!" She spluttered. "You meddling buffoon, did you have to lace these with Veritaserum?"

"My dear, I didn't. Severus did; he is the Potions master in this castle."

Snape materialised beside Dumbledore, scowling at his employer. "Thank you ever so much. Did you have to land me in the path of the harpy?"

"Severus, Headmaster, Potter, I'm not a harpy. I'm a Necromancer; get it right! As far as I'm concerned, you're all in the doghouse." Hermione drew her wand, levelling it at the door, only for it to fly out of her hands. "Give that back!"

Snape had caught the wand, slipping it inside his robes. "My apologies, but this must be resolved."

"Right! The Headmaster is an interfering old goat, you are a complete and utter snarky bastard, and Potter is a rotter." Hermione hammered her fist on the door. "Now let me go or the door gets it."

"Hermione, do you need Harry's friendship?" Dumbledore asked, ignoring the insult. The girl had been given Veritaserum, after all.

"Ah! Nuh-uh." Hermione shook her head, refusing to answer, only to find herself nodding. It seemed that Veritaserum could force her body to be truthful, too.

"What will it take for you to accept me as a friend again?" Harry asked, his gaze pleading.

"Ditch that bloody book for starters!" she growled, earning the rare sight of a puzzled look from Dumbledore.

"Done! I'll do it. Hell, I'd streak to Hogsmeade and back if it'd fix this mess."

Hermione grimaced. "Not on my account, you won't. No offence, Harry, but the thought of you naked is just..." She shuddered.

Harry's expression lifted. She must be softening to call him by his given name again.

"Give me some time. I'm still extremely angry with you." Hermione tried the door again, having to suck her stung fingertips in an attempt to soothe them.

Dumbledore gave her a reproachful look, which she ignored entirely. "For the last time, open this door, Headmaster!" Hermione's voice was rising dangerously, obviously on the verge of losing her temper.

Harry watched as Dumbledore refused. Hermione rested her wand hand on the door, the light sources in the room dimming slightly even as Harry's scar stung with the Dark energy filling the room. Suddenly the door wasn't there anymore, just swirling ash slowly falling to cover the floor, the now rusted door fittings stuck to the walls.

Hermione's footsteps faded away, pacing down the spiral staircase.

"Holy shit!" Harry couldn't believe his eyes. "S-sir? I think it's just as well Hermione, ah, let herself out. She was pretty ticked off with me, and I'd hate to have that happen to me."

"Merlin's balls... I do believe you are right, Harry," Dumbledore murmured, staring at the missing door.

Snape followed Hermione out of the doorway, his billowing robes spreading the ash further across the polished stone floor.

Severus had to resort to scrying to find Hermione, and even then it was a challenge. She had hidden herself away in a broom cupboard, of which there were no less than a dozen spread throughout the castle. Every single one of them looked the same (especially in the blurry view given in the crystal ball), so it was in the seventh cupboard that he found her, down in the dungeons.

"Hermione? The Headmaster isn't angry with you, so why are you hiding?" Severus laid a hand on her shoulder, noting with some concern that she was trembling.

"I'm not hiding from him; I'm not hiding at all. I'm attempting to calm down, far away from morons like Harry Potter." Hermione's voice was thick with anger, still. That explained why she was shaking.

"In a broom cupboard? Surely the Room of Requirement would be better, you could have it provide mannequins in the shape of Potter for you to throw around." Severus smiled at the thought, although throwing around the real brat would be far more satisfying. It had been gratifying to watch Potter be upbraided by Albus and Hermione from his position under the Disillusionment Charm. Although he would rather it had happened without upsetting Hermione.

'Complete and utter pillock never deserved her as a friend... only realised when it was almost too late just how essential she is.'

"I was under the impression that Necromancers could only affect humans, not inanimate objects. How did you reduce that door to ash?"

"The rule is that if it is or was alive, I can manipulate it down to the very atoms that form it. I'd have difficulty doing that with rock, but it's still theoretically possible, especially with those made up from dead creatures. Chalk, for example, I could reduce to dust given time and energy." Hermione looked away from Severus's pale face.

He stared at her, absently thanking the founders for largely building the castle with, and on, igneous rock. "Thank Merlin for small favours..." he breathed.

Severus shook himself and pulled her wand out from his pocket, offering it to her to take. "I realise that as a Necromancer you hardly need a wand to defend yourself, but the idea is to keep it secret. What if one of my Slytherins had attacked the wayward Gryffindor in their territory?"

Hermione took her wand, stashing it in her pocket. "Then that Slytherin would have less than the intelligence of the lowest pond life. You claimed me today. No student is likely to risk angering you, much less your pet snakes."

Severus wearily ran a hand over his face. "This day feels like it has gone on forever. That was only this morning, and it feels like it happened a lifetime ago."

"I know the feeling. Some birthday, huh? I guess I better get to my dormitory before tomorrow." She stood up, pushing the door open.

Severus followed her up to the portrait of the Fat Lady. "Not so fast, my dear." He grabbed her from behind. "I have yet to give you your present."

"I thought that was the display in Defence."

"No wizard worthy of the name would only give a kiss. Even a Weasley gives a material gift to their 'sweetheart'." Severus all but spat the last word, contemptuous of such a term. He used his wand to wordlessly summon a parcel from his quarters, where he pressed it into Hermione's hands.

"Open it in your dormitory, preferably within sight of your gossiping room mates. Don't even think of returning it, you must know that to do so is a great insult and a clear sign that you reject me as a suitor. Goodnight." Severus used a couple of his long fingers to tilt Hermione's chin up to claim her mouth with his own in a fervent kiss. He left her gasping for breath as he sauntered back to his dungeon lair.

Minerva McGonagall watched with some concern at breakfast as Potter did his utmost to get Hermione Granger back as a friend. She herself was resigned to the fact that there was very little she could do to mend the split between her favourite student and the Boy-Who-Lived.

It had been a little over three weeks since Hermione's seventeenth birthday, and whilst the girl was allowing Potter to talk to her, she wasn't being overly friendly as she was still quite rightly feeling betrayed and angry with Potter's demands and accusations. It was Ronald and Ginevra Weasley that held the group of friends together, running interference when they could. However, Ronald seemed to be a little caught up with Miss Brown, engaging in quite scandalous behaviour, which meant that Minerva had already been forced to take even more points off Gryffindor, leaving her own House still in the negative, despite the famous trio's brave rescue of Miss Bulstrode.

Perhaps it was time to intervene. Minerva was ashamed to admit to herself that she had been remiss in avoiding Hermione. Her encounter with Grindelwald shortly before Albus killed him was a nightmarish experience, but no excuse. Hermione showed no signs of turning evil, venting her blackest emotions on the door to the Headmaster's office, which still hadn't been replaced although the ash had been swept up by a mystified Argus Filch. The girl could have chosen to do so with Potter; so she was obviously still in control of herself.

So it was that on the second Friday in October, Minerva asked Hermione to stay behind after Transfiguration. The stern witch summoned a house-elf and ordered lunch for two, inviting Hermione to sit down in front of the desk. The girl did as she was asked, after transfiguring the uncomfortable stiff backed chair into an armchair that seemed to have come straight from the Gryffindor common room.

"Miss Granger... Hermione... I'm sorry that I haven't really been there for you at this difficult time. All I can say is that my experiences as Grindelwald's captive left me petrified of Necromancers."

"I know. I read about it." Hermione half-heartedly nibbled at a sausage roll. "Even if I hadn't, the rate at which your heartbeat rockets and the skipped beats when you don't expect to bump into me would tell me." She rubbed at her face, heaving a tired sigh. "Professor, I have always respected you. I would never do anything to harm you."

"I know. But my fears are not why I wanted to talk to you. I understand why you're giving Potter the cold shoulder, but it is time for you to let bygones be bygones. I have managed to persuade the Headmaster to allow you to go to Hogsmeade tomorrow on the understanding that you will have at least one escorting member of the Order. I would like you to go with your friends; including Potter."

Hermione's face lit up at the thought of escaping the castle even for a few short hours. She shook her head ruefully. "You drive a hard bargain, Professor." She bit into a sandwich, chewing and swallowing before continuing. "Very well. I'll go and tell Harry the good news. But if he doesn't toe the line, he'll be out of my life faster than you can say 'banish'."

"Before you leave, Hermione, I hope that Severus Snape is treating you right. I'll transfigure him into a kitten if he's not."

A dreamy smile crossed the girl's face, her eyes sparkling. "He's a perfect gentleman, Professor. Whilst he doesn't give me chocolates and lots of flowers, he does give me jewellery... and books!"

"Hmm, so he does know the way into a bookworm's heart. What sort of jewellery? I did hear the odd rumour, but pearls the size of coconuts tend to be a little more visible."

Hermione laughed. She pushed up her sleeve a little, revealing a platinum charm bracelet. "One for every time I did something that gained his notice."

Minerva leaned forward, turning the bracelet to examine each one. A potions bottle signifying her solving of Severus's riddle in her first year. A cat, obviously a private joke as Minerva failed to see the significance. A serpent for her discovery of exactly what the monster of the Chamber of Secrets was. A waving hand; Minerva had to suppress a snigger, apparently Hermione tried to answer too many questions in Severus's lessons as well. A quill, resting on a letter; apparently they had corresponded at some point. The last charm was an embracing couple.

"Which books?"

"Several very rare ones that aren't in the library or in Flourish and Blotts. He won't let me return them after I've finished reading them either." Hermione danced around the question. Obviously, some of the books were of questionable content.

"Sweet Nimue. The man must really care for you if he's giving you books from his own collection." Severus's personal collection was split between his quarters and his parents' old home, rivalling Albus's for sheer size and rare contents. "Well, if he does do you wrong, come straight to me."

"Professor, if he does wrong me, there won't be much left for you to deal with." Hermione's tone was light enough to minimise the shiver that passed down Minerva's spine. The youngster thanked her elder for the lunch and said her farewells.

Minerva chewed thoughtfully at the remainder of her lunch. Judging by the girl's body language when the topic of Severus came up, she was more than half in love with him. 'You had better reciprocate, Severus Tobias Snape, or I'll turn you into a ball of wool for playing with in my Animagus form.'

## Chapter 15

*Chapter 16 of 25*

Hogsmeade: Thestrals, Butterbeer with Harry, Honeydukes, the necklace of doom. What more could happen?

Disclaimer: the Ministry of Magic are morons, J K Rowling owns Harry Potter and I am a skint student.

Without a beta, this couldn't be posted here, and the story would suffer. So thank you, LadySunflower.

Thanks to those who read and review.

Chapter 15

Hermione's relief at escaping the castle was short lived. She had the (in hindsight) obvious surprise that she could now see the Thestrals pulling the carriages to Hogsmeade, only to be dumbfounded by their colour. Instead of being the black that Harry and every book mentioning them had described, she saw them as pure white. Perhaps it was a result of having died, or simply an effect of being a Necromancer. Hermione didn't know, and not knowing things always disconcerted her.

When she arrived in the Wizarding village, she had a constant prickling on the back of her neck signifying that she was being watched by hostile eyes, yet when she looked up there was no one there. Attempting to locate the watcher was impossible, even trying to listen for the heartbeat failed her as there were far too many people around. Both McGonagall and Severus were within sight, allowing her some space to enjoy her friends' company. Ginny was strolling about, arm in arm with Dean Thomas, having been persuaded that Hermione was perfectly happy keeping Ron and Harry company.

Then Ron had been ambushed by a displeased Lavender Brown. Apparently, she had told him weeks ago that he was taking her to Hogsmeade. That left Hermione in a rather awkward situation with her erstwhile friend. Harry had managed to persuade her to join him for a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks, where they managed to talk through and resolve the majority of the issues between them.

They had been heading back to the castle after stocking up on sweets from Honeydukes (Sugar Quills in Hermione's case; the sight of the Tooth-flossing String Mints almost had her in floods of tears as she had given some to her parents years before) when Katie Bell was incapacitated by the sinister necklace.

Hermione was strongly tempted to reduce it to its component atoms, but knew that it was needed to investigate the attempted murder. McGonagall took the necklace back to the castle (wrapped and warded to avoid accidents).

The feeling of being watched intensified to the point where Hermione felt hunted. A deafening crack of multiple Apparitions echoed around the outskirts of Hogsmeade as a group of wizards wearing some kind of scaly armour surrounded her, their wands already moving together in a combined spell. A clear, silver dome expanded to enclose them from the outside world even as several projected spells rebounded from it as both Harry and Severus reacted a little too late. The thump of a body hitting the barrier only resulted in another as Harry tried to get through, only to be landed flat on his back, likely completely winded. No sound escaped the intricate barrier, only the hum of the magic and the breathing of the occupants could be heard.

Hermione went for her wand, only to be hit by several spells at once before she could even reach into her pocket. It seemed that Stunners didn't work with a Body-Bind Curse, but the net result was that she toppled over, unable to move. Her limbs were not restrained to her sides and she was still conscious, but the combination had paralysed her, barely allowing her to breathe. Her eyes were stuck shut, leaving her other senses to sharpen.

She could tell by his heartbeat that Severus was frantic, the hisses and cracks of his repeated attempts to break the barrier futile. Harry had recovered, joining him in the hopeless quest.

"Gawain, have your men strengthen the wards. It's time to end this." The voice was instantly recognisable as Rufus Scrimgeour's.

"Yes, sir. I must say that this does seem a little extreme, even old Dumbledore didn't dismember Grindelwald. Decapitation seemed fine then, so why it is necessary now..."

"Gawain Robards, you were appointed as Head of the Aurors due to your unquestionable loyalty to the Ministry. Don't make me question it now; do your duty. We cannot risk her coming back."

A thrill of fear ran through Hermione as she heard both the approaching footsteps and the heartbeat of Head Auror Robards. The swish of a knife as it cut through the air made her catch her breath. Didn't they know she was still awake?

Robards crouched down beside her, brushing her hair away from her throat as he brought the knife down. His hesitation even as he pressed the cold blade against her skin allowed her time to remember exactly what The Book had instructed her to do in last case scenarios such as this. The Auror's regretful touch against her cheek with his gloveless hand allowed her mind, even without eye contact, to slip inside his.

'Poor kid. It's not as if she asked to be a Necromancer, and to die this way... I'm sorry, Miss. This is the way it has to be. The Ministry cannot allow you to live... such a pretty girl, too... WHAT THE...'

Robard's thoughts cut off as Hermione forced his mind into dormancy as she took over, leaving her body behind as she got up.

"I can't do it, sir," she blurted, exchanging the silver knife for Robard's wand.

Scrimgeour was flushing red. "Stand aside, then. I'll do it myself."

'*Stupefy!* Hermione's non-verbal spell caught Scrimgeour unawares. He went down like a sack of potatoes. The other Aurors spun around, the barrier shimmering as the spell began to fail with their lack of attention.

"Stand down!" she yelled, realising that she was currently in the body of their superior. Two of the seven men pocketed their wands, four were undecided and the last raised his wand to attack. Hermione stunned him, disarming the undecided ones.

The barrier failed completely, Stunners flying from Severus and Harry's wands. Hermione dove for her body, as she was uncertain as to what would happen if she was knocked out in someone else's body. She managed to get back into her own body just in time, as Severus stunned Robards even as his own mind fought to the surface.

"What did you do that for? He was helping her!" Harry demanded, pocketing his wand.

"No, he wasn't." Hermione broke in before Severus could get into an argument with his least favourite student. "That was me. I possessed him," she murmured, unable to get up as her body below her head was still paralysed. Even if she'd recovered, she probably wouldn't be able to do anything but tremble as the situation caught up with her. If she hadn't read *The Book...*

They both recoiled, horrified by the talent. Possession was Voldemort's trick after all.

"It's not as if I had a choice! Or would you rather that they'd dismembered me?" Hermione was grimly satisfied to see Harry turn green and Severus a curious mottled colour as he both flushed with anger and paled at the thought.

Severus knelt beside her even as he trained his wand on Scrimgeour, only to shift it between the Minister and Robards. He must have seen Robards wielding the knife.

"He hesitated. That was enough for me to slip inside his mind. He didn't want to do it, he just saw no other way. Feel free to neuter Scrimgeour, though. The bastard wanted to go over the top, make sure I couldn't come back." At her words, Severus fixed his wand steadily on Scrimgeour.

"Professor, don't. The Ministry will be all the more troublesome if you do. Let's get out of here, we're drawing a crowd." Harry was right; it seemed as though the whole of Hogsmeade had been attracted by the noise of the barrier being worn down.

Hermione found herself in Severus's arms and being carried to the nearest Thestral-drawn carriage. Harry hopped in, watching her with some concern as she flopped against Severus.

"I don't recommend Stunners combined with a Body-Bind Curse." Severus lifted the debilitating combination, reversing the paralysis.

"The Headmaster must be informed of this. It may well result in you being restricted to Hogwarts castle and grounds in future, but we cannot take any chances with your safety."

"If I'm to be confined to Hogwarts then how do you suggest managing to get me to He-Who-Wants-A-Necromancer in future when he demands that you bring me before him? Invite him over here for a tea party?" Hermione asked, rolling her eyes at the ludicrous suggestion. "Look, being restricted to the castle isn't going to help if the Ministry reveals the truth. I'd be mobbed by the occupants of the castle, let alone the inhabitants of Hogsmeade."

"The Ministry will not risk inciting panic, not with the Dark Lord wreaking havoc."

"What makes you so sure? They're stupid and bold enough to attack me when I'm under Dumbledore's protection. They'll be handing out pitchforks in no time."

They reached the castle soon enough to meet Dumbledore and McGonagall as they hurried outside, the apparently omniscient wizard already aware of what had transpired. The students loitering around were on the verge of wetting themselves as they had never seen Dumbledore in such an enraged state. Hermione would hate to be in Scrimgeour's shoes when the Headmaster caught up with him.

Severus jerked awake, breathing heavily as he sat bolt upright, wand raised. He wiped the cold sweat from his face before it could run down his nose. Moonlight coming from the hidden window illuminated his bedroom with ghostly hues, casting sinister shadows.

"Hermione..." he gasped, throwing back the sheet covering him and lurching over to his robe. After pulling the garment on, he was barely aware of leaving his quarters and making his way through the empty corridors to the seventh floor and the Fat Lady's portrait. The painting was intelligent enough not to argue with a wild-eyed, unkempt version of the scariest professor in Hogwarts, so swung open when Severus hissed the skeleton key password.

He had enough presence of mind to cast a Disillusionment Charm over himself before entering the common room. As a member of staff, the stairs up to the girl's dormitories did not sound the alarm or transform into a slide, allowing him to ascend to his destination.

The sixth year girl's dormitory was quiet except for the soft snores of the girls inside. Three four poster beds were positioned around the circular room, an odd sight as the usual number was five. Hermione's bed was easily identified; it was the only one surrounded by books to the extent that it looked as though it was a refugee from the library.

Severus drew back the curtains, breathing a sigh of relief when the moonlight shone onto bushy hair and sparkled off the charm bracelet she still wore. He sat down on the end of the bed, his head resting in shaking hands. After the nightmare that he'd fought to wake up from, he'd felt the need to check that Hermione was whole and unharmed. He'd dreamed about what had happened scant hours earlier, except this time Hermione hadn't possessed the Auror...

Severus turned to the sleeping girl, hands stretching out to touch her soft, warm skin to further reassure himself that she was fine. She stirred, mumbling in her slumber. Even as he moved to get up and leave, she grabbed his arm and tugged with surprising strength. Severus was caught off guard, landing sprawled alongside her. Before he could roll away and get up, her arms had slipped around him, holding on tight. Another restless move later and she was lying more or less on top of him, head pillowed in the crook of his neck. Her legs were tangled in the blanket, resting between his own.

'Now what do I do? I can't get up without waking her, and if I stay this position will get very uncomfortable. Even those brainless gossips will notice if she has an invisible bed mate.'

To prove his thoughts, and complicate the situation even further, his treacherous body began reacting to the closeness of Hermione's warm body. His erection was soon pressing into the girl lying on top of him, something that she would not fail to notice if she woke up.

'Nothing for it, I have to move. I just hope she doesn't have her wand close to hand...'

Severus rolled Hermione off, only for her to come awake with a start. Fortunately for him, she seemed to realise exactly who was there.

"Severus? What're you doing here?"

"I..." He trailed off, not wanting to admit that a nightmare could scare him sufficiently to seek the comfort of her body.

Hermione reached out, to touch her hand to his camouflaged cheek. He jerked with surprise as he felt her pry into his mind. Contact Legilimency was almost unheard of, not even needing eye contact to work. In his surprise he couldn't prevent the memory of the nightmare from surfacing.

"It didn't happen, Severus. I'm fine." She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling herself close to him.

"I know. But I should have ignored Potter and been beside you. Maybe then..."

"You would've been Stunned. You aren't infallible. I don't hold it against you; you tried your best to protect me."

"My best wasn't good enough! I should have spelled that charm bracelet with an emergency Portkey to take you to the hospital wing in the event of hostile spells hitting you. I should have objected to Minerva's idea of allowing you to go to Hogsmeade. I'm not letting you out of my sight in future, young lady. Perhaps I should chain you to your bed and keep you in this tower like the proverbial princess in Muggle fairy tales," Severus hissed, attempting to keep his voice down, mindful of the gossips still sleeping.

"Don't beat yourself up! I would have gone regardless, I hate being cooped up. As for the damsel in distress cliché, while being chained to a bed does sound kinky, I'm not the sort to go along with overprotective chauvinists. Maybe I should chain you up..." Hermione's smirk was dimly visible in the moonlit room.

"Not in this lifetime, my dear. I had better take my leave. I wouldn't want those gossips to discover my presence." He moved to get up, only for Hermione to tighten her arms around him and latch her mouth onto his own with unerring aim, even virtually invisible as he was. Her lips, teeth and tongue evoked an automatic response in him, making his mind helpless to resist her magic on his body.

When she had to pull away to draw breath, he had a chance to remove himself from her clinging form, which he reluctantly took. It was increasingly tempting to take their relationship further than the occasional passionate exchange, but he didn't want to push her into something she wasn't ready for.

"I am ready, you sanctimonious bastard!" Apparently Hermione had picked up his train of thought before he moved away.

"Are you?" Severus murmured, before grabbing her hand and bringing it to rest on the bulge in his trousers. The size of his nose and the length of his fingers were good indicators of the proportions of his erection. From the widening of her eyes and hint of fear showing in them, Hermione was not as ready as she claimed.

"I-I think I am..." Her voice quavered slightly.

"Get back to me when you know you are. You must be absolutely certain; once I bed you, I won't let you go. You will be mine."

"Severus, I think you already have the whole school under the impression that I'm yours. You certainly leave enough evidence; if Ron wasn't caught up in Lavender's tentacles, he'd attack you every time he noticed certain marks you leave on my neck. Vampire!"

A satisfied smirk crept across Severus's face. He had intentionally left *Passion Purpura* after their encounters visible on her neck and noted with considerable glee the furtive glances of the students. The only reason Minerva hadn't sunk her claws into him was that he had cast a modified masking charm on the love bites that kept anyone over the age of the students from seeing them.

A loud snore from one of the other beds reminded him that he had better leave. To avoid Hermione kicking up a fuss, he drew his wand and fired off a Soporific Charm. She slumped down onto her bed, deeply asleep. He carefully positioned her so that she would not get a crick in her neck and tucked her in. On impulse, he gently kissed the sleeping beauty.

'While the majority would call her pretty at best, she is beautiful to me.'

## Chapter 16

*Chapter 17 of 25*

Hermione is *ready*...

Disclaimer: I'm not making any money from this, so it follows that I don't own Harry Potter.

Thanks to LadySunflower for betaing this and to any reviewers. I know you're out there somewhere!

Chapter 16

Ron Weasley was positive that Hermione had been wrong when she'd told him precisely how small his emotional capacity was just under a year ago. His shoulders were hunched over in an attempt to make himself less noticeable as he followed his best friends in the shadows cast by the treetops of the Forbidden Forest. His emotions were roiling, fear predominate. This godforsaken wood was all right by day, but by night it was the setting of his worst nightmares. He'd never forget the day he and Harry followed the spiders to Aragog's lair.

This year was turning out to be one of the worst, what with Snape and his long fingered hands (that for some reason reminded him of spiders) all over Hermione. His involvement with Lavender appeared to have backfired spectacularly; 'Mione showed no signs of jealousy, caught up as she was in Snape's web. Worse, Lavender must be the lovechild of the giant squid with the way she snogged and clung to him. That nickname she'd dreamt up for him was cringe-worthy; it was highly tempting not to respond whenever she called him 'Won-Won'.

The tall boy let out a yelp as he realised that Harry and Hermione were out of sight, having walked on at their usual speed while he dawdled in his thoughts. He dashed ahead, only to let out a girlish shriek as he got caught up in a spider's web spun between two trees.

"Ron, don't make so much noise. We're not that far from Aragog's territory." At Harry's words, Ron shuddered, his face draining. He'd thought that this part of the forest looked familiar.

"I don't see why those Potions' ingredients are so important. We're risking being eaten by the scariest things in this forest to collect a bunch of mushrooms." Ron squeaked, his voice higher than it had been since his second year at Hogwarts.



"What are you talking about? I'm the worst thing you'll meet in here," Hermione said, her voice thick with contempt.

Her eyes glinted in the starlight breaking through the foliage, her face hidden in shadow. They dared not light their wands, not wanting to attract any attention from the denizens of the forest.

"You know we need Luminous Spotted toadstools for our next Potions lesson. They only ripen every new moon; tonight is our only chance to get them in time. Potions is important if you want to be an Auror."

They walked on, Ron flushing in the darkness. He always felt stupid and clumsy around Hermione. He wished that she would see him as someone really brave, but she often seemed braver than him.

A sickly glow was visible ahead, low on the ground. They'd found their target. Ron drew his wand, ready to cast a few Severing Charms, only for Hermione to push it away to point above their heads.

"If you use magic to harvest them, you'll spoil them. Didn't you read the information on them in the textbook? Don't answer; I know you didn't. We have to pick them by hand... just don't let the caps touch your skin, or they'll have you glowing for a week afterwards."

"Cool!" Ron knelt next to the nearest toadstool, hand stretching out to touch it, only for his fingers to rebound off a conjured shield.

"I wouldn't. You'll find it hard to sleep with your eyelids glowing." Harry chuckled, pocketing his wand. He'd read the textbook, obviously still keeping himself in Hermione's good books.

Their pockets were soon filled with the glowing fungi, so they began retracing their steps.

"Shut your eyes, I'm going to light my wand. I can hear the heartbeat of something not human that's been getting steadily closer." Hermione's voice came with the slight whisper of the slide of wand wood against fabric as she drew her wand.

Ron could see the sudden bright source of light with his eyes closed. He heard Hermione gasp. He opened his eyes even as she called for him to keep them closed.

A silent scream opened his mouth wide as his eyes bugged out, fixed on the sight of an Acromantula larger than a shire horse. The monstrous spider skittered closer, having been momentarily blinded by the light of Hermione's wand. It spat three globules of sticky webbing-like saliva, pinning the three of them to nearby trees by their wand arms before they could cast any defensive or offensive spells.

The jaws of the creature clacked together with glee as it crawled close to Ron, sensing his fear.

"Stringy meet first, scarred meat second and delicate meat for afters!" The Acromantula cackled, its voice deep and grating.

It moved to bite Ron's head off, only to collapse into a heap at the petrified boy's feet. The spit holding them to the trees dissolved into flakes of dust.

"W-what the..." Ron stammered, baffled by the turn of events.

"Hermione?" Harry called, to be answered by silence.

The wand-light returned, illuminating Hermione's haunted features, her eyes fixed on the dead Acromantula.

"Hermione, it would have killed us," Harry murmured, laying a hand on her shoulder and shaking her gently.

"I could have stunned it instead of killing it," Hermione whispered hollowly. "I stopped its heart. I could've restarted it before it died."

"It was a monster, 'Mione. It got what was coming to it," Ron snapped, angered by the fact that she seemed to regret killing it.

"It was a sentient creature. I had no right to kill it; humans are a form of its prey."

"Maybe, but look at it. It's really fat, bloated so large that if it did eat us, it might've exploded. It didn't need to hunt us." Harry, bless him, was trying to comfort her. Ron nodded fervently, in agreement. He hoped that Hermione would see that he could be a comfort too.

"So by your own logic, when you, and especially Ron, are still stuffing your faces when you are so full that you can barely move, the animals that died needlessly would be justified in killing you."

"You eat meat too! You're no vegetable."

"Vegetarian, Ron. But I don't stuff myself silly either."

Harry began gently pushing Hermione to walk. "Come on, we don't want to attract any more predators, or heaven forbid, Grawp."

The mention of Hagrid's 'little' half brother was sufficient to incite Hermione into a fast walk, leaving the boys behind in her haste.

"Scared of a half-pint giant? We'll protect you, 'Mione." Ron sniggered.

"You've never seen him. He was scary, and seemed to take a liking to Hermione, too. I don't blame her for hotfooting it out of here. Snape is like Prince Charming compared to Grawp," Harry murmured.

"Snape? He doesn't deserve 'Mione. The thought of his great big paws all over her turns my stomach."

"Ron, I never thought I'd be saying this, but don't you think that they kind of go together? I mean, they are the scariest people in Hogwarts."

Ron stared at his best mate in disbelief. "Harry, have you been at those mushrooms in your pocket? You've gone mental. 'Mione ought to have someone decent her own age, not some Death Eater spy old enough to be her father. If her parents were still alive, they'd say the same thing."

"My parents might have said as much, Ronald Weasley, but they would have been hypocrites to do so. My father was one of my mother's lecturers at university and twenty years her senior. They would have no right to criticise my choices. You have no right to say anything like that."

Ron jumped, Harry stiffened beside him as Hermione's voice came from right behind them, in the shadows of a tree trunk. She'd been waiting for them to catch up, and was now ticked off to say the least.

"'Mione, Harry told me you have to let Snape seduce you, but you can't let him be your, you know..." Ron flushed before continuing, "your first."

"Not that it's any of your business, Ronald, but I'd rather have a man than a boy. Severus is quite the man, too..." Hermione's lofty tone turned quite salacious. She laughed as both boys gagged at the unthinkable combination of Snape and sex.

"I might not be of age yet, but I'm not a boy anymore. I'm manly; look at how tall I am, my voice is really deep." Ron flexed his muscles, only to hear Hermione snort derisively.

"Physical attributes are not what really what makes someone a man although they do admittedly help."

"What's Snape got that I haven't?"

"Maturity," Hermione snapped.

"Oh, very mature, the way he favours Slytherin," Ron grumbled, his face twisting.

"Do you think he really has a choice? There's a whole bunch of junior Death Eaters who would tell their father's if Severus didn't put them first. He knew that Voldemort wasn't gone forever, so he had to keep up the charade."

Even as Harry elbowed his side, attempting to get him to shut up, Ron blurted, "We belong together, 'Mione. I'll wait for you, but we could do it first. You should be with someone you love..."

There was a long silence, punctuated by a growing chill. Ron almost slipped over, grabbing at Harry. Their legs slid around as they stabilised themselves, clinging to a nearby tree. Ice surrounded them, creeping up the tree trunks.

"H-Hermione?" Harry shivered, his teeth chattering. None of them had been prepared for wintry temperatures in mid-October.

"Apart from anything else, Ronald, you are with Lavender. Furthermore, we do not 'belong together'; I don't know what gave you that idea. I don't love you as anything more than a friend."

Whilst the ice was slowly vanishing, Ron felt like it had found a new home in his heart. "But all of our arguments, you could cut the tension between us with a knife. We're meant to get married one day and have lots of babies..." He trailed off, eyes wide and pleading.

"That wasn't sexual tension. That was anger, frustration and annoyance. At least, it was on my part. Or do Weasleys have arguments as some bizarre mating ritual?" Hermione sighed deeply. "Ron... we'd never marry even if we did date because I'd end up killing you within a month and spend the rest of my life in Azkaban. Actually, they'd just execute me. I forgot; I'm number one on the Dangerous Persons List."

"But still, even if you don't wanna be with me, you shouldn't give up your virtue to Snape. If not me, then Harry. We love you 'Mione and want the best for you."

"Ron! Speak for yourself! Hermione's my friend. It'd be like shagging my sister, if I had one," Harry spoke sharply, as he shuddered at the thought. "But, Ron's right in that you should be with someone you love."

They had finally reached the edge of the Forbidden Forest and scurried up towards the castle. Harry pulled his Invisibility Cloak on as both Ron and Hermione were Prefects and, as such, were less likely to be in trouble if caught.

"I will be," Hermione murmured, on the edge of hearing.

"What?"

"I will be with someone I love."

"Who? Whoever it is needs to meet with our approval."

"Excuse me, but you are not my keepers. I don't need your approval to sleep with someone." Hermione cheeks were red, her eyes narrowed. She looked absolutely furious. If she was a dragon, she'd be breathing fire.

"Hermione, please tell me... you're not... Snape?!" Harry breathed, attempting to remain unnoticeable under his Cloak.

Ron frowned, not understanding what Harry was saying.

"If by that nonsensical disarray of words you meant to ask: am I inclined to be devoted to the younger resident recipient of a mastery in Potions, then yes, Harry, I am."

Ron's eyes almost crossed as he attempted to translate Hermione's words into ordinary English. Harry was just as confused, judging by the sounds of his footsteps as he almost tripped beneath his cloak.

"You're in love with Snape?" Harry yelled. Apparently, that fumble in his footsteps was because he did understand what Hermione had said.

Ron's jaw dropped as his heart seemed to plummet into his shoes. He held his breath, hoping against hope that Hermione would say no.

"Yes. Head over heels, arse over elbow; whichever way you want to put it, I am completely and wholeheartedly in love with Severus Snape."

"No!" Ron wheeled around, towering over Hermione. His eyes were stinging, but he was more angry than upset. "Anyone but him. Even the Ferret would be better than Snape. No one could ever love that excuse for a human being. He has no heart; you're only setting yourself up for heartbreak. Be mine, Hermione. I'll treat you right."

Hermione shook her head, pity foremost in her even gaze. "No, Ron. I'm sorry, but I do love him. Not you."

"Can't you pretend to love me? You're just as cruel as him."

"It'd be crueler to hide the truth from you. I will always be your friend."

Her pity sickened him. He stalked off, his long legs leaving her behind. As he passed through the Entrance Hall, he was curious to note (even through his anger) that Gryffindor house points were now out of the negative and almost equal with Slytherin's. They'd somehow gained something like two hundred and fifty points whilst they'd been out in the woods.

The main topic of conversation for the next week running up to Halloween was who had awarded the points and why. None of the teachers seemed to know, although Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling more than usual, leading to the theory that he'd awarded the points. There were more outlandish theories, the most popular being that an unnamed Gryffindor student had figured out how to get past the maze of wards surrounding the House point lists governing the hourglasses around the castle and fiddled with the numbers.

Hermione didn't believe any of the theories. She had her own, but hadn't mentioned it to anyone as they would consider it far too outlandish. Even the *Quibbler* wouldn't publish it. The two hundred and fifty points had been awarded shortly after she'd admitted the truth of her feelings regarding Severus to the boys. She'd bet her front teeth that the sneak had overheard and awarded those points. It was tempting to make skin contact with him and read the truth from his mind, but she didn't think that she was prepared for the possibility that while she loved him, he might not feel the same for her. Yes, he cared for her, but caring was not the same as loving.

Voldemort had not summoned Severus again since he had been ordered to seduce her, but the reports from spies amongst the students and staff would not satisfy him forever. There were ridiculously simple spells around that would reveal whether or not a girl was a virgin; which Hermione still was, having been unwilling to waste the experience on just anyone. While the idea of doing so to collect her virgin's blood had some merit, it was more valuable (and powerful in potions) the older the virgin was. It would hardly please Ol' Voldy to find that his servant hadn't managed to bed the girl in over a month, so it was time for Hermione to mentally prepare herself for the inevitable.

First times were said to be awkward, painful and unsatisfying for the girl involved, but it should be better with Severus; he must have sufficient experience to know how to please a woman in bed. At least, Hermione hoped so, her practicality overriding any jealousy concerning his hypothetical previous lovers. Sex hadn't exactly come up as a topic during their correspondence, but it was highly unlikely that a man of thirty-six with a bad boy sex appeal (granted, without any leather) was still a virgin.

So it was that Hermione caught Severus's attention during Defence on Halloween with a raised arm.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Will we be covering hand to hand combat? Many wizards and witches are caught off guard by physical attacks, yet with lessons in Muggle self-defence, I find that I'm *ready* for defensive action, yet untrained people don't know how to react."

"Do you think or know of your readiness?" Severus's dark eyes were fixed on her face, having detected the slight stress she placed on the word 'ready'.

"I know; perhaps a physical demonstration would be in order?"

Judging by the glint in his eyes, he'd got the message.

"In future lessons, perhaps. A private demonstration of what you have in mind will no doubt convince me. I'll meet you outside of your common room at curfew."

Hermione smiled as she saw Severus, only for it to fade when he scowled in response. Something wasn't right; he was holding himself rather stiffly. She moved toward him as she tried to work out what was wrong.

He gestured for her to follow him, allowing her to watch him walk. Normally, the view was quite spectacular, with sweeping robes and fluid, graceful movements, walking tall, holding himself up to his full height of just over six feet. At the moment he was slouching, his limbs moving awkwardly. Hermione cocked an eyebrow sceptically; if this was a sign of his nerves, then perhaps they'd better put this off for a while longer.

Minutes later they were in the Room of Requirement, standing by a large double bed in the cosy room. Severus moved to pull her into his arms, only for Hermione to step back.

"You want me... come here, 'Mione." His voice sounded roughly normal, if a little throaty.

"Yes, but there's just one problem." Hermione let him pull her into her arms, even as she reached into her pocket for what was required in this situation. He leaned down to kiss her, a very distinctive, repulsive scent reaching her with the move. That gave her the last piece in the puzzle. 'I last smelt that in Slughorn's classroom, an entire cauldron full. And before that, in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom...'

"What's that?"

She dug the tip of her wand into his throat, keeping him from coming any closer. "You're not Severus."

## Chapter 17

*Chapter 18 of 25*

All Hallows Eve, Hermione finally sees the interior of Severus's quarters.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter.

Thanks as always to my beta, LadySunflower and any reviewers.

Chapter 17

Ron would be in the hospital wing for a while after Hermione hexed him virtually into next week. His attempt to deceive Hermione using Polyjuice Potion backfired spectacularly, her new wand powering up harmless hexes into quite painful variants. After hearing what had happened, Professor McGonagall was inclined to expel Ron for attempted rape, but Hermione refused to press charges. She could exact her own revenge, after all... and had already started by hitting her presumptuous, so-called 'friend' with a combination of obscure hexes that Madam Pomfrey would struggle to counter. When Ron eventually recovered, he would be in detention until further notice, under McGonagall's watchful eye.

Before she left the hospital wing, Hermione made it clear that Ron had a long way to go before she'd trust him again. She also completely destroyed his 'I-only-did-what-was-right' composure by telling him that his mother had been informed, and that he could expect a Howler anytime.

The real Severus was waiting for her outside, forbidden entrance because he was itching to cast some of his own spells on poor, stupid, misguided Ron.

"What was it that alerted you to the fact that he wasn't me? Your contact Legilimency?"

"No. It never got far enough for that. I'm very familiar with your mannerisms, you know. He didn't move or stand like you, and he scowled when he saw me. I bet Ronald has never seen you make a pleasant expression... he also called me 'Mione, which you know better than to do," Hermione answered. "Oh, and his breath reeked of Polyjuice."

"Do you still want to do this? Perhaps it would be better to wait; that fool has ruined tonight."

"Yes, I do still want to go ahead. It'll take more than that prat to put me off. Just don't mention my idiotic former friend."

"You do realise that you need all the friends you can get? While foolish, Weasley is a faithful friend. Loyal enough to want to keep you from my hands."

Hermione sighed at his words. "I know. I'll forgive him, but I'll find it easier to do so if we rectify this situation tonight."

"Very well. I shall endeavour to make you forget anything else exists. Come with me; my quarters will be the best place for this."

It was a mystery exactly where Severus's quarters were, even to their occupier. Either it could move around the castle or the various doors into it were a form of Portkey,

because it had hidden doors leading into it from very different locations. The main entrance was through a door in Severus's office (now moved from the dungeons to the third floor) with others from the Slytherin common room and the corridor along which every other teacher's quarters could be accessed from on the ground floor. The fourth door seemed able to open anywhere in the castle and grounds but only from the inside, and was the secret to the ease with which Severus could patrol at night.

They used the office door, as it was only one floor below them. Hermione hadn't been inside his quarters before as every close encounter they'd had recently had either been in public areas or in the Room of Requirement, but he had described them. The walls couldn't be seen for bookshelves, except for over the fireplace and doors, where earthen tones blended with the polished wooden floors. While furniture was sparse, what there was appeared to be comfortable, high backed armchairs and sofa upholstered in pale green.

Hermione didn't even realise that she'd drifted over to the nearest bookshelf until Severus's hand gently closed around her wrist, preventing her from taking a book.

"I was under the impression that you were not here to read. Although, perhaps you would like a guided tour around my domain before we get down to the serious business of your deflowering."

He guided her around his rooms, showing her where his guest room was ("Not that I ever use it"), his study, ("I tend to use my office. I just file the paperwork here"), his library - filled to the brim with bookshelves packed tightly with books - and finally his bedroom, leading her through it without giving her time to register anything in it, to his personal bathroom. It was smaller than the prefect's bathroom, but it was still more than large enough for two people. There was also a separate shower stall ("I don't have time for baths, so I insisted that it be installed").

Severus's bedroom was carpeted in thick deep green pile, which practically screamed for Hermione to kick her shoes and socks off and dig her bare feet into it. She succumbed to the urge, wriggling her toes.

"It does beg for that." Severus had done the same, his large pale feet sinking deep.

There were a couple of bookshelves - Hermione had been almost surprised by the lack of them in the bathroom - but otherwise there was just a chest of drawers, a floor-to-ceiling Muggle mirror (Severus hated talking mirrors with a vengeance), and his bed. Not even the sight of more books could wrench her gaze from the bed. It was an ordinary king size bed with black cotton sheets - with no irritating curtains or posts - but there was something special about it. Hermione wandered over to it, frowning in concentration. What was it about this bed? Was it just the fact that it was Severus's? She sat on the end to test it out.

'Ah. That's what it is. It's the most comfortable bed I've ever encountered. Mine!' Her eyes closed in bliss as she flopped back to lie spread-eagled on it.

"You're never getting this bed back; I've claimed it." Hermione all but purred.

"Really? I urge you to reconsider, if you think my bed is good now... just think about what it's like with company." Severus's words made her breath catch, her eyes snapping open to see him standing over her, his eyes running hungrily over the sight of her sprawled across his bed. Even as an involuntary flush made her cheeks burn, his words and hungry eyes sparked her arousal into life below the pit of her stomach.

"Rather than keeping on interrupting the mood with questions ascertaining your permission, just tell me 'no' and I will stop, no matter what." His eyes seemed even darker with lust, but he didn't move from his position. Hermione realised that he was waiting for her to say 'yes'.

"Take me." Her voice, although small, was firm with resolve.

Severus smirked at her. "I will."

He pounced, a swift, graceful move that ended with him straddling her, pinning her to the bed. He took her face in his hands as he lowered himself on top of her, his elbows resting on the bed to keep him from crushing her. The warm weight of his chest shifted against her own as he moved his head closer, her nipples tingling as his mouth made contact with her own.

A strangled moan escaped her as he explored her mouth with his tongue after teasing her lips open with it. She prevented him from fully investigating her teeth by tangling her own tongue with his, drawing an answering groan from him as she ran her hands down his back to grip his arse and squeezing lightly. Severus bucked against her, pressing his now fully erect, cloth-covered member into her belly. He pulled away with a growl, staring intently at her whilst still straddling her.

He said nothing, his mouth open as he breathed in deeply. His hands reached down to her torso, long fingers tracing around her breasts, contracting her nipples further as he stroked the sensitive undersides. Severus cupped them, weighing her breasts in his large hands, engulfing them in his grip.

Hermione gasped for breath as she realised that she'd stopped breathing, caught up in Severus's attentions. Her cheeks reddened further at the attention being paid to her chest; she was well aware that her bust size was only average. For all she knew, Severus preferred buxom women. The man in question gently squeezed, drawing her attention to him.

"Whatever you might think, there is nothing wrong with your... dimensions. Your breasts fit perfectly into my hands." He shifted his hands to her throat, unclasping her robes and shoving them aside. "There are spells for this, but I find that the act of undressing manually arousing for both parties involved."

His fingers were surprisingly nimble for their size, undoing her tie in moments and sliding it from under her collar, throwing it aside to the floor. He made quick work of her blouse's buttons (not surprising, considering the number of buttons on his own clothes), pushing it open to reveal her no-nonsense bra surrounded by smooth, almost unblemished skin. The faint pink line of her curse scar cut across her chest from her collarbone to her hip, but Severus ignored it.

Severus cursed as he examined the bra. "Of course, it would have to be fastened at the back." He scrambled off her, pulling her to her feet and he pulled her robe and blouse off, spinning her around and scrutinising the clasp for a moment before fiddling around, attempting to undo it.

Hermione stifled a giggle, reaching around to do it herself. "For future reference, it works like this."

His hands batted hers away once they had undone the clasp. He slid the straps down her shoulders, caressing her skin as he did so with his slightly callused fingertips, sending shivers cascading down her spine. A twist of his arms later, and he'd slipped it off her and sent it across the room. Hermione automatically crossed her arms over her newly exposed skin, her blush spreading down across her chest.

"Do you think you need to hide yourself from me?" Severus demanded, turning her to face him with a hand on her shoulder.

"No..." Hermione whimpered uncertainly, biting her tongue at the unwelcome tone.

"Would it make you feel more comfortable if I was equally exposed?" At Hermione's nod, he grinned. She was wondering exactly what had made him impersonate a shark when he gestured her closer. "Undress me." She followed his command automatically, only to realise that she'd exposed herself to his lecherous gaze. His grin widened.

Hermione let out a huff, shaking her head resignedly. 'He never stated how to undress him, just to do it manually.' She smirked as she reached up to his robe clasp, and touched it with the tip of one finger. It disintegrated under her touch, the array of buttons holding the rest of his clothes together followed suit seconds later, the threads binding the seams together last. She found it easier to tear things apart when their atomic structure was already familiar to her.

Severus frowned, not understanding what she'd done until his clothes started falling open and off. "Hermione! I said equally exposed, infernal girl."

Before she could admire her handiwork, he lunged at her as his control over his animal instincts failed, tearing her skirt all the way down to the hem. It, understandably, fell down. The shreds of her knickers followed suit. Hermione didn't have time to complain as she was thrown down onto the bed, pinned under Severus.

They both gasped at the burning contact between their bare skin, his lightly haired chest tickling her. Severus shifted, bringing his engorged cock into contact with her inner thigh. Her body refused to respond to the prim demands of her brain to move away, enjoying the feel of Severus's hard body pressed tightly against her.

"Temptress," Severus muttered, before seizing her mouth with his own.

Hermione was too caught up in the sensations of skin against skin to respond, but he didn't seem to mind a one-sided exchange. If she could have, she would have been using her contact Legilimency throughout this night, but the concentration required for it was beyond her, her mind in increasing disarray. So it was no surprise that she didn't notice his hand working down between them, running down her left side, pausing at the swell of her breast to fondle it, then continuing down to hover above where his cock twitched against her. She certainly did notice it, however, when long fingers began stroking at the nub between her legs. She was well aware of the finger dipping further down to slip inside, testing the growing wetness it found there.

"Severus..." she gasped, her eyes drifting closed. They snapped open when after she felt Severus move down, his tongue laving her crinkled areola before he sucked her nipple into his mouth. His left hand worked at her other, pinching lightly. Her mouth opened, little whimpers and moans of delight escaping as he switched over, the cold air pebbling her nipple further.

He pulled away, drawing a cry of protest from her. He drew his right hand away from her privates, sucking his glistening finger into his mouth, savouring her essence. From Severus's devilish expression, he liked it very much. He also seemed to like making her squirm, as he slid further down, his hands at her breasts and his mouth...

"Ah!" Hermione's head fell back as he parted her thighs and began licking at her centre, his nose nudging her clitoris as he lapped at her inner labia before slipping his tongue inside. He didn't let up with his kneading fingers either, working her breasts into aching fullness. She wasn't so sure about oral sex, but the sensations it evoked halted any protest before it could be vocalised. Her hands clutched at his freshly washed hair. Not that being washed made much difference, as it seemed to be a law of science and nature that Severus Snape's hair was greasy. No matter, it felt slick and smooth under her fingers. Anyway, who cared about his hair when he was on the verge of giving her a toe curling orgasm?

Her hips were shifting involuntarily against him, as her eyes rolled back in her head. She cried out in ecstasy as he suckled on her clit, much in the same way as he had on her breasts, but the intensity of the reaction sent stars dancing across her vision. Her eyes slid shut as she revelled in her climax.

Severus moved back up, positioning himself over her. The blunt tip of his dripping cock rested at the entrance to her vagina. He said something to her, then summoned something with his wand. He didn't hesitate, thrusting deep inside with a single fluid move. Hermione flinched slightly at the pang from her rendered hymen, but there wasn't much of the fabled pain, just an unfamiliar, strange sensation of being stretched and filled.

"Look at me," Severus ordered, and when she complied she found his expression to be as strained as his voice had been. He was obviously just as affected as she was by the trembling of her body; especially by the contractions of her inner muscles around his erection. She focussed on his eyes, absently noting that she really couldn't tell where the pupils ended and the irises began in their current dilated state.

He began to move, his back arching over her as his hips shifted fluidly, powering spine-tingling thrusts. Hermione ran her hands over his back, sinking her nails in to the point of drawing blood as the tension built again inside her. Severus was almost pulling out of her and then plunging deep back inside, his hands gripping her hips to prevent himself from slipping out. She lifted her legs up, bending them at the knees as she locked her ankles together behind him. He slid even deeper than before, a deep groan escaping both of them as he filled her completely.

His hands came up to tangle in her hair, after stroking his thumbs over her nipples in passing. He used this hold to bring her head up to his as he stretched down, mimicking the act of sex with the thrusts of his tongue as it plunged between her lips.

An extra twist of his hips brought his pubic bone into contact with her own, stimulating her clitoris as it did. He repeated the process, smirking against her lips as another orgasm began to crest, which seemed to blank out her vision as it shook her body. She clenched around Severus, throwing her head back as she screamed something, most likely his name judging by the smug look on his face afterwards.

The sensations of her climax soon took Severus with her, his thrusts becoming less controlled, his balls slapping against her as they tightened. She dimly felt his cock pulse as he came with a strangled cry of "Mine!" which might have been a mangled version of her name, but was just as likely to have been a possessive shout. He collapsed on top of her, still within her.

Once he had regained enough usage of his brain, Severus rolled off her, slipping his softening cock out of her as he did so. Both of their chests heaved as they came down from their high, their breathing eventually slowing down to a more normal rate. Hermione didn't need her heightened hearing to sense his heartbeat still pounding away as it gradually slowed. Severus held her close, stroking her hair. Their skin stuck to each other and the sheets, sticky with sweat.

'Yeah, it's just sweat, Hermione. Why not delude yourself?'

Hermione caught sight of a vial of red liquid on the bedside table, where their wands rested. Odd, she didn't remember removing them from their robes, or seeing Severus do it. She reached out, bringing it closer to examine it. She pulled the stopper, assuming that it was a contraceptive potion and meaning to drink it, only to smell... blood? She raised it to eye level for closer observation. It was blood.

"I told you that I was going to collect your virgin's blood with a spelled vial. Weren't you listening?" Severus stuck the stopper back into the neck of the vial before the precious liquid could be spilt.

"I knew you said something, but I wasn't exactly with it at the time. Bastard," Hermione muttered.

"That's not a very nice thing to say to the man who gave you two orgasms in exchange for the loss of your virginity," Severus said in a mock hurt tone.

Hermione smacked his arm. "What makes you think I'm a very nice person? Your temperament is catching." She suddenly recalled what she'd thought the blood was. "If that wasn't a contraceptive potion, then... oh, God. This isn't the time for pregnancy." She moaned, eyes widening with panic.

She was baffled when Severus began to laugh. "Something the know-it-all doesn't know! My dear girl, only married people have to cast spells or use potions against conception on Hogwarts grounds. Hand-fasting nullifies special wards used to prevent an epidemic of teenage pregnancies. Heaven knows there would be one, with all the madly copulating, hormonally driven students around here. Either that or I'd be overrun with requests for certain potions, even with Horace Slughorn back."

"That wasn't mentioned in *Hogwarts: a History* or the school rules."

"If it was, then it'd just encourage more promiscuity. Furthermore, you must know that I wouldn't put you at risk if the wards didn't exist. Some things are..." Severus gasped, clutching at his left forearm. Hermione leaned over, pulling his hand away to reveal the squirming tattoo-like Dark Mark, burning black. He'd been summoned. "Badly timed; typical. At least he didn't call while we were making love."

Hermione watched as he pulled on some fresh clothes from his drawers (well, she had ruined what he had been wearing earlier) and slipped his Death Eater robes and mask on. A swift kiss (rather surreal with the mask on) and a hasty farewell and she was alone. She assumed that Severus would use the moving door to leave unseen, as it might scare someone like Filch to death if he was caught in Death Eater gear. He hadn't said that she couldn't stay, so she pulled the covers over her cooling body as she settled in to wait, summoning a tempting looking book to read from the nearest shelf. She looked up abruptly, startled when she remembered what Severus had said before he left. 'He said... he called what we did making love... does that mean he loves me?'

AN: I'm not most confident with my ability at writing scenes like those included in this chapter, so please bear that in mind if it seems a little clumsy.

# Chapter 18

*Chapter 19 of 25*

Voldemort wants his pet Necromancer to learn the Dark Arts.

Disclaimer: Nope, still not mine.

Thanks to my reviewers and my beta (LadySunflower).

Chapter 18

Voldemort was alone in the graveyard of Little Hangleton, waiting for Severus to arrive. His eyes and ears at Hogwarts had been keeping him informed as to the progression of Severus's seduction. Now six weeks had passed, and he was growing impatient. Surely, Severus had the girl eating from the palm of his hand by now...

A disturbance in the air alerted him to Severus's arrival; his closest spy to Dumbledore could Apparate virtually soundlessly. The black robed, silver masked man came close, knelt down and fluidly crawled forward to plant a kiss on the hem of Voldemort's silk robe.

Voldemort's snake-like nostrils flared. He breathed deeply, inhaling the musky scent clinging to his servant. 'I have not smelt this since...' His red eyes widened as he recognised the distinctive scent. He raised his hairless brows, looking down at the still kneeling Severus.

"Well done, Severus. You bedded the girl." Severus didn't answer, recognising the statement for what it was. "Recently, too. Her scent clings to you, along with a hint of blood. She was a virgin, then. You collected the blood? Good. I am sure you will find a worthwhile use for it." He gestured for Severus to rise and began to wander around the graveyard with him in tow.

"What the children of my Death Eaters do not know to look for are signs of the Granger girl's Necromantic powers. Tell me what you know." It was a sign of the Dark Lord's favour that he did not use Legilimency to see the relevant memories for himself.

"Her control over her powers is growing. She found a book instructing her on how to use her powers. I slipped into her mind to examine it myself, but the backlash threw me out of her mind with such force that it rendered me unconscious. It is obviously dangerous to any who do not possess the powers of Necromancy. The memory of it might have destroyed a lesser wizard."

"Has she brought anything back from the dead?" A greedy gleam came into those unnatural red eyes.

"Not using Necromancy, no. She did use Muggle methods to save the life of one of my Slytherins."

"Perhaps she just needs to get used to the idea. It is taboo, after all. Tell me of what you have seen of her powers."

"When she loses control over her negative emotions, unnatural frosts form. One of those covered the floors of the entire castle, as I discovered when I compared notes with the other teachers. She can reduce anything that is or was alive to ash, given enough time and energy. I saw her vaporise the door to the Headmaster's office with a single touch; the empty space left also resists any attempts at replacement."

Voldemort smiled thinly at Severus's words. "She will be a worthy ally. Severus, my friend, I require you to give our little Necromancer some extracurricular lessons in your position of Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. Sans the defence against."

"Yes, Master. But, if I may... why does she need this knowledge? Her grasp of her Necromancy is far beyond the normal Dark Arts."

"Be that as it may, the girl may be more comfortable with using her natural powers if she has the simpler Dark Arts under her belt. You may go... but before you do... is the girl warming your bed as we speak?" It was simple curiosity that made him ask, prying his flat nose into his servant's personal life.

"As far as I know. I left her in the afterglow." There was slight note of disapproval in Severus's smooth voice.

"I do apologise. Does Granger know of your position as a Death Eater?"

"Yes, but she is under the impression that I am Dumbledore's spy."

"Keep her that way for the moment. She is said to be intelligent; she will figure it out. But you must ensure that she will follow your lead and join us. I would hate to have to punish you..."

Severus nodded, bowed and vanished from Voldemort's side with a rush of displaced air.

Hermione had fallen asleep by the time Severus had alerted Albus to Voldemort's troubling orders. He stood over the sleeping girl, worried eyes tracing over her relaxed features. The Dark Arts were insidious, inevitably corrupting the purest soul. His own soul, if it could be seen, would look filthy, dark rents crisscrossing it, staining what white was left with grey. Hermione's soul had been damaged by the deaths of her parents and familiar and had been steadily tarnished by the pure dark powers of Necromancy. The ordinary Dark Arts would spread hairline cracks throughout her spirit, allowing the faster spread of the advanced Necromantic taint.

'Am I to be the architect of her destruction? Why me? I wish Albus had dirtied his hands with dark magic a little. 'There is no one in the Order with sufficient knowledge of the Dark Arts, Severus. You must do this yourself. Even if Remus could do this in your stead, Voldemort would find out somehow.' Well, thanks for nothing, Albus. Stupid werewolf only learned Defence. Useless cur!' Severus's thoughts trailed off into a stream of invective aimed at Albus, Lupin and the snake-faced Dark Lord himself.

He began to undress, throwing the Death Eater robes into their drawer, his mask tucked away into a pocket. The rest of his clothes would be fine to put back on later on; there had been no bloody revel.

As he pulled the covers back, he exposed the smooth expanse of Hermione's front. She frowned in her sleep, a shiver passing through her as the cold air raised goose bumps. He paused, comparing her virtually unmarked skin to his own, scarred hide. By the end of her extra 'lessons', would the fabric of her soul match his shredded skin? Could he forgive himself if it did?

With a heavy sigh, he climbed into bed, pulling Hermione close. "Mine..." he breathed, before drifting off to sleep.

Hermione was roused by a deep rumbling. She struggled to lift her head (for some reason it was heavier than normal) to find that it was actually Severus snoring; her head had been pressed to his chest, his arm keeping it there. After rolling over, she sat up, wincing as some unused muscles complained about their first usage. She pulled the

covers around her to ward off the chilly morning air. In doing so, she pulled them off the upper half of the man currently shaking the bed with his snores.

Last night she hadn't had much of a chance to examine his body, but now... she grinned, her eyes roaming over Severus's lean frame. Hermione's wide smile faded as she took in the sight of the scars cutting across his chest. She traced a shaking finger over a particularly nasty looking one, cutting across his breastbone directly over his heart. While faded, it was still deep, obviously having pierced the bone. His scars were testament to his dangerous life. How many times had he risked his life for the greater good? If those doubting boys could see these old wounds, they might not be so quick to pass judgement.

Severus snorted in his sleep, absently kicking the rest of the covers off. Hermione was distracted from his scars by his morning erection jutting out. It seemed to be begging to be touched, and she couldn't resist. The surface was quite possibly the softest skin she'd ever touched, especially at the tip. The texture was unlike anything she'd ever felt (unless she took the feel of him within her, as experienced the previous night). While soft on the surface, his erect phallus was also hard. She observed with some interest that it was growing harder still under her fingers. It was with an almost scientific interest that she ran a finger over the head; it twitched in response. To further satisfy her curiosity, she collected a drop of the liquid gathering at the opening and lifted it up to examine the clear fluid more closely. On impulse she flicked her tongue out to taste it, sampling it before swallowing. Hermione winced at the burning it induced in her throat as it went down.

'Salty, bitter and unpleasant to swallow. I think Severus will need to give me an incentive before I fellate him.'

Hermione continued to occupy herself with stroking his cock, only to be startled when he abruptly spoke, having been awake for some time.

"Before you continue fondling me, perhaps you'd care to tell me precisely how sore you are. Don't start something that we can't finish."

"I am a little sore... and it's breakfast time judging by the platter that's just appeared."

After shrugging into a couple of kimono-style dressing gowns (in Slytherin green) they dug into the House-Elf conjured breakfast, during which Severus told her of Voldemort's most recent command.

"The Dark Arts... and the Headmaster agrees?" Hermione pushed her plate away, no longer hungry.

"He doesn't like it anymore that either of us, but we have no choice. People who practise the Dark Arts can feel their fellows; your Necromancy does not have quite the same taint." Severus laid his hand over hers, stifling the trembling. She obviously understood all too well the implications of this, that it would be harder to retain control over the darkness spreading within.

She pulled her hand free, got to her feet and began to pace back and forth in front of the bed. "What would be my chances with the Dark Arts Addict if I tried to reduce him to cinders?"

"You cannot risk it. He, like Albus Dumbledore, is more than powerful enough to kill you on his own. As such, their bodies would resist any attempts at atomizing."

"So we have no choice but to go along with this." Hermione sighed, her shoulders slumping. "Fine. Tonight, or this weekend?"

"Both. We may need every bit of time available, and it is inadvisable to use a Time Turner before and after coming into contact with Dark spells. I tried once, and the experience was..." Severus shuddered, closing his eyes. "Well, I'll never forget the sensation of the worst hangover in existence when I'm a teetotaler."

A loud rap at the window alerted them to the presence of an owl, Hedwig. Hermione opened the window and retrieved the letter dangling from the snowy owl's leg. Hedwig gave her a friendly nip then flapped off, obviously intelligent enough to know that anything belonging to Harry Potter wouldn't be welcome in Severus Snape's domain.

"What does Potter have to say?" Severus demanded, scowling at the letter Hermione was reading.

"He wants to know where I am. He can't see me on the Marauder's Map, and he's worried because I never came back into the common room last night. He also wants to know why Ron's in the hospital wing. I guess that means Ron didn't involve Harry in his plot and hasn't admitted the reason himself," she explained as she used her wand to summon a scrap of parchment, a quill and a pot of ink.

"I... am fine... Ron's had an encounter with... the intended victim of a backfired... prank... namely me... see you in lessons... Hermione." She folded up the letter she'd just read aloud as she wrote it, and opened the window. Hedwig, who had been hovering outside, snatched the letter up in her talons (almost drawing blood on Hermione's hands before she pulled them back).

"Potter may well realise exactly where you've been. You wrote that using my marking ink." Severus smirked, snatching up his crystal ball. *Locus Harry James Potter*."

The image revealed was of Harry sitting with Ginny, Dean and Neville at the breakfast table. He looked up, Hedwig fluttering into view moments later. Hermione leaned closer, intrigued by Harry's reaction. He was frowning, his scar creased by the frown lines. The frown deepened, fading into a wince. Ginny was asking him something in a whisper, Dean and Neville talking amongst themselves. Harry passed the letter over to her, moodily scooping up a forkful of his breakfast and idly watching as it slid back off it. It looked like Ginny's eyes might cross, but then she started laughing. Harry glowered at her, jabbing the letter with his wand, causing it to smoulder into ashes.

"*Finite Incantatem*. The Potter brat does seem to realise, as does Miss Weasley. Perhaps I should supply you with my marking ink for everyday usage..."

Hermione swatted his arm. "Harry's less of a brat now than he used to be. After Dumbledore came clear with him, he's a bit less emotional and more in control."

After they had dressed for the day (with a few uses of *Reparo* needed to mend her skirt and knickers, together with a few household freshening spells to make it look less like she was wearing yesterday's clothes) they went their separate ways, Hermione to the library to get ahead on her homework and Severus to teach his lessons. That is, after coming close to undressing each other again in a consuming goodbye kiss.

Hermione discovered in the library that Severus had spelled all of her usual black ink to look like (or perhaps replaced it with) his red marking ink. She rolled her eyes, and attempted to spell it back to black. Nothing she tried worked; she was stuck with using red.

'It seems that Severus can be just as much as a prankster as Fred and George. I bet they never got one over him.'

She had decided to avoid telling Harry the truth of Ron's big mistake, as it certainly would damage their friendship, quite possibly beyond repair. While Ron deserved to lose his friends, Harry needed every friend he had. As did she, come to that.

"You look troubled, Severus." Albus looked over the top of his spectacles at the young man (compared to him, and in terms of a wizard's life span) slumped in the seat in front of the fireplace. It was approaching midnight, and Severus had just come in to report on Hermione's first Dark Arts lesson.

"I am, Albus. You should be too. I started off with the theory, using information from the less dangerous tomes." Severus pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand, closing his eyes. "She already knew everything in them. She knew most of what is in the advanced volumes too."

Albus looked up sharply. "How does she know?"

"Either Black didn't ward his library as ordered to, or the wards didn't keep her from them. Perhaps, even then, her buried Necromantic powers countered them. She said that she was... bored... during her last stay there. A bored bookworm always seeks out books. We should have realised."

"Severus, Sirius wasn't at fault. I placed the wards on the library in Grimmauld Place myself. How much does she know?" Albus removed his glasses, rubbing wearily at his eyes.

"More than enough to progress to practical lessons. I started to supervise her after giving her a piece of my mind. She should've realised exactly what those books were."

"She didn't know they were Dark Arts books?" Albus was incredulous.

"You wouldn't know this, as a staunchly light user, but no Dark Arts manual actually calls itself such."

"I see. How did she do, using those spells?"

"She's a natural," Severus said despondently. "As with any other spell, she only needs to read the theory to be able to put it into practise." He sighed. "I hope she sleeps all right tonight; even Dreamless Sleep won't keep the nightmares away after using spells that are harmful to the soul. She was also disturbed to learn that the dark spread earlier and therefore deeper within her than previously thought."

"We can only hope that her mind can overcome the pressure of her darkening soul. She knows what I will be forced to do if she cannot." Albus blinked as he caught sight of the flash of emotion in Severus's dark eyes. "Severus, what... you... you aren't growing too attached to the girl, are you?"

"No." Severus's outright denial was undercut by the unprotected thought that Albus had already extracted from his mind. 'I was too attached to her even before she became a Necromancer.'

"You love her. Don't try to deny it; I just saw it in your eyes. Have you told her?"

"Of course not. The word 'love' is far too sentimental for me. I have told her that she is mine. That should be enough for her."

"Severus, tell her. 'Mine' just sounds possessive. It doesn't tell her that you care. It could be the difference. If she knows she has your love, then she may well be strong enough to resist the darkness within. Do you really want your reticence to be responsible for her execution at my hands?" Albus said, a piercing gaze levelled at the uncomfortable looking fool sitting huddled in the warmest chair.

"Very well. But only if I must." Severus stood, muttering something about not wanting to show weakness as he left.

"Fawkes, my old friend, why do these young fools view love, our greatest strength, as a weakness?" The phoenix had no answer for him.

## Chapter 19

*Chapter 20 of 25*

Encounters with Harry and Ron.

Disclaimer: I'm just a skint student, not JKR.

Thanks to LadySunflower for being my beta. Any reviews are very welcome; I very much enjoy reading and replying to them.

Chapter 19

It was quite obvious to Severus, even without the crystal ball to scry with, that all was not well with Hermione. By mid-November dark circles ringed her haunted eyes. It was possible that the storms raging were keeping her up, as for the past two weeks, thunderstorms had been shaking the castle from the tallest tower to the dungeons. Yet, in the mornings Hermione looked quite guilty when she saw the other sleep deprived students. He eventually managed to get her to admit the cause: nightmares tormented her with increased regularity and clarity, primarily memories of the car accident, but mixed with her fears of becoming the evil Necromancer as displayed by her boggart. The storms were caused by her powers letting loose during those dreams. Severus just found it fortunate that her mental anguish was just affecting the weather and not tearing the castle down.

Dreamless Sleep had no effect whatsoever now that the hairline fractures caused by learning and practising the Dark Arts were extending further in her soul. She was also struggling against the temptation to use Dark spells in mock duels in her Defence lessons. Severus was able to tell this because like called to like; he could feel the darkness in her begging for release. So far, she'd been able to control herself, but Severus doubted that she'd be able to manage for much longer.

After observing Hermione almost collapse into her dinner in her exhaustion two weeks after he'd began giving her Dark Arts lessons, he decided to bring her to Dumbledore in an attempt to solve the problem behind her lack of sleep.

The Headmaster's solution was quite radical, but he was also fed up of having his own sleep disturbed by thunderstorms. Severus smirked as he remembered it on his way to his rooms.

*"When can you sleep? When is the last time you slept through the night?" Albus demanded, eyes fixed on Hermione where she stood before his desk.*

*"Last weekend, sir." Hermione flushed, as Severus felt his lips turn up at the corners. That had been the latest time that she'd spent a night in his company. The knowledge that his presence was such a comfort to her was a balm to his self-esteem; he'd been troubled by his perceived failure at protecting her.*

*From the look on Albus's face, he'd surmised that Hermione hadn't been in her dormitory those nights.*

*"I see. I do recall that those were also fine nights, no storms. In the interests of the health of the occupants of this school, I allow... no. I insist that you, Hermione, move into Severus's quarters. Extra space will be provided for your belongings. But this allowance is on the condition that you are both discreet. Obviously, I cannot remove you from Severus's rooms if it does become common knowledge, but I will have to force you to marry."*

His quarters were now slightly larger than before, Albus having persuaded the castle to modify them to be comfortable for two. The study contained another desk, together with Hermione's schoolbooks and work. Severus was about to close the door and investigate the other rooms, when he caught sight of Hermione huddled on the floor, a book lying discarded beside her. She was staring absently at the ceiling, her eyes wet with tears that were steadily and silently running down her cheeks.

"What's wrong?" Severus made his way to her, crouching down beside her and laying a hand on her shoulder.

"Nothing." Hermione sniffed, wiping at her cheeks. "I'm just being stupid."



"Don't give me that. Stupid is one thing you're not, despite what I may have said before. Tell me. I can't make it better if you don't."

She shook her head, but reluctantly admitted what had upset her. "I was reading the Ancient Runes textbook for homework, only..." A dry sob escaped her. She swallowed hard before continuing. "What's the point of going on with my studies? Even if I sit my N.E.W.T.s, it won't matter. I can't get a job; no one would employ a Necromancer. Then I thought about how selfish and ridiculous I was being. People are dying out there, and I'm falling apart at the thought of there being no point to my studies."

"Hermione... your studies are not worthless. Learning is a vital part of who you are. Even if you can't get a job, you can still pursue further knowledge for your own satisfaction. Money is hardly a problem; even if a teacher's salary is not much, I did inherit the Prince family fortune." Severus reached over and laid a finger over her lips when she opened her mouth to protest. "No argument, my dear. I fully intend to claim you in the unbreakable bonds of a hand-fasting ceremony. What's mine is yours."

Hermione let out what seemed to be a cross between a laugh and a sob. "Most people discuss marriage. They don't just state their intentions like that."

"I am not most people."

Beneath his Invisibility Cloak, Harry followed Hermione after dinner. It had been a week since the storms had stopped, allowing the ground to be covered by a healthy blanket of snow in late November. He was well aware that Hermione no longer inhabited Gryffindor tower and that she had been the cause of the storms. But when he had asked Dumbledore, he hadn't been told where she was now staying. When asked, a secretive smile had crossed her face, but Hermione hadn't elaborated. Harry knew that he wasn't as bright as Hermione the girl was in a class of her own but he was far from stupid. He suspected that she was staying with Snape, but couldn't fathom why Dumbledore would allow Hermione to spend every night with the emotionless git.

Having attempted to locate Hermione on the Marauder's Map, he'd surmised that Snape's quarters were Unplottable. It rankled him that Hermione spent so much time with Snape. Surely, her friends were better company; he couldn't imagine that a lonesome, bitter wizard like Severus Snape could do her much good, but she looked healthier than she had in weeks. So to satisfy his curiosity, he was making every attempt to observe the interactions of the greasy git and the bookworm. Ron had refused to accompany him for some reason. After he'd recovered from Hermione's hexes, he'd been very subdued and unwilling to do anything that could anger the walking encyclopaedia of obscure hexes, jinxes and curses. Not that Harry could blame him; Hermione could be ruthless when riled and was quick on the draw with her wand. Also, of the three of them, while Ron had the hottest temper and was quickest to anger, and his own fuse was short, Hermione was slow to anger, but burnt hottest and longest. The girl could hold grudges for a long time, only aided by that perfect memory of hers.

Snape slipped out of the shadows of the first floor corridor leading to the teacher's quarters, his tunnel-like eyes fixed on Hermione. Yet, Harry had noted that instead of resembling the usual empty tunnels, Snape's dark eyes were lit up with emotion. As to what emotion, Harry couldn't tell; Snape was still locked up tighter than a Gringotts vault. Was it lust or love? Harry didn't have enough experience to say for sure, but it was clear that Hermione's feelings were not the only ones involved.

Snape murmured something to Hermione, and she answered in the same low tone. A slow smile spread across his face, and he stepped aside, allowing Hermione through to the door presumably leading to his, no, their quarters. After she had closed the door behind her, Snape snatched his wand up and summoned Harry's cloak.

"Potter, did it ever occur to you that because Hermione can hear heartbeats from a distance, she can also recognise familiar ones? You've followed her for the last time under this."

Harry almost stopped breathing as Snape folded the Cloak up and put it in one of his pockets. "Sn..." He cut himself off, taking a deep breath to calm himself. "Professor, the Headmaster told me to keep my Cloak with me at all times."

"To attempt to spy on your friends? To follow your paramour, Mr. Malfoy?"

Harry flushed beetroot red at Snape's taunts. So the slippery spy knew that Harry was obsessed with Malfoy. Had Hermione told him? Snape was observant enough to notice without being told; if Hermione had let that slip, then his least favourite professor had probably already known.

"Sir, please. It's all I have left of my father." His trembling voice betrayed his fear and rising temper.

"Ah, yes. Your illustrious sire used this to play numerous so-called pranks on me. Have you used it for more deserving purposes? Have you never played pranks with this?"

At Harry's righteous protest that he hadn't, Snape reminded him of that day in Hogsmeade when he'd thrown mud at Malfoy outside the Shrieking Shack.

"I know better now. I was only thirteen then. Surely you did stupid things before. Sir. Lupin and Sirius told me that you gave as good as you got."

"Yes, as good as one against four could. So brave; four Gryffindor's against one Slytherin." Snape's tone was growing icier by the minute. Harry swallowed, wondering if he'd be able to get his precious Invisibility Cloak back. Would Dumbledore intervene?

"I'm sorry, sir. I know what it's like to be bullied. I'm not my father."

Snape glowered at Harry. "You're just as, if not more, arrogant as him. That prophecy may mean that you are the one who must defeat the Dark Lord, but is it true bravery to follow the path set by fate? Prophecies are self-fulfilling, after all."

"That damn prophecy doesn't say that I will kill him. I will succeed under my own merits. Wait a sec, how do you know... you bastard! You were the eavesdropper! You killed my parents!" Harry forgot all about his wand and launched himself at Snape, his fists flying.

Normally, Snape would have been prepared and sidestepped the punches, but he hadn't been expecting Harry to attack him. He grunted with pain as the first fist hit, falling to his knees, his wand rolling away out of reach. As Harry's anger built, so did the power of his punches. Snape tried to roll away, but only managed to partially deflect a particularly nasty kick to the groin, his face screwing up in agony as his eyes squeezed shut. Tears blurred Harry's vision even as he tried to revel in the pain he was causing to whom he perceived as the reason his parents were dead.

He kept up the attack, even as Snape fell to the floor of the corridor, curled up as much as he could in an attempt to protect himself. Even as he raised his knee to stomp on the prone man beneath him, he staggered back, clutching at his chest as it seemed like his heart was caught in an icy grip. After it had skipped several beats, it slowly returned to what felt like normal, if a little fast in his alarm at the scare.

"If you ever do that again, I'll keep it stopped." Cold fire seemed to drip from Hermione's words, who Harry suddenly noticed was kneeling beside Snape. Her eyes seemed darker than normal, almost matching Snape's in colour, but twice as cold. Harry shuddered; he could tell that she meant every word she said. He used a shaking hand to wipe the tears from his cheeks.

"He's the reason my parents are dead." Harry's voice cracked on his words.

"No, Potter. The reason your parents are dead is because the Dark Lord chose them. It could have been Neville Longbottom. There were several sources in the Hog's Head that night who heard what I did. I was not the only one who told him what I heard; although, I admit I deserved that," Snape said, his voice ragged. "Take it and go." He thrust the Invisibility Cloak at Harry.

"I'm not going to be expelled and thrown in Azkaban?!" Harry took the Cloak even as his jaw dropped. "I... I shouldn't have done that. Even if you deserved every bit of it, I'm no better than that murderer who killed them. Hermione, I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Just go, Potter. I've had worse; that was hardly up to the Dark Lord's standards. He uses Unforgivables, not physical attacks."

Harry hurried away, wincing as he thought of the look in Hermione's eyes. He was going to get it. Perhaps an owl order to Honeydukes wouldn't be amiss, although chocolates wouldn't save him from an enraged Hermione.

Approximately a year's worth of Honeydukes finest did pacify Hermione somewhat, but she still tested a few hexes that she'd invented herself on the unfortunate Harry. Perhaps the one where she made him think he was naked in public when he wasn't was a little extreme, but the usage of a physical attack on the man she loved was also a little extreme.

As a prefect, it was among Hermione's duties to occasionally patrol the supposedly empty corridors of the castle in search of rule breakers. Severus seemed to view this time as an opportunity to risk being caught doing the same thing most of the out-of-bounds students did. The night of December first was no exception. She'd been well aware that he was lying in wait for her in the shadows behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy, but let him pull her behind it anyway.

Her ability to sense the heartbeats of distant people was invaluable in detecting sneaking students, resulting in plenty of detentions. Hermione was not popular with any house at the moment, as she had no qualms with cornering any of them; even Gryffindors weren't safe from her. Yet when she let Severus distract her, she couldn't hear his heartbeat except in the usual way with an ear pressed to his chest when he was pressed up close to her. She was certainly distracted when being thoroughly snogged by her lover, with straying hands on both parts loosening clothing to caress bare skin.

Neither of them registered approaching footsteps until a familiar voice called out: "Gotcha! Break it up, that'll be detention with your Heads of houses for..." Ron Weasley trailed off, his freckled face wavering between paling and flushing bright red as he registered exactly whom he'd caught. He gawped at them as he registered exactly how much skin was showing before focussing on Hermione. Not that he could see much, as Severus had snatched her up against him the moment he'd realised that they had an audience.

From the way Ron was fiddling with his wand, he was tempted to attack Severus, but afraid to do so from the wary glances he shot at them both.

"I suggest you go back to your duties, Weasley." Severus levelled his wand at Ron, having slipped it into his hand.

Ron's lips thinned, but he lowered his wand. He looked daggers at Severus then turned on his heel. The lanky redhead's dramatic exit was spoilt when Hermione called him back. It was perhaps the best revenge for what he'd attempted to do on Halloween, but she'd take pity on him just this once.

"Ron, one last thing..." Hermione's hold on her wand was hidden by Severus's body, allowing her to prepare the required spell. As Ron turned his head to frown back at her, mouth opening to ask what she wanted, she let the spell fly. '*Obliviate.*'

## Chapter 20

*Chapter 21 of 25*

Christmas with Lord Voldemort

Disclaimer: I'm just playing with the characters, I don't own them.

Thanks to my beta and reviewers.

Chapter 20

Severus awoke with a start as something rapped on the window. A handsome eagle owl peered in, blinking in the driving snow. Beside him, Hermione murmured a protest as he got up, shrugging into his robe. She rolled over and yanked the covers over her head, grumbling. He shook his head; she could be a monster before her first dose of caffeine. Worse than he was!

The owl didn't stay around, just long enough for him to open the window and snatch the offered letter. Severus shivered in the cold draught before slamming the window closed. He noted the seal with a dark scowl then tore it open. The letter burst into flames moments after he'd finished reading it.

Hermione sat bolt upright, clutching the covers to her chest in an attempt to ward off the chill. "What was that? Your heartbeat just started racing."

"We've been 'invited' to Christmas Dinner, at lunchtime. The Dark Lord will be our 'gracious' host." His teeth ground together, his anger almost great enough to speak Voldemort's blackened name. They'd reached the winter solstice with no loss of Hermione's control, even with the darkness rising ever higher within her. But exposure to the Dark Lord might break that hard won control.

"We'll have to go, won't we?"

"Yes. Bastard whoreson can't leave us well enough alone! Christmas indeed. I bet he only ever got coal." Severus stalked over to his bed, tearing off his robe and climbing back in to bed, pulling her close.

"Don't you need to let the Headmaster know?" she asked before he cut her protests off with hard, intense kisses... and more.

Later on, after Severus had dressed and gone to alert Dumbledore as to Voldemort's new command. Hermione lay back on the bed, recovering from their love making. Well, it was a little too rough to be called that... sex, maybe?

'Alright, not sex either. That was nothing more or less than fucking.'

It was probably just as well that Harry and Ron had departed the day before for the Burrow, as it was, she'd have to use the odd glamour to conceal the obvious signs that she'd been shagged senseless. Bruised lips, love bites, whisker burn... and that was just from the neck upwards. She'd be aching for days if she wasn't a witch with access to healing potions.

The last vestige of the aftermath of her climax faded, leaving a leaden weight in her stomach at the thought of meeting with Voldemort in just a few short days.

'I've got an awful feeling about this...'

As he swirled the last of the antique wine from the Malfoy cellars around his mouth, Voldemort observed the interactions of Severus and Granger (although now that she had eaten at his table, perhaps referring to her by her given name would be an idea). While he did not believe in love, he could see that strong emotions were at work on both sides, with the body language passing between them. Perhaps it would be better to test Hermione in a different way... no. There was no time to come up with another plan, and while the girl was undeniably powerful, his own powers were sufficient to destroy her if need be. But to do so would be to ruin his plans, and Severus would object violently. His servant was sufficiently emotional for Voldemort to read in his guarded mind that he fancied himself in love, yet also refused to admit it, regarding it as a weakness.

The table and contents vanished as Voldemort set his wine glass down. He fixed his eyes on Hermione, observing her in silence for a moment. She didn't look down or away, allowing him to slip inside her mind, to investigate the memories he found. The bloody wreckage of a car crash was followed by the reading of a mysterious book. Remembering Severus's warnings, he shied away, leaving before he could be affected.

"You enjoyed the meal, I trust. Now you shall earn it. I can feel your potential power; show me what you can do..." He half shut his glowing eyes, summoning a Dementor. It drifted towards the girl as her face paled with the remembrance of her worst experiences. Her wand was suddenly in her hand, a look of grim determination on her features as her eyes drifted shut in concentration. A glowing, silver corporeal Patronus shot out, a large reptilian winged horse easily recognisable as a Thestral. The Dementor attempted to retreat, but was caught by the galloping silver Thestral.

Voldemort turned to the girl, noting the stunned look on her face. Either she'd acted without thought, or her Patronus had changed form. Possibly both, but now he was angry and not inclined to be forgiving. His first burst of the Cruciatus Curse caught her by surprise as she fell to the carpeted floor, involuntary screams escaping her writhing body. Severus stepped forward, probably to intervene, only to fall to Bellatrix's attack from behind.

The Unforgivable coursing through Hermione abruptly reversed, making Voldemort drop his wand with a startled cry. He saw a feral look cross her young face, her eyes darkening to the point where nothing but black could be seen. Voldemort felt a foreign flash of fear as he realised that he'd underestimated the girl. She was more powerful than Grindelwald... he breathed a sigh of relief as she twisted around to focus on Bella, who was absorbed in torturing Severus.

"Now, you fool, die! Filthy half-blood, besmirching my Master's house with your breath."

Voldemort saw a spark leap from Hermione's hands to the tip of Bella's wand. With a flash, and a roar of pain coming from the dragon heartstring core, his unhinged servant's wand was no more, leaving Severus in peace. But the enraged Necromancer hadn't finished.

Bella screamed as the spark travelled from the ashes of her wand to her hand. The piercing shriek was cut off within seconds as the incredible heat tore her apart into ash. Voldemort stared at the pile of soot mingled with tattered robes on the ground that had been his fanatically loyal servant.

'It was the wrong way to test her. Stercus!' Voldemort didn't approve of profanity, but when he swore, he used Latin. It certainly sounded less common.

He eyed the girl as she got to her feet, no tremble discernable in her limbs despite the curse he'd kept her under for long enough to keep her muscles twitching for an hour. Her face was white, but otherwise she showed no reaction to Bella's death.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed. While she was indeed powerful, he could still overpower her. He moved fast, snatching his wand up as he lunged at her. He grabbed her around the throat, but not hard enough to bruise. His wand dug into her pulse point.

"Bring her back, and I will let you live. More to the point, I will let him live. Severus has failed me if you are this..." he fumbled for a word. "...disobedient."

Hermione's eyes were slowly returning to brown, he noted, as she glanced down at the prone form of Severus. He'd fallen unconscious during Bella's tender care. Her lips firmed.

"I've never brought anyone back."

"You will manage. Necessity is, after all, the mother of invention." Voldemort stepped back, wand pointed at Severus. "Do it. NOW!"

Hermione took a shaky breath, stepping up to Bella's meagre remains. She closed her eyes, frowning in concentration, hands clenched into white knuckled fists at her sides.

Slowly but surely, the ashes trembled, rising into the air into a human shape. There was an acrid tang to the air Voldemort breathed in, with accompanying sparks of electricity raising shivers across his skin.

The Necromancer at work next to him bit her lip, droplets of blood trickling down her chin. A pained look crossed her face as her breath caught. With a rush of cold air, Bella stood once more before him, dressed in tattered robes with unblinking glassy eyes.

"Master." Bella's voice was hoarse, but she didn't sound quite as unhinged. Clearly, Dead Bella was an improvement already.

"You may take Severus and leave. Ah, I forgot... take this, it will Portkey you to the gates topped by winged boars." Voldemort took his graduation ring from his finger which had been recovered by Lucius from his vault before his imprisonment and tapped it with his wand. He waited until Hermione knelt beside Severus, grasping his arm.

"Wait... you're not going to mark me?" Hermione asked, looking overwhelmed.

"No. I never intended for you to be a Death Eater. You are an ally, not a servant. Ah, no hard feelings about the dose of *Crucio*. I'm rather addicted to casting it." He tossed the ring to her. Both of his 'guests' vanished as the Portkey whisked them away to the boundary of Hogwarts.

The winged boar topped gates hadn't opened upon their arrival. Hermione was just about to cast *aRennervate* on Severus, when her wand began trembling in her grip. She cried out as it flashed red hot, scorching her; yet she couldn't drop it. The vinewood appeared to have fused to her hand; that or her muscles were simply frozen.

There was a roar of pain coming from the wand, echoing across the valley to Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. The trembling stopped suddenly, the wand quiescent and cold under her fingers. Hermione doubled over, the wand falling from her blistered grip. She fell to her knees, shaking, landing in the snow beneath her, which began to melt at her touch.

Roiling nausea made her feel like she was going to be sick, but she soon forgot about that as she suddenly felt as if her heart had been pierced by a shard of ice. Her entire body became numb, but that only intensified the sensations of what followed. Much like the loss of one sense intensified the others, the numbing of her body only intensified her perception of her own soul.

She could feel each and every hairline fracture lengthening and widening under the pressure of a limitless source of darkness. The last untouched bright spot in her spirit held for a moment, then shattered. Hermione screamed. The Cruciatus Curse was nothing compared to the agony of what felt like her soul turning inside out. Everything seemed to feel wrong, as if everything that was right had gone.

"Severus!" she gasped, her cry for help unheard by the unconscious man on the ground beside her.

While Hermione couldn't see it, she could feel her soul darkening with every passing second. What had once been white was grey, and what was grey was turning pitch black. She fell to the ground, shuddering with the chill within even as her clothes began to soak up icy water. Blood trickled from her mouth to seep into the slush beneath her, staining the off-white snowy water red.

Her body jerked as the last of the grey within her soul darkened. A strangled cry escaped her as she flopped onto her back, staring up into the deep blue winter sky. The glaring sunlight above the horizon faltered, as the complete darkness in her soul splintered her control over her Necromantic powers. No clouds swept in to block the sunlight, but the light dimmed anyway. Soon the afternoon light failed as night fell hours early.

The anguish within Hermione reached the point where her eyes rolled back in her head, her breathing erratic. Yet the pain was verging on ecstasy as she began to adjust to her now predominate dark side. Her awareness followed the contours of the earth beneath her, finding the places stained by deaths. Even as she absently began the process of awakening the dead, she could feel a great power fast approaching. A dazzlingly bright spirited live one was within fifty paces of her, the gates flying open. A booming voice shouted something that she couldn't understand in her current state.

"STUPEFY!"

Painful magic danced across her chest, but she remained conscious. Hermione's out-of-control powers automatically began to fight back.

"STUPEFY MAXIMUS!" the voice cried again.

The pain was greater this time, but she launched her own attack even as her mind tried to exert itself. She could feel the heartbeat of her attacker, hammering away. It slowed as her unleashed powers tried to stop it.

"HERMIONE, STOP IT! I don't want to hurt you, but you leave me no choice." The voice, which she recognised as Dumbledore's, continued with an unfamiliar spell that hurt a lot, but didn't stop her from inadvertently slowing his heart further. She cried out in despair as her mind failed to shackle her dark powers.

Dumbledore fell to his knees, struggling to keep going with a dangerously slow pulse. He launched several more ineffective spells at her then muttered an apology to Severus. "*Sectumsempra*."

It felt like she'd been impaled by several blades at once. Judging by the blood she could feel spurting out of the multiple wounds across her torso, that wasn't far off the truth. Light-headed from the loss of blood, her powers were finally within her control, even though she had no energy left to bind them. Darkness swallowed her even as wrinkled old hands pulled her close, a melodious incantation echoing in her ears.

Severus sat by the side of Hermione's bed in the hospital wing. Several Blood Replenishing Potions had been poured down her throat, but she was still unconscious. Albus had apologised profusely after reviving him, but he'd understood why the old wizard had used his speciality cutting curse. Hermione's dark side had been out of control, with no Stunning Spell having much, if any, effect. Instant blood loss had been the only fast acting option to knock her out.

Her pulse was strong and regular under his fingers, but Albus had decreed that it was inadvisable to wake her suddenly using a Revival Charm. She should be allowed to drift awake, in the hope that she would be able to retain control.

'Please let her be in charge; I don't want to lose her. Albus will be forced to kill her if she isn't in her right mind.' Severus's face contorted as he struggled to withhold bitter tears. 'If Bellatrix hadn't got the drop on me, she would be fine. It's my fault... Why do I always destroy anything I love?'

"Don't let your powers control you, Hermione. I can't lose you. Albus was right; I should have told you that I love you." Severus squeezed her hand before standing up to leave. He needed to do something to keep his mind off the comatose girl.

"Mmm, Sev'rus, wait..." At Hermione's murmur, he spun around, seeing her eyes blinking open. He breathed a sigh of relief as he examined them for any sign of unnatural blackness and found none. He helped her sit up, passing her a glass of water to relieve her dry mouth.

"Did you hear what I just said?" he asked, wary eyes fixed on her.

"Would you repeat it if I said I hadn't?" A small, wan smile appeared. "Yes, I did hear you." She grabbed one of his hands and brought it to her lips to kiss. "Love you, too... but you knew that before Halloween." There was a slight note of censure in her voice as she gave him a challenging look.

Severus sighed. "Yes, I loved you before then. Why do you think I awarded so many points to Gryffindor? I was relieved to know that you returned my... feelings." He fidgeted, uncomfortable with discussing such things. "Promise me that you won't let your dark side win," he blurted, levelling a piercing stare at her.

Hermione buried her face in her hands, dragging them back to run through her hair and wincing as her fingers were almost caught up in the tangles. "Severus, you do realise that I don't have anything but darkness in my soul now? How can I fight it, let alone beat it, with nothing to take its place?"

"My soul is hardly lily-white either. But mind and soul are two different things, yet inextricably linked. You cannot tell me that your mind is corrupted by darkness."

"Not entirely, no. But I killed Bellatrix Lestrange; my powers may have been out of control, but I made the decision to attack her because she hurt you. She was going to kill you..." Stark tears were running down her cheeks as her eyes slid shut.

"Bellatrix was an insane bitch who delighted in the pain of others. The world is a better place now that she's gone from this plane of existence," Severus said firmly, wiping her tears from her cheeks with gentle touches of his thumbs.

Desolate bloodshot eyes were raised to meet his. "You don't understand. He ordered me to bring her back, or he'd kill us both."

He stiffened, his hands dropping onto her shoulders. "You raised Bellatrix from the dead?" Severus shook his head, unable to believe what he'd heard.

"After reducing her to ash. Should I have refused?"

"No, the Dark Lord would have killed you," he snapped, regretting the action when she flinched. He mumbled an apology, stepping close as he pulled her towards him by his grip on her shoulders. Hermione relaxed into the offered embrace, her arms coming around his waist.

"She's been stripped of emotions," Hermione stated.

"Really? She'll be less of a crazy bitch, in that case." Severus stroked a hand over her tangled hair. "There might be a solution to your blackened soul... I'll need your help to research it, and possibly make it."

"A potion? Will it be a temporary or permanent fix?"

"Permanent, I hope, but it will require time to find amongst my collection of potions recipes. If only I had a memory like yours... anyway, I daresay Madam Pomfrey will be overjoyed to see the back of you. To my quarters on the double." Severus stepped back away from her, allowing her to get out of bed. He shrugged out of his Death Eater robe and draped it across her shoulders, leaving himself underdressed (compared to normal) in a shirt and trousers.

Twenty four hours later, they were ready to add the last ingredient to a hybrid between a purification and a restoration potion. The key ingredient was three precious drops of her own virgin's blood, to be added after it had been stirred forty two times in an infinity symbol. The catalyst was four drops of semen from the man responsible for deflowering the virgin: Severus.

The potion slowly turned the colour and consistency of unicorn's blood. It was ready to be taken. Severus scowled. He didn't want her to take an untested potion, but on their own or taken consecutively, neither of the components of this new potion would work permanently to return her soul to what it had been before losing her virginity. This way, the dark from Necromancy would still be there, but she would be able to use the Dark Arts with no danger of sullyng her soul or lashing out at others with them. That is, if the Purification Potion didn't poison her.

"Wish me luck!" Hermione dipped a vial into the cooling potion and raised it to her lips. She jerked back and looked at it suspiciously as the scent of it reached her nose. "That can't be right. It smells delicious, like... I don't know. But potions are meant to taste and smell revolting."

He investigated the contents of the cauldron himself, cautiously using his large nose to sniff at it, only to twist around to face her as he heard her swallow. Despite the suspicious qualities of it, she'd gone ahead, the imbecile!

With a strangled groan, she doubled over, summoning an empty cauldron as her face turned a sickly green tinge. Severus reached her side in time to hold her hair back as she vomited into the cauldron. It took a surprising amount of time to come out of her, for she hadn't eaten much at the meal provided by Voldemort. In fact, her appetite had

been down ever since she'd learned of the Christmas meeting with He-Who-Wanted-A-Pet-Necromancer. Had they used a purging potion recipe instead of purification?

Finally Hermione strained up, her limbs shaking. Severus took a step back as he saw the contents of the cauldron. It was black, roiling about like smoke. Was that the darkness that had been in her spirit? He cast a containment spell, realising that this unknown substance could be dangerous.

Hermione was gasping for breath, the shake in her limbs spreading to her body. Her head snapped back as a blinding light flashed, outlining her body in a heavenly glow. Ignoring his own safety around the effects of an unknown potion, he wrapped his arms around her. The glow faded, taking with it the trembling as her breathing eased. Severus could feel his shirt growing damp, he pulled back to see her smiling widely through her tears.

"It worked, I'm almost whole. If not for this whole Necromancer business since September, I'd be fine."

Severus looked long and hard at her. Perhaps there was something he could do to make her feel more complete. He drew his wand, focusing on his feelings for the young witch in his arms. A complicated non-verbal incantation later, and he held a thin platinum band with a glowing white gemstone.

"Marry me, Hermione."

## Chapter 21

*Chapter 22 of 25*

D.A.D.A. lessons: Boggarts and Patronuses.

Disclaimer: The plot is my idea. Harry Potter is not.

Thanks to LadySunflower for consenting to beta this.

Chapter 21

Every returning student did a double take at some point, depending on how observant they were, when they saw Hermione. Ginny noticed instantly, her eyes wide as they fixed on the older girl's left hand as she spoke the new password to let them into the Gryffindor common room. Just because she now lived with Severus didn't mean that she never set foot in Gryffindor tower anymore.

"OhmyGodHermioneSnapeaskedyoutomarryhim? Yousaidyes? Whenwilltheweddingbe, canibeabridesmaidplease..." Ginny had to trail off to draw breath.

Harry deciphered most of what she'd said and jerked as though he'd been stung. His glasses slipped off, leaving him to dive down to pick them up and slip them back on to look between her left ring finger and her face, his jaw slack.

There was a sound not unlike the giant squid releasing the grip of one of the suckers on its tentacles as Ron surfaced from Lavender's enthusiastic greeting to stare at Hermione, frozen in something between shock, grief and disbelief.

"Yes, he did, I did, it's going to be a long engagement, and it really depends... we might end up eloping." Hermione sat down on her favoured chair.

Harry and Ron collapsed into their own chairs, mouths opening and closing as they tried and failed to come up with something to say that wouldn't result in a hex courtesy of their newly engaged friend.

Lavender and Ginny may have been disgusted that her fiancé was Snape, but Hermione found herself almost dragged off her chair when they grabbed her left arm to get a closer look at the ring.

"What's the stone?" Ginny demanded, twisting Hermione's hand around so that the glowing stone caught the light.

"Is that a Forget-Me-Not ring?" Of course Lavender would know almost everything about romantic Wizarding knowledge.

"Something like that. Severus created it; I know that much."

Three pairs of eyes stared at her, with Harry looking on with increasing bafflement.

"Blimey. He must really love you," Ron said in a deadened tone, his shoulders slumping.

"What's so special about that ring?" Harry asked, repeating the question when he was ignored.

"Snape created it using his feelings for Hermione. As long as he loves her, it's indestructible, although the glow will fade if either of them dies," Lavender explained, sounding like a rather more perky version of Hermione in textbook-recital mode.

"Hell must have frozen over. Snape actually has feelings...OW!" Ginny yelled as Hermione sent a Stinging Hex at her.

"Er, perhaps I should have mentioned that the glow would be blue if Hermione didn't reciprocate?" Lavender ventured as Ginny scowled at her.

"Well, we always knew she was mental," Ron muttered, only to swear viciously as Hermione sent a warning rabid canary in his direction. "You get scarier every day."

At Hermione's guilty twitch at Ron's words, her friends looked questioningly at her. Harry gave Ron a meaningful look, who rolled his eyes as he got up, taking Lavender with him as he left the common room.

"Alright, spill. What happened over the holidays?" Harry cast some sort of privacy charm, giving Hermione a guilty smile as he did. "It's something I picked up from the Prince's book before swapping it. Anything we say will sound like gobbledegook to anyone listening."

"I just hope no one can understand Goblins then," Hermione grumbled, before sighing with resignation. "I had the pleasure of having my roast turkey with Voldemort. He tested my... abilities afterwards." She twisted her ring around on her finger, a nervous twitch she appeared to have picked up ever since she'd let Severus put it on her finger.

"What did he make you do?" Harry asked, leaning closer. Ginny mirrored his movement, and also slipped an arm around Hermione.

"Bellatrix Lestrange was also there. She attacked Severus, and I completely lost my temper and my control."

"She's dead? Good riddance," Harry breathed, a savage pleasure in his voice.

"That's not all of it. Voldemort had both Severus and I at wand point. He forced me to bring her back."

Ginny's arm across her back had been tightening its hold. Now it stiffened as an involuntary gasp escaped the younger girl.

"He's going to want an undead army, isn't he? He might want you to bring back his Basilisk too... We're done for!"

"We're not. Hermione will be the one in control of the undead, not Voldemort. We're going to win this war. I know it!" Harry's confidence was touching, but Hermione didn't think he understood the implications.

"I don't think you understand, Harry. Bringing Bellatrix back tired me... I think raising an undead army might do me in literally."

"You do know that they say practice makes perfect?" Harry said, then clapped a hand over his mouth as Hermione glared at him.

"Why don't I reduce you to ash and then reconstitute you as an emotionless zombie?"

"Forget I said anything. I'm fine as I am, thank you!" Harry leant back, hands upraised as if to ward her off. He laughed, albeit nervously. "Seeing as Snape is now your... you know, d'you know what he has planned for us in Defence?"

"Harry, don't even think about it. I won't use my position as Severus's 'you know' to give you forewarning. They may be just lessons, but I highly doubt Voldemort will refrain from giving you unpleasant surprises. As for tomorrow's lesson, you'll have to wait and see."

"I do believe that the werewolf taught you how to deal with Boggarts in your third year. Now, the contents of this chest are not so much a recap as a coping mechanism. The object is not to banish the Boggart but to face your fears. None of you were more than thirteen years old when you faced the Boggart; I daresay many of your worst fears have changed as you have 'matured'.

"Some of the more informed amongst you might know that treatment of phobias involves exposure to the root cause of the fear, in the hopes that it will lessen the power of the icy grip of fear.

"Gryffindors are supposedly the bravest. Who can tell me what is true bravery? Not you, Herm...Miss Granger." Severus winced as he almost said his beloved's given name in public. Hermione lowered her hand, a slight frown pinching her face.

"Yes, Potter?" Severus watched the boy lower his upraised hand, a mulish look half hidden by the reflected light on his glasses.

"Bravery is facing dangerous situations in spite of fear. Sir."

"Do you have any original ideas, Potter? Or do you just recite what you pick up from your intellectual betters? The Headmaster describes true bravery as what you just said, so you are indeed correct.

"Everyone in this class will face the Boggart, without exception. I do believe that the werewolf left many of you unprepared for your end of third year exam by only allowing a few of you to face the Boggart." Severus smirked as he saw Hermione lay a restraining hand on Potter's arm. Of course, the brat was fond of Lupin... Severus's smirk faded as he saw the reproving look on Hermione's face.

'Ah. She's fond of Lupin as well. I'd better let up on the degrading terms, or I might find myself kicked out of my own bed.'

"Boggarts cannot physically attack, being restricted to inflicting mental damage; although heart attacks have been caused in the past. Potter, seeing as you know all about bravery... you're first." Severus released the catches on the case, allowing the Boggart to emerge in the form of a Dementor. It appeared that Potter's fear hadn't changed. The boy paled, going for his wand, only to remember himself before he let loose with his famous stag Patronus. Poor Potter couldn't withstand the Dementor long before falling to his knees, close to fainting.

"Weasley, why don't you rescue Potter?" At Severus's contemptuous suggestion, Weasley hurried forward, dragging Harry out of the way. The lanky student turned back to come face to face with an Acromantula, a girlish scream escaping him as he lurched back. Severus caught him by his collar and shoved him back towards the Boggart. By the time he'd ordered another student forward, Weasley was a gibbering wreck; even his freckles were pale.

Most of the students had the same fears, perhaps as a mark of their lack of maturity. Yet due to the exposure of the Dark Lord's return, various imaginings of You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters were dominating the changed fears. The only accurate representation of the Dark Lord was Draco's fear, which seemed to give most students cause for thought (and shivers of fear to run down their spines).

Hermione came before the Boggart last, to be faced with the last of the manifestations she had faced in her third year Defence exam. None of the students were aware that this was not a different fear. Exclamations of muted surprise came from Potter and Weasley, as both were still recovering from their own fears.

Boggart Hermione stepped forward, but this time the real Hermione didn't back away. There was no difference in their ages now, the only variations being the entirely black eyes, blood red robes and menacing aura of Boggart Hermione.

This time the Boggart said nothing, glowering at Hermione. Was it possible that the Dark creature had a hive memory and already knew what had been said before? Hermione glared back, only to be caught by surprise when Boggart Hermione lashed out with a clenched fist.

At first, the observing students laughed when Hermione fell back, only for that derisive laughter to falter when they realised that her nose was bleeding from the contact. Severus went for his wand, yet when he had the ebony shaft in his grip, his mind was blank. Hadn't he assured his students that they couldn't be physically damaged by the Boggart?

The sight of an incandescent spark jumping from Boggart Hermione's outstretched hand to the original alarmed him. The heat radiating from it threatened to singe his hair from his position across the room, yet Hermione barely flinched when it settled on her bare skin. An incoherent cry of rage escaped the Boggart at the apparent failure of the attack. The appearance of a lethal looking dagger in Boggart Hermione's hands galvanised Severus into action.

'*Expelliarmus!*' The non-verbal spell sent the dagger flying out of the Boggart's hands, almost striking Severus before it vanished. Hermione hadn't been frozen with fear either; even as the Boggart was knocked off its feet, a well placed kick from her knocked it out. It seemed to retain its form even when out for the count. Another spell stopped the flow of blood from Hermione's nose, although she might need to see Madam Pomfrey in case of breakage.

"Class dismissed," Severus barked, his tone warning the students not to hang around. They scrambled to escape, obviously pleased to get away from both the Boggart and Hermione. He turned to the Boggart, only to find that Hermione was still there, prodding the unconscious form of her double with the tip of her shoe.

"I thought you said..."

Severus interrupted her. "As far as I knew, Boggarts can't do what that one did to you. Allow me to deal with it." He raised his wand to dispatch it.

"No, don't. It might be my doing... I mean, if my powers affect Quidditch balls, what's to stop them from empowering Boggarts?"

"It would have killed you if it could have, Hermione. I won't let it live."

"Then would you have attempted to kill me if I'd turned evil like it? It can't help its nature. Boggarts turn into what we fear the most... Come to think of it, you didn't face it yourself. Or is the great Severus Snape fearless?"

In answer, Severus stepped closer to the Boggart, tight lipped. "I wouldn't be human if I was. Step away if you must to know what I fear."

Hermione slowly backed away from the Boggart, looking uncertain. The Dark creature changed forms whilst still unconscious. Severus kept his eyes on Hermione, ignoring the new form of the Boggart on the floor. She frowned, opening her mouth to speak, only for the words to fail her as it became obvious what his fear was.

"I see," Hermione managed to choke out, her eyes fixed on the trickle of blood flowing from the Boggart. "Ron keeps telling me how scary I am, yet it seems I'm scariest to myself alive, evil... and to you, dead," she continued conversationally.

"*Riddikulus*." Severus banished the Boggart with so much force that it shattered into wisps of smoke. "Boggarts feed off fear; you must learn not to view such Dark creatures with the respect given to the sanctity of life. When the inevitable confrontation between the Dark Lord and Potter occurs, you must be able to handle any enemies without mercy. They will have none for you on the battlefield."

"I'm afraid that if I do harden my heart like that, I will lose something of myself," Hermione whispered, eyes still downcast.

Severus stepped close to her, lifting her chin to prompt her to meet his gaze. "It is true that murder does damage the soul, but killing for the sake of self-defence and saving the lives of others is not the same. You have a compassionate nature so deeply ingrained within you that I highly doubt that it is possible for you to lose it."

"I hope you're right." Hermione breathed in deeply, before letting it out in a rush. "Before I go on to Arithmancy, I stayed behind to tell you... I received a letter this morning from our esteemed Christmas host, instructing me to wear this at all times." She pulled a silver ring from her one of her pockets, what Severus recognised as a Slytherin House Ring, tarnished with age. "It's enchanted as a Portkey. Knowing Riddle, it's not a one-time thing either. I don't want to wear it."

After casting several advanced curse breaking spells over the ring, Severus could find nothing malignant. It was also not enchanted to spy, perhaps as a mark of Red Eye's respect. "The Dark Lord's commands are not to be ignored, even by someone like you whom he doesn't regard as a servant."

She grumbled a little, but slipped the ring onto her right little finger regardless of her misgivings. It automatically resized to fit. "If it does turn out to be dangerous, at least I might escape with only losing one of my least useful fingers." After picking up her bag, she leant up to meet him half way as he bent down to kiss her.

"Call at the hospital wing first, Hermione. You wouldn't want to end up with a misshapen nose like mine."

"There's nothing wrong with your nose. It's nowhere near as crooked as the Headmaster's." With a press of her soft lips to the tip of his nose, she hurried off before he could argue with her.

Sitting back down behind his desk to wait for his next victims, Severus mused on the events of the lesson while absently running a finger over his nose to feel what could possibly be right with it after Potter and Black had broken it several times over.

'Potter's Boggart was a Dementor still. Perhaps I can use him and another Boggart to ensure the N.E.W.T. level classes can fend them off, as they seem to be breeding exponentially.'

It was a week after the facing of fears Defence lesson that Snape brought another Boggart into the classroom.

"The purpose of this lesson is to educate, and in some cases test, you in the ability to ward off Dementors. How many of you have cast the Patronus Charm before? All Gryffindors, I see. I expected as much, Potter. You obviously cannot fathom sharing such vital knowledge with Slytherins."

Harry scowled. At the time of Dumbledore's Army, the Slytherins were hardly trustworthy. Hermione's sneak revealing hex would have marred the features of many if he'd allowed Slytherins to participate.

"As Potter's Boggart is a Dementor, it allows a practical lesson without angering the Headmaster by bringing in a real one. Potter, up here. I know perfectly well that you can conjure a Patronus, so demonstrate your prowess."

Harry stepped up, his wand at the ready. The Boggart was released, instantly taking the tall, cloaked form of a Dementor. Even as the chill and his mother's screams started to affect him, Harry thought of his happy memory, which in these dark days was increasingly hard to find. The thought of Ginny Weasley smiling at him leapt to the forefront of his mind.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" Prongs galloped over to the Boggart Dementor, causing it to stumble.

"Adequate, Potter. You could do with being faster to cast; a real, starving Dementor could have swept down to Kiss you by the time you launched the spell." Snape turned to the rest of the class, his comments to Harry equivalent to glowing praise, although the way the git had said it stung.

"The incantation, as Potter demonstrated, is *Expecto Patronum*. A happy memory is required to power the Patronus, which is why a pseudo-Dementor in the form of Potter's Boggart is required. Casting the spell with nothing to drain any happiness from you leads to a false sense of confidence. By the end of this week of lessons, I want to see silver mist at the very least from everyone."

It was surprisingly entertaining to watch the proceedings from the close range required for Harry to keep the Boggart in Dementor form. The former D.A. members did struggle more, but they had greater success than the Slytherins, of whom only a handful produced silver mist by the end of the lesson.

Ron finally managed to get his mist to form a terrier, which worried at the shin of the Boggart, eliciting laughter from the onlookers. Although that laughter was tinged with contempt in the case of the Slytherins, who sniggered at the pint-sized Patronus.

"Hey, Granger, we hear you have another rodent size silver beastie. Is it a beaver?" Pansy Parkinson called over the laughter. Hermione just smirked in response, stepping up to the Boggart Dementor with her wand raised. She cast the spell nonverbally, but that was not what silenced the room; it was the size and shape of the resulting corporeal Patronus that did.

Harry gaped at the rearing Thestral, which knocked the Boggart off its feet. A year earlier, Hermione's Patronus had been a gambolling otter. The loss of her parents and rise of her status as a Necromancer had obviously changed her enough for her Patronus to change drastically.

"What in the nine hells was that?" Malfoy demanded.

"That was a Thestral." It was Neville who answered him, pleased to know something that the Ferret didn't.

Shivers ran through the class at his words. The majority of them had never seen one of them before, as when Hagrid had included them in one of his lessons the year before only three of the students had been able to see them. Even with Voldemort active, not many more had seen someone die.

"It is worth noting that as a person experiences emotional upheaval, they can and do change. Their Patronus changes with them." Snape's deep voice brought the class out of their shock, allowing the lesson to move on.

"Harry, mate, no matter what we think of Snape, his lessons are the most useful," Ron voiced this opinion through his mouthful of dinner at the end of January. They had

moved on from fending off Dementors to alternative methods of duelling, including fighting blind. Hermione had been the best at that, as her ability to sense the position of her opponent was uncanny. Her ability to sense heartbeats did give her an unfair advantage, but it was her Muggle Self-Defence knowledge that allowed her to surpass Harry.

"Huh." Harry's sulky grunt drew Hermione's attention from across the table.

"Harry, when are you going to let go of it? You're not the only one who didn't think to have the Room of Requirement summon a Boggart. Sometimes it's really tempting to give you Veritaserum; maybe then you'd admit the truth about Severus."

"That he's a greasy git, overgrown bat and all around bastard?"

Ron snorted his dinner up his nose at Harry's recitation in his attempt to stifle his laughter. Harry reached for his goblet, only to find that it had frozen over when he tried to take a sip. His tongue stuck to the pumpkin juice ice. Incoherent mumbles and hisses at the pain as he tried to pull away tumbled from his open mouth.

"Don't insult my fiancé. Certainly don't do it when I'm within earshot. I'll see you at the first Apparition lesson tomorrow." Hermione got up and moved to leave the Great Hall, obviously heading for Snape's rooms.

"Herm-win-onee! Gum bwack... Ow!" His calls were ignored, his tongue still stuck to the frozen juice.

'She can't leave me like this. Will a Warming Charm work? No, no, no. I can't spend the weekend like this! Hermione, come back, I'll never say a word against Snape again... Hermione? No, come back. Please, my tongue's going numb. Don't go...'

"HERM-I-KNEE! ELP!" Harry's only reply was the thud of the closing door. "Oh, uck. Girlfz."

"Girls," Ron agreed, fluent in garble.

AN: Thanks to those who care to review.

## Chapter 22

*Chapter 23 of 25*

Valentine's Day

Disclaimer: I'm just playing with JKR's universe. I don't own it.

Thanks to my beta and reviewers.

Chapter 22

Quite what Hermione had expected from Severus on Valentine's Day, she wasn't sure. His distaste for it had been clearly evident during Lockhart's over the top celebration in her second year, but the circumstances were different now. Surely now that he had her in his life (and bed), he would acknowledge the 'celebration of love' in some way?

'Apparently not. He all but ignored me this morning... I thought men were supposed to appreciate being woken up like that. All I got for my efforts was a strangled grunt and a mouthful of what I'd rather not think about whilst eating my dinner. Did I do it right? Theory can be different than practice, after all.' Hermione moodily chewed at her stew and boiled vegetables as she thought. 'I must have done something right, or I wouldn't have had the salty, bitter mouthful of... Ugh. I can't eat anymore now. Stupid, introspective, analytical twit, Hermione.'

After pushing her plate away and contemplating the remains of her pumpkin juice before deciding against finishing it, she made her way out of the Great Hall. Although preoccupied, she noticed that Harry kept his goblet away from his mouth when she was leaving the table, as he had ever since she froze his tongue to the contents two weeks before.

'Poor, paranoid Potter. Doesn't he know that I try not to use the same trick twice? I hope he's learnt not to insult Severus by now... although after my beloved fiancé has ignored me today, I'd be tempted to let Harry badmouth him.'

Lost in thought, she didn't register the gradual weakening of her body until she'd sunk down onto her knees in the corridor leading to the staircases. Her muscles felt heavy, her eyelids dragging down. Fragmented thoughts containing vague wonderings of what was happening to her danced across her mind, before Hermione slumped to the floor, her eyes closed. Her last recollection was of a soothing drumbeat approaching, before the veils of sleep overtook her.

Hermione drifted awake to find herself clad only in moonlight, lying on a carpet of grass devoid of insects. The full moon met her eyes, bathing her surroundings in ghostly light. A gentle breeze caressed her bare skin, yet the warmth, her idyllic surroundings and lack of the clothes she had been in made a frown cross her face.

'I don't think I'm in Hogwarts anymore... or even in the same week; the moon was supposed to be in the first quarter, not full. What's happened?'

Eyes wide with sudden realisation, Hermione sat bolt upright. "Severus, honestly! From one extreme to the other."

"Let me guess; you heard and recognised my heartbeat." Severus's smooth tones came from behind her.

"You underhanded sneak! You drugged me!"

"My hand with a vial of Sleeping Draught might have slipped over your pumpkin juice. Said draught might have activated when you passed the threshold of the Great Hall."

"What have you done with my clothes? I only have one school robe..." Hermione turned her head to glower at him over her shoulder, only to be struck dumb by the sight of his lean, muscled frame, his completely exposed skin gleaming in the moonlight.

Severus smirked at her, prowling closer and kneeling a hand's breadth from her. He reached out to gently close her open mouth, a deep chuckle escaping him as he did so. "By your reaction, I look sufficiently tempting in this dim light to make you drool... and as for your clothes, I imagine that since the Room of Requirement took them away, it can bring them back as well."



Flushing from her cheeks to her breastbone, Hermione turned to face him, mirroring his position. She noted the slight slackening of his jaw, but considering that he'd obviously been watching her 'sleep' in her naked state, he was unlikely to be as affected as she was. Perhaps she needed to up the ante...

A quick pounce knocked him flat on his back. Hermione looked down at him from her position straddling him, a feral grin on her features. Severus's eyes trailed over the contours of her curves, to be followed by the faint touch of his fingertips. His dazed eyes met hers in a moment of unspoken communication. She leant down to trail a line of open mouthed kisses from his collarbone to his lips as she rocked her hips against his.

"That Sleeping Draught... was also laced with... an aphrodisiac..." Severus murmured against her lips.

"Bastard. As if I need one with you," Hermione hissed, before sinking her teeth into his neck in a playful nip.

"No, but it does mean that we can skip the foreplay and dive straight in..." he growled as he grasped her hips, positioning her against him so that his erection was no longer trapped between them.

Hermione opened her mouth to protest that she preferred making love with foreplay involved, only for the words to die in her throat as he thrust in. The aphrodisiac ensured that she was sufficiently lubricated and also heightened the sensations.

'Ohmygod...' Her capacity for thought was compromised by the second thrust, her head snapping back to stare blankly at the night sky as she was overwhelmed by the sensations. Only a few thrusts later, she was semi-aware of her inner muscles clenching around him as she climaxed once, twice, three times... 'Ngh!' She collapsed on top of him, exhausted.

She wasn't aware of falling asleep, but the next thing she knew, she was in Severus's bed, snuggled up to the smug bastard as he smirked down at her.

"Don't do that again. Not without my knowledge *and* permission... or I'll bite the next time certain parts of your anatomy are within range." Hermione's voice was ragged, her throat raw; she realised that she must have been pretty vocal.

He winced, shifting his groin away from her. "Understood. You're not... angry are you?"

"No. I'm furious! You let me think that I'd done something wrong or that you were ignoring me out of spite; then you drug me... and shagged me senseless, but that's not the point. In different circumstances and with different people, that would have been a date rape in Muggle terms."

Severus stiffened, drawing away from her. He rolled out of bed, reaching for his robe.

"Severus? I didn't mean..." Hermione turned to face him, only to trail off at the stark look on his white face. She swallowed hard. "It wasn't like that. I did enjoy it, I wanted it... rape is something quite different. I... I didn't mean what just happened between us. I love you, come back to bed."

"I shouldn't have done it. It wasn't far off from rape. That aphrodisiac made you want me. I'm a monster... I'll understand if you want to break off the engagement. I'll be in the spare room." He shrugged on his robe, holding it together as he stumbled away.

"Wait! Severus... oh, fuck."

The door closed behind him. She climbed out of bed, throwing on her own robe before attempting to extract Severus from the spare room. When she failed to talk him out, she slumped down onto the sofa, determined to wait him out. Her eyes lids slipped closed, lulled by the heat given off by the fire she'd lit to keep warm.

*"It is time to end this once and for all. We will attack when we have our army... raise the dead, my Necromancer." The high hiss of Voldemort's voice echoed in her ears, coupled with the sense of being watched. A glimpse of masked figures clad in black hooded robes swam before her, arranged in a circle around the skeletal figure of Voldemort himself... and a woman, clad in crimson robes. Her Boggart?*

*There was a rushing sensation as the ground trembled, a foul, rotting stench tainting the air before a gust of wind took it away. There was a sudden bone-deep chill, as countless voices spoke as one: "You called us forth, Mistress."*

*"I called you forth to fight in the place of the living." That voice was her own.*

*"Now, to the battlefield. By sundown we shall have brought the Wizarding world to its knees... FORWARD!" Voldemort ordered, his rasping voice piercingly high in Hermione's ears. The gruesome sounds of half rotted feet marching faded away...*

*"...WITCH! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!" Voldemort's scream of pain echoed in her ears, rising to painful levels before cutting off with a rasp. There was the distinct feeling that the Dark Lord was no more, even on a molecular level.*

*Shouts of triumph sounded around her, only to fade as her senses were overwhelmed by the sudden pain. She couldn't even cry for help as her lungs seemed to constrict... everything seemed to constrict as it felt like an invisible giant hand was trying to squeeze her down to the size of a single atom. Unbearable heat overtook her until she felt like she was going to simultaneously melt and explode at once. There was an unimaginably pain-filled moment before everything faded, her last coherent thought being a mental scream.*

"SEVERUS!"

He awoke from his restless sleep in the lonely spare bed to hear Hermione screaming his name. Snatching up his robe, Severus burst into the sitting room to find her sitting bolt upright, almost hyperventilating as she tried to recover from a nightmare. He hesitated for a moment before pulling her into his arms.

'Monster or not, her nightmare is obviously the greater evil than I am at the moment.'

It took quite a while for Hermione to calm down to a point where she could speak, but even then she refused to talk about what the nightmare had been about.

"It wasn't a flashback to the crash. It was just a bad dream," she insisted.

"A 'bad dream' about what in particular?" No answer was forthcoming, instead she just buried her face in the crook of his neck. "Was it to do with my earlier actions?" He was answered with a distinct shake of her head.

She pulled her head away so that she could meet his eyes. "No, it wasn't. Do me a favour and ditch your guilt over it; in my own opinion there's nothing to forgive."

"My actions were reprehensible..."

Hermione cut him off. "So what? If we both enjoyed it, what's the problem? Look, just drop it, Severus."

She wouldn't let go of him, eventually drifting back to sleep with her arms wrapped tightly around him.

"My monstrous bastard..." she mumbled before her eyes lids slipped closed.

'I can't make her choices for her. If she still wants me, I won't leave her.'

"My insufferable know-it-all," Severus murmured as he dropped a gentle kiss on her lips, before carrying her into the master bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him.

Hermione approached the hospital wing two weeks after her first nightmare about the so-called final battle, intending to ask Madam Pomfrey about possible solutions for chronic nightmares, only to find Harry and Ginny pacing outside.

"Hermione, you heard!" Ginny flung herself at Hermione, who almost collapsed under the sudden weight.

"Heard what?" Hermione demanded, setting Ginny back onto her own feet.

"Ron's been poisoned. It would've been disastrous if I'd given the Prince's book back when you first told me to; it had vital knowledge in it that saved Ron's life. Did you know bezoars can save victims of most poisons if stuffed down their throats soon enough?"

"Severus told us that in our first potions lesson, Harry. Although he didn't say 'stuffed down their throats'."

Harry waved a hand impatiently. "Yeah, and you're the only one who remembers that. Whoever the Prince is, he's my hero." He frowned at the strained expression on Hermione's face as she struggled to keep herself from guffawing. "What's wrong with you?"

"You know who this Prince is?" Ginny asked, perceptive as always.

"Yes. Ah, anyway, is Ron going to be alright?"

"We're waiting for word... and you're not escaping so easily. Come on, 'fess up." Ginny poked her prefect's badge, digging the clasp into her.

"You won't believe me."

"Try us." Harry stepped up to Ginny's side, his arm coming around Hermione's shoulder as she tried to back away.

"He'd call you unappreciative dunderheads. Still don't get it? He's about so tall..." Hermione stretched her arm up above her head, her hand indicating the height of Ron's saviour, "dark hair, lean build, strong features..."

"Snape? The Prince is *Snape*?" Harry's knees gave out under him. "Oh, no. Ron's as good as dead. Why would stones from a goat's stomach work as a cure against poisons?"

"Potter, Miss Weasley... oh, and you, Miss Granger... Weasley is out of danger. You can come in now."

Hermione gave Harry a superior look as he was forced to rethink his opinions of both Severus and the Prince. They sat beside Ron's bedside until the Weasleys arrived, her own nightmares forgotten in light of the bungled attempt at poisoning Dumbledore with mead. Had the necklace been meant for Dumbledore too? If so, there was a pretty inept would-be murderer about. Was Harry right in his suspicions about Malfoy? Two attempted murders fudged like this should leave a mark on the soul of the attacker, especially if it was one person.

With that in mind, Hermione made her way to Severus's quarters, using the door in his office. She used the Door of Requirement (as she'd dubbed it) to take her to wherever Malfoy was at the moment, to find herself in a room full of junk.

'Hmm, fitting to find old Ferret Face in surroundings like this.' Hermione looked around the room to see everything from damaged library books to hollowed troll feet. She was approaching the anxious sounding heartbeat in the back of the room when she found a floor-to-ceiling mirror, with an engraved gilt frame reading: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*.

'The Mirror of Erised... I really shouldn't look... I REALLY shouldn't look... Oh, hell. I'll look just once...'

She stepped close to the mirror, peering at it until her reflection morphed into her deepest desire.

'No. That can't be right. Surely I should see Severus at the very least, maybe us entwined together? Look away, dammit! This is what my nightmares end with. I can't desire it...' When Hermione failed to wrench her eyes away from the mirror, she lashed out. The enchanted mirror resisted any attempts at reducing it to ash, but the violence of her reaction cracked it. Seconds later, it shattered, alerting Malfoy to her presence.

"Who's there?" He appeared from her left, only to come to a jarring halt, his eyes almost crossing as they fixed on the tip of her upraised wand. Hermione herself was surprised to notice that she was holding him at wand point, as she wasn't aware of drawing her wand.

It took only a moment at this close range for Hermione to register that his soul was indeed tainted. Whether Dumbledore knew or not, people were getting hurt. It was time to stop this before someone died. '*Expelliarmus*.' Malfoy's wand jumped from his hand to her own.

Malfoy scowled at her, his teeth bared. His anger at being disarmed overruled his sense of survival; he lunged at her with an enraged cry. Hermione dropped the wands in her surprise at his move, but her reflexes were up to the task of sidestepping him. She let one leg drag behind as he tried to recover his balance, and he tripped over it, falling into a pile of tattered textbooks.

"Tut tut, Malfoy. Getting clumsy in your old age? Let me help you up..." Hermione grabbed the back of his collar, swinging him up to throw him against the wreckage of the mirror. Fortunately for him, it was free of the shattered reflective glass. "Wondering how a weak girl like me can do that, huh? I'm using your own strength against you." She twisted one of his arms behind his back, so that any attempt to free himself would risk dislocating it.

Her movements allowed her skin to touch his. It was a simple matter to overcome his Occlumency shields with her contact Legilimency, revealing his nefarious plans. A bit of concentration focussed her thoughts on the broken Vanishing Cabinet. It crumbled, the inanimate parts falling into the newly created dust.

"Oops. I hope you weren't planning to use that," Hermione taunted the squirming boy, whose struggles doubled as he realised what had happened. "I know what you were planning, Malfoy. Now you'll get no backup. Your attempts on the Headmaster's life are endangering the lives of others... Hell, anyone who knows anything about Dumbledore would know to poison his lemon drops, not mead."

Malfoy opened his mouth, most likely to deny everything, but Hermione didn't let him talk, pushing him against the broken mirror more firmly.

"It's time you rethink your path. Even if, by some fluke, you did succeed, Voldemort would just give you another impossible mission. He wants you dead, you stupid boy. Instead of going along with this, why didn't you go to Dumbledore in the first place?"

Malfoy pushed his head away from the mirror to answer her. "My mother's life is in his hands, you moronic Mudblood!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I figured as much. Don't you realise that Dumbledore is more than capable of providing a safe house? It doesn't have to be this way!" She took no offence at his typical insult. She'd heard it so many times, it had very little effect on her.

"I am a loyal servant of the Dark Lord! You can't fathom nobility of his cause, pathetic Mudblood."

"Okay, so be it. Seeing as you respond so well when your scrawny hide is at risk, let's try this: you'll give yourself up to Dumbledore's tender mercies... or I kill you, here and now."

A shiver ran down Malfoy's spine at her words. "C-come off it, Granger... you're no killer."

"Wrong!" Hermione said in a singsong voice as she slipped an arm around his throat, pressing firmly enough to cut off his breathing. He choked, flailing around, but was unable to throw her off. After he started to fall slack, she let him drop to his knees, gasping and wheezing. "Well, what'll it be? Death at your precious Dark Lord's hands or my own, or life at Dumbledore's mercy?"

"I don't have a choice. I never did," Malfoy whined, blood trickling from his battered nose.

"You can choose to go to Dumbledore. For some reason, he believes in giving people second chances."

Malfoy consented to be taken (or dragged by his robes in this case) to Dumbledore. While at the time he didn't thank Hermione for interfering, the Malfoy heir was sufficiently grateful to drop the usage of 'Mudblood' when referring to her.

"For such an accomplished witch, Hermione, you sometimes forget all about your encyclopaedic knowledge of spells. Draco is quite afraid of you now; or at least, afraid of your Muggle duelling skills."

"You should've seen his face in my third year after I slapped him silly."

"So today wasn't the first time you've used violence against him? No wonder he's petrified. Those pure-bloods who consider Muggles lower life forms rarely know what to do when confronted with Muggle methods of fighting."

"When you were a student at Hogwarts, did 'Muggle duelling' give you the advantage? Um, Severus? Why are you stroking your nose like that?"

"I'm reminiscing, my dear. My nose wasn't always this shape, you know. If I'd been a pure-blood, it is true that I'd look even worse off, but Potter and Black used fisticuffs themselves. They broke my poor nose no less than three times. Bastards."

"If I didn't know better than to speak ill of the dead, I'd have a few things to say myself... and, once and for all, there's nothing wrong with your nose! It's very, ah, distinctive. I like it." Hermione leant forward and gave Severus a series of soft kisses across his nose.

"You're distracting me from my marking, insufferable girl. If you keep that up, I'll spread you across my desk to mark *you*."

Hermione grinned wolfishly at him before hopping onto his desk, knocking the stacks of marked and unmarked essays onto the floor. "Give me less than an 'E' and I'll want a remark."

Albus stuck his head through the Floo connection open in his fireplace after calling Severus's name. The castle granted him access to all rooms as Headmaster, with his personal Floo connection automatically taking him to the nearest fireplace of his destination.

"Severus, could you..." Albus's jaw dropped as he squeezed his eyes shut. "Could you both come through to my office. When you are decent." He pulled his head out of the connection, his cheeks hot with embarrassment. He stumbled over to his Pensieve, reaching over it to grab a suitable container.

"Perhaps they would appreciate this as a wedding present. I certainly don't want it in my head; I'd resemble a bearded tomato every time I saw either of them."

After using his wand to extract the memory and seal it inside the small glass bottle, Albus sat down behind his desk, rubbing his temples to ward off the ache that sometimes began after extracting memories. It was a particular problem for those with emotions involved, the predominate one being embarrassment in this case. He suspected that the ache was caused partly by the confusion caused by still feeling the emotion, having a vague idea why yet having the memory missing.

The fireplace flared green after a few minutes as the Floo connection opened. Severus stepped through, Hermione following him. While their clothes were wrinkled, it was just possible for Albus to delude himself that they'd been making potions.

"I have received news from Kingsley and Tonks. There has been a mass breakout from Azkaban."

## Chapter 23

*Chapter 24 of 25*

Beware the Ides of March...

Disclaimer: If I were JKR would I be writing fanfiction? Especially HG/SS fanfiction?

Thanks to my reviewers and beta.

Chapter 23

The Ministry of Magic could only withhold the knowledge of the Azkaban breakout from the Wizarding world for a few days before allowing the *Daily Prophet* to report it. The result was widespread panic, as every Death Eater captured in the battle in the Department of Mysteries was now on the loose.

The members of the Order were meeting more frequently, as were the Death Eaters judging by the number of times Severus was summoned by the 'Snake Fixated One'. Yet Voldemort remained tight-lipped concerning his plans. It was clear that a major offensive was coming close to fruition, but the exact target was unknown.

Hermione was growing increasingly concerned by her dreams. She had consulted Madam Pomfrey when visiting Ron in the hospital wing, and nothing the matron had suggested had worked. Severus had given up asking her what the nightmares were about after calming her down after her screams awoke him almost every night. Hermione was well aware that Severus's opinion of Divination matched her own, so she was very reluctant to admit to him of having dreams that she suspected were of the future. Hell, she was reluctant even to *think* it to herself.

With the knowledge that she would never forgive herself if her dreams turned out to be true and she told no one of her suspicions, Hermione extracted the memory of the recurring nightmare into Dumbledore's Pensieve to show him. His opinion was that it was possible that her powers left her mind open to echoes from the future, but it was also possible that the dreams were a symptom of the stress she (and the entirety of Wizarding Britain) was under.

Distracted and lacking in sleep, Hermione's schoolwork was suffering. However, this only reduced her stellar grades from Outstandings to Exceeds Expectations. She'd

have to be getting 'Trolls' to bring her record down to the level of other achievers, a fact that didn't exactly make her popular amongst her classmates.

It was also rather puzzling to her that Voldemort hadn't summoned her since they'd met. While clear that his plans revolved around her, he didn't seem to be in a hurry to tell her his plans in advance. Obviously, he only trusted her so far...

Hermione had been working on a nineteen inch essay for Defence *Differences between Necromancy and the usage of Inferi*, to be seen by Severus and Dumbledore's eyes only), when she absently snapped her quill, ink spilling over her hand and the parchment below her. A nasty thought had just occurred to her; what if Voldemort intended to eliminate her after he'd gotten what he wanted from her?

At some point in the upcoming inevitable confrontation between the Dark and the Light, Hermione was going to have to turn against him. What was to stop him from killing her there and then? The minute she turned against him, she'd outlive her usefulness to him. Or worse, Voldemort would threaten the lives of those she cared for. He'd already threatened Severus to force her to bring Bellatrix back...

'I can't let that happen. There must be some way to have Riddle under my thumb...' Hermione had almost reached the nearest bookcase, her hand outstretched for one of the Dark Arts volumes, when the memory of one of the last pages in *The Book* surfaced in her mind. It was an untested spell, based on the theory of life force leeching techniques on the pages preceding it. If it worked, it would transfer any damage from herself to Voldemort, meaning that she had only to turn her wand on herself to prevent him from attacking her loved ones. Any damage she did to herself (or was inflicted on her) would be transferred to him.

A frown crossed Hermione's face, her wand now in hand, ready to cast the spell. 'There must be a catch. This seems far too easy.' She lowered her wand. 'I'll get someone else's opinion. This isn't something to rush into, after all. Anything recorded as untested in a book like that must be dangerous.'

Severus agreed that the transference spell was their best chance, but was reluctant to let her risk using a potentially dubious and dangerous spell. He was also resigned to the fact that there was little he could do to stop her from casting the spell.

"He will realise what you are up to. You'll be dead before you finish casting the spell."

"Hardly, Severus. You-Know-Who is hardly omniscient. Do you really think he will feel the effects of a spell being cast hundreds of miles away?"

He blinked, looking a little taken aback. "You mean that the spell can be cast here and now? In that case, the Dark Lord is highly unlikely to notice. Fine. Cast it, but be very careful. There must be a reason that it is recorded as untested."

It was certainly anticlimactic. The spell was both silent and invisible with only the tell-tale tingle of magic to let Hermione know that it had been cast. She would have to test it out the next time she was in Voldemort's presence.

The Portkey ring activated for the first and only time in mid-March. Hermione had vaguely registered that it was the Ides of March at breakfast, but didn't really find the date of any note unless, of course, you were Julius Caesar. She had been walking back from visiting Hagrid on the gusty Saturday lunchtime, her cloak wrapped tightly around her as she trailed behind Harry and Ron. She had felt the subtle shift of magic radiating from her hand a split second before the Portkey activated, leaving her no time to call out to the boys.

'The wind would have stolen my words before they heard me... I hope this doesn't mean what I think it does.'

Hermione cursed the fact that she'd never really got the hang of Portkey transport as she felt the tug in her midriff and almost instantaneously landed flat on her back in front of Voldemort, who looked a little startled to see her undignified arrival. He extended a long fingered hand to help her up, his skin feeling dry and papery as she took his hand.

"It is time to bring this to an end. The unworthy will perish, leaving our world open for those who deserve to live. Even if some of the worthy do fall, you can bring them back."

"Who counts as worthy? Surely you have noticed that the obsession with purity of blood has resulted in the powerless or mental illness." Hermione looked pointedly at the silent figure of Bellatrix.

"You doubtless know that I myself am a half-blood from Harry Potter. Blood does hold less meaning than before, with you as the prime example. Mudblood though you are, you outstrip any pure-blood of your generation." Voldemort turned away from her, hands stroking his bald head as he thought further. "Fresh blood is needed, yes. We will bestow the status of pure-blood on the deserving half-blood and even the brightest Muggle-borns. If you were male, then the Granger family would be classed above the Malfoy line. As it is, I guess the name of Snape will get that position... perhaps Severus will revert to his mother's family name. Prince was a noble line before it failed."

Voldemort led the way from the Riddle house to the graveyard. "I trust that you have experienced Side-Along-Apparition? Good. I shall guide you to our destination, where I shall summon my Death Eaters... and you will earn your place of honour as my most valued ally. Oh, and that robe and Muggle clothes are hardly befitting one of your status." With a complicated wave of his wand, he transfigured her clothes into a horribly familiar set of crimson robes.

He grasped her elbow, taking her with him through the compressing sensation of Apparition. Hermione closed her eyes in her discomfort, only opening them when she felt the wind ruffling her hair. They were in another graveyard, jumbled lines of headstones littering the ground, a tangled path weaving around them. From the names on the closest graves, Hermione was able to deduce where they were before turning to double check her assumption. The Rosmerta family grave coupled with the eerie sight of the Shrieking Shack gave their position as the Hogsmeade Cemetery.

Bellatrix appeared next to Voldemort, who let go of Hermione to focus on using the undead Death Eater's Dark Mark to call the other Death Eaters to them.

'Now, while he's distracted, I'll test that transference spell.' Hermione reached into her pocket (the transfigured robes had the pockets in the same places, thankfully) and sent a few sparks flying from her wand to hit her right side, where the tip rested. She carefully controlled her expression when Voldemort jumped, a yelp escaping him as his hands flew to his side. It appeared that the spell was working perfectly, as she only felt the tingle of magic and no pain from the impact of the sparks.

"Let that be a lesson, my dear; never keep your wand in a pocket," Voldemort hissed, as he withdrew his wand, glaring at the length of wood. As luck would have it, his wand seemed to have been in the same position as her own. He bent back to his task, touching his fingers to Bellatrix's Dark Mark. "There. My followers will soon arrive, although any bearing my Mark in Hogwarts will be delayed. It is lunchtime, after all."

Even as the first Death Eaters began to arrive, an urgent thought crossed Hermione's mind. 'Severus won't know that this is! I need to get word to him, or failing that, to Dumbledore. But how? Voldemort is hardly going to let me write an owl...'

"It is time for all proud pure-bloods to make a stand. We will attack when my Necromancer here has brought an army back to life." At Voldemort's words, many of his assembled Death Eaters gasped, flinched or shied back, widening the circle arranged around the Dark Lord and Hermione.

'Ah. I thought as much.' Hermione swallowed hard. "I found bringing Bellatrix Lestrange back from the dead tiring; I'm afraid that an undead army is unfeasible."

"I have planned extensively for this moment, Hermione. I anticipated your limitations... this should provide you with sufficient energy."

A vial of glowing golden potion was passed to her. While it resembled Felix Felicis, from Voldemort's comments it was more likely to be some sort of strengthening elixir. Ordinarily, she would have refused to take the potion before Severus had affirmed what it was... but judging by the unrecognisable heartbeats surrounding her, Severus was not there. Voldemort's fingers were running restlessly over his wand, so it was probably best not to test his patience. Hermione uncorked the vial and swallowed the contents. It felt as though she'd downed a thunderstorm as every single nerve seemed to spark before the electric jolt sank into her muscles. The vial shattered into glass dust in reaction to the energy in her fingertips. If her hair hadn't been so bushy, it would have stood on end. As it was, static electricity ran through every hair on her head.

"It is time to end this once and for all. We will attack when we have our army... Raise the dead, my Necromancer," Voldemort reiterated himself, his patience obviously flagging.

Hermione's eyes drifted shut as she extended her senses six feet under the ground to the boundaries of the graveyard. All plant life experienced a sudden burst of growth as her mental summons sank into the soil. 'Rise up...'

While the occupants of the graveyard were reluctant to respond, they had no choice but to answer her call. How soon the dead were reanimated depended on their condition, with the newly buried already surfacing. Hermione opened her eyes to see them reflected in Voldemort's satisfied gaze. Her usual brown irises resembled twin black holes, something that didn't fade as her powers were still being called upon as the ground seemed to bubble beneath them as skeletal hands clawed their way to the surface, scraps of flesh still hanging from some of them.

The air was unnaturally still for a while as the ground trembled, a rushing sensation brushing past Hermione that had nothing to do with wind, but far more with magic as sparks of electricity danced across her exposed skin. That was the last stage of the mass resurrection, bringing the souls back to the dead.

The assembled Death Eaters staggered back from the foul, rotting stench emanating from the shifting ground, stifled cries of fear arising from them as they realised that they were surrounded by the surfacing corpses. Where there was still flesh, the heads contained glassy eyes, while the bare bone of skulls contained a cold blue pinpoint of light as a pupil in the empty sockets. Given time and additional energy, Hermione would have been able to restore the assembled dead to their living appearances.

The exhalations of the living misted the air as the temperature dropped drastically, yet no ice formed on the ground. This was the affect of the undead multitude, who spoke as one in a creaking, hoarse rasp, "You called us forth, Mistress."

"I called you forth to fight in the place of the living." A quick glance at Voldemort proved Hermione's assumption right. The undead army wasn't just for decoration. It was to keep his precious Death Eaters, and himself, out of danger.

"Now, to the battlefield. By sundown we shall have brought the Wizarding world to its knees, either with the blood of their children or by holding their loved ones hostage. FORWARD!" Voldemort ordered, his rasping voice piercingly high to Hermione's ears

'Hogwarts. He's going to attack Hogwarts! Of course, why else would he want me to raise the dead in Hogsmeade? Stupid! I can't believe I didn't realise that before now. Severus still doesn't seem to be here... I need to get word to Hogwarts.'

"We will catch the old fool by surprise... Wormtail, you will have a place of honour for your most useful information concerning the 'secret' passage from the Shrieking Shack to the grounds of Hogwarts." Voldemort gestured to the ramshackle building overlooking the graveyard.

At Voldemort's words, Hermione narrowed her eyes as she concentrated on one of the dead closest to the supposedly haunted building, countermanning her original order. The skeletal form backed away, unnoticed in the crowd of bodies in a similar state. It also helped that the Death Eaters were avoiding looking at the dead whenever possible.

'Perhaps they need to change the name of their little club. It doesn't seem that they have much stomach for the actual dead... I hope my undead messenger arrives in enough time before the attack for Dumbledore to enact defensive measures.'

Staff meetings at Hogwarts were usually held midmonth at the weekend. In this case, at lunchtime. As Head of Slytherin, Severus was supposed to stay for the entire meeting, so when he felt his Dark Mark burn part way through the proceedings, he signalled Dumbledore. Alas, even the Dark Lord's summons was not enough to get him away from the bureaucracy ridden meeting. Hopefully, said Dark Lord would understand that his chief 'spy' at Hogwarts couldn't come at the drop of a hat. If not, Riddle would hopefully view the ongoing burning throb of the Dark Mark as sufficient punishment.

"...more crystal balls and incense are needed to stock my classroom..." Trelawney was droning on, peering around the room at her colleagues, several of whom (Severus included) were slumped over, staring into the fire in their boredom.

Minerva scrawled the demands down in her duties as the minutes' taker.

*"The Dark Lord will fall by sundown on the Ides of March, banished by the Strand Breaker. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord is freed of his prophesised fate, his bonds cut by the Strand Breaker. The Dark Lord will fall by sundown on the Ides of March..."*

Every member of staff sat bolt upright as Trelawney lapsed into her loud, harsh prophesising voice. She coughed, her bangles rattled as she slumped down in her seat, before sitting up, blinking rapidly as she cleared her throat. "Huh? What'd I miss? I must have dozed off... I'm ever so sorry."

The roll of parchment Minerva had been writing on was passed to Dumbledore, who frowned down at the shaky handwriting. After staring at the words for a long moment, he looked up, flicking his gaze up to meet Severus's.

His mouth opened beneath his beard, but before he could speak, the wards flared, outlining the walls and door of the staff room. "Something triggered the wards. I fear it's connected to what was just prophesised. I must investigate. Severus, Minerva; come with me."

There was a barrage of knocks on the door before they could reach it. Severus pulled it open, revealing Potter and Weasley. Potter was clutching a tattered piece of parchment, which on closer examination was revealed to be his map of Hogwarts.

"Hermione's gone," Potter panted, holding onto the doorframe to keep himself vertical.

Severus opened his mouth to demand an explanation, only for Weasley to continue the tale, equally out of breath as Potter.

"We were walking back from Hagrid's. She was right behind us, but when we got to the front door, she was gone. We checked the map, and she wasn't on it anywhere."

"The Portkey," Severus murmured, his face falling as his eyes darkened with suppressed rage directed at the meddling Dark Lord.

"What?" The question was asked by everyone who heard it, included some of the teachers listening in.

"He gave her a ring, a Portkey. It seems that Trelawney's prophecy is correct. This is it, Headmaster."

"What prophecy?" Potter demanded.

"Our esteemed Divinations professor has made another prophecy, invalidating the one involving you. You're off the hook, Potter." Severus brushed the boys aside with Albus and Minerva following in his wake. The wards made it obvious to the enlightened where they had been triggered, so it was a simple matter to go from the ground floor staff room to the Whomping Willow.

Before they reached the oddly still tree, they were met by a foul stench. Shortly after noses had been wrinkled with disgust, the sight of an animated corpse met their eyes. Rotting flesh hung from a largely exposed skeleton, one glassy eye mismatched with an empty socket staring out at them.

Five wands were levelled at the creature, but it opened its mouth to speak before any spells could be launched. The resulting voice was distorted by the condition of the throat, jaw and mouth, but it was unmistakable; especially to Severus.

"He's coming here, through the tunnel beneath the Whomping Willow with virtually every Death Eater and a several hundred strong undead army. They're not far behind..."

The sound of Hermione's voice coming from the corpse sent shudders down his spine.

Albus sighed. "I feared that it would be so. Minerva, sound the alarm. We must get the students to their common rooms."

"But sir, we can fight! If everyone is hidden away, Voldemort will hurt Hermione," Potter protested, even as Minerva hurried away. The attack alarms soon rang out, with the hubbub of many pairs of feet shifting echoing from the castle as the students followed their instructions.

"That may well be so, Harry. But do you really think the majority of the students can withstand an attack such as this? Of age students who volunteer may fight, but the younger ones need protecting. Children are a danger to their own side in battle." When Albus had finished speaking, he raised his wand to send a Patronus message to Minerva, advising her of the change in plan.

"Do you mean that I can't fight?" Potter squawked, his face flushing with indignation.

"I shouldn't let you. But I do not have time to stop you."

A rhythmic squelching was steadily growing louder. Severus was able to pinpoint it as coming from the vicinity of the Whomping Willow. As his breath began to mist the air, the dead began to emerge from the roots, the earlier gruesome sounds made by their rotting feet. There seemed to be an unending stream of them, ranging from skeletons to fresh corpses marching three abreast.

The older (and braver) students were hurrying towards them, wands drawn. They were waiting for Albus's command to attack, though. Most of the professors were following them, a sign that the younger (and more sensible) students were safely tucked away in the castle.

Finally, the army of the dead was assembled on the now trampled lawn. They parted, allowing the black robed Death Eaters to advance, silver masks glinting in the dimming light. Low clouds were sweeping in to form fog, a Necromantic trick apparently done on the Dark Lord's orders.

There was a collective intake of breath as the tall, thin figure of the man who had once been Tom Riddle advanced to the head of his army, accompanied by a slight woman in deep red robes. Severus blinked, recognising her as what Hermione's Boggart had been. It seemed that You-Know-Who had an unintentionally ironic taste in fashion, as he highly doubted that Hermione would have transfigured her clothes in that particular way.

"Now that this blessed moment has finally come, all of my prepared speeches seem inadequate to the task." Riddle's high voice carried far. It wouldn't surprise Severus if the students inside the castle could clearly hear the words.

"Drama queen," Potter muttered. By the snorts of the assembled teachers and students, everyone has heard him... including the drama queen himself, judging by the narrowing of his red gaze.

"Surrender now and I will spare your lives... or die."

"As if life would be worth living if we surrendered! As if you'd keep your word about letting us live!" There was a mixture of responses, but as most started with 'as if' that was the predominate response.

"Very well. Die in the cold grip of my army, in the knowledge that resistance is futile; they cannot die. Attack!"

Wands were upraised as the first curses began to fly, only to falter as both sides registered that Riddle's precious army hadn't moved a single rotting muscle in response to his command.

"Necromancer, you know they are to fight in the place of the living. Order them to attack!" The Dark Lord's voice came out in a strained, high-pitched hiss much like the whistle of a boiling kettle.

Hermione looked sidelong at the pale, anger pinched face of Riddle. "I never said which living people they would fight in the place of, Tommy."

It was a sight that would be replayed in Albus's Pensieve time after time: the white face of the Voldemort suddenly reddening with rage as his jaw dropped, eyes glowing like Muggle Christmas tree lights. The twitch in one of his eyelids only helped with that impression, as it made the glow flicker.

"Traitor!" he literally spat, his wand upraised, pointing directly at Hermione.

"Hardly. To betray you, I would have had to be on your side in the first place!"

The Dark Lord swelled up, giving the impression of a bullfrog. The tip of his wand sparked green, obviously on the verge of releasing the Killing Curse. He suddenly spun, the wand pointing directly at Severus.

"*You. You have played me false, all this time. Curse you, Severus Snape! Die, death is your reward. I only wish I had time to tear you apart.*" Voldemort didn't speak these words, but communicated them to Severus using Legilimency within a second. The heat of his rage was blinding, keeping the now former spy in place.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

AN: Keep your raging mobs back. This story isn't over yet!

## Chapter 24

*Chapter 25 of 25*

The so-called Final Battle, fought by the dead, dying, injured and unscathed.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and all associated riff-raff are not mine. The plot, however, is.

My thanks to LadySunflower for betaing this story. It would not be posted without you.

Chapter 24

It was discovered that the dead could move surprisingly fast, as one dived in front of the Killing Curse fired at Severus. The rotting corpse collapsed to the ground, wreathed by the bright green flash. After a moment, the carcass climbed to its feet, unaffected by the lethal curse.

With a cry of rage, Voldemort attempted to launch another Killing Curse, only to cut off the incantation with a pained howl, clutching at his wand arm. The Death Eaters flanking him looked puzzled, before levelling their wands at Hermione, who was just switching her wand from her left hand to right hand, having launched a cutting curse at herself and transferred the damage to Voldemort in the process.

She cocked an eyebrow at the assembled Dark wizards and witches, before they were set upon by the undead surrounding them. Some of the more powerful Death Eaters were able to escape the icy clutches of the dead, but as they couldn't Apparate on Hogwarts grounds, they were not unscathed.

Lucius Malfoy had lost his mask and had accompanying rents across his face, spoiling his looks. Half blinded with his own blood and crazed with fear and rage, he launched himself at the line of Hogwarts staff and students, casting Unforgivables non-stop. Even as Filius Flitwick fell to one of the Killing Curses, the diminutive Charms professor sent an elementary Knock Back Jinx at the elder Malfoy, who was flung back into the throng of animated corpses. He didn't emerge.

Another Death Eater burst out of the undead mob, flinging rotting body parts everywhere. This coincided with the arrival of the rest of the Order of the Phoenix, so the rampaging Death Eater was met and bowled over by Remus Lupin. Black robes tore, the silver mask crumpled out of shape, revealing the feral features of Fenrir Greyback. The opposing werewolves rolled around, wands forgotten as they clawed and bit at each other. It wasn't full moon, leaving them in human form; yet the fight was somehow just as animalistic as it would have been in wolf form. Greyback cackled as he got the upper hand, Lupin yelping as his maker tore into his flesh, blood spurting around them to stain the grass.

Greyback's head flew off as Nymphadora Tonks managed to get a clear shot at him with a fully powered Cutting Curse, more blood spurting up in a fountain. She raced to the side of her beloved, only to slip over the blood-stained grass, sprawling on top of Lupin, who grunted with pain. Tonks stuttered an apology, her trembling wand hand fumbling over healing spells. Slowly but surely the bleeding stopped. Tonks pulled Lupin to his feet and began to half drag him toward the castle, both of them now out of the fight.

One of the undead was not under the control of Hermione, something the young Necromancer had overlooked. Bellatrix Lestrange was loyal to Voldemort even in death, yet lacked the emotional awareness necessary to link any damage to Hermione to the resulting damage and pain to her Master.

Hermione's feet were yanked out from under her, her torso hitting the ground with a winding impact. Sharp fingernails dug into her as she tried to catch her breath, dragging her under her attacker even as she scabbled at the grass in an attempt to drag herself away. Voldemort had doubled over, wheezing, but the transference spell was apparently flawed when it came to breathing difficulties. The pain had transferred, but the lack of air was still an ongoing problem for Hermione. A problem that was exacerbated as Bellatrix clamped her hands around Hermione's neck, steadily tightening to the point that no air could be breathed in.

Voldemort fell to his knees, clawing at his throat, Hermione mirroring this movement as she tried and failed to prise Bellatrix's frigid grip from her throat. The strength in the undead hands was just as inhuman as the lack of emotions in the glassy stare.

If Hermione had been able to breathe, she could have reduced Bellatrix to ash or hijacked her loyalties, but she was steadily turning blue from lack of oxygen, a symptom that Voldemort shared.

Bellatrix abruptly let go, surging over to another target currently threatening her master. It was a mark of her lack of intelligence that she didn't realise that her previous efforts to protect Voldemort had placed him in far more danger than his current attacker did.

Severus had seen Hermione come under attack, but he had little chance of prying Bellatrix off her, having observed Hagrid get tossed aside as the dead Death Eater made a beeline for Hermione. While satisfying, his cast of Crucio was doing little to damage the Dark Lord, but as long as Bellatrix thought her precious master was in danger, she should let Hermione go.

His ploy worked, but Bellatrix moved faster than he had anticipated. Severus managed to set the bitch on fire, but not before she'd thrown him clear across the blood-stained lawn to land at the foot of the steps at the main entrance to the castle. The impact knocked the breath out of him as his ribs splintered, allowing the waiting darkness to claim him as he passed out. Fortunately for him, Tonks had just emerged from the castle, having deposited Lupin in the hospital wing. She sighed, rolling her eyes as she grudgingly accepted her place as a glorified stretcher-bearer, her hair turning red with her annoyance.

Bellatrix let out an unearthly scream until the chill present in her put out the flames. Before she could attack again, Hermione reduced her to so much ash, a permanent state this time.

Antonin Dolohov was another Death Eater who managed to escape the attacking former inhabitants of Hogsmeade, his robes in tatters and his mask dangling from his face. He tore it off, launching his favoured purple flame curse as soon as his vision was clear. Minerva McGonagall managed to raise a shield in time to prevent the curse from killing her, but it still impacted, knocking her down and out. Dolohov snarled, lowering his wand to launch another curse at the defenceless witch at his feet. A fist knocked into the base of his skull, driving him to his knees before he could formulate the lethal spell.

"Oh, no you don't, Death Eating scum!" Ron Weasley stood behind him, his clenched fist trembling with his rage, deep red spots on his freckled cheeks. "Hey, I know you. You're Dolohov. You tried to kill Hermione in the Department of Mysteries. You also killed my uncles, before I had a chance to know them. Remember Gideon and Fabian Prewett?" The boy levelled his wand at the murderer, the length of willow steady as he mastered his rage to the point that he was in control.

"As if a snivelling brat like you can kill me, pathetic little Weasley." Dolohov spat a bloody mouthful onto the trampled grass, his eyes almost crossed with the blow to his head. "Yes, I remember them, the blood traitor brothers. I only regret that I didn't have time to dismember their corpses... I do so like to play. Pity that the little girl had Potter protecting her; I would have enjoyed her company so much."

"Shut up! Azkaban is too good for you. Hell, using magic is too good for you." The youngest Weasley son tossed his wand aside, clenching his fists as he kicked at Dolohov, who grunted with the bruising blows. As the punishing blows from the boy's fists began to land, he began to laugh weakly.

"Are you any better than me, Weasley? My blood will be on your hands." Dolohov smirked as Weasley's attack faltered. He launched himself at the brat, a cruel blade in his hands cutting into the soft flesh of the youngster. Before he could thrust the cold steel into the heart of the boy, he was thrown off in a deluge of Stinging Hexes.

"Ginny, what're you doing here? You're too young!" Weasley's voice was weak, as the poison in the knife took hold.

"Shut up, Ron." The girl launched her favoured Bat-Bogey Hex, causing Dolohov to flail at his face, cutting himself with the blade as he tried to fend off the attack of the bogies. He lumbered blindly towards the girl, managing to throw the knife. She ducked, the knife grazing the side of her head. A swift, lucky punch took her out of the equation, the bogey hex failing as the caster lost consciousness. Dolohov advanced on Weasley, snatching his wand up.

Before he could end the short life of young Weasley, his skull shattered under a blow from a rolling pin. Molly Weasley née Prewett had been baking as the call to assemble at Hogwarts had come in, and hadn't let go of her favoured pastry rolling tool before Apparating to the Hogwarts' gate. When she had seen her children come under attack,

she had acted instinctively. It was only after the Dark wizard slumped to the ground, dead, that she recognised the long, pale, twisted face of her brothers' murderer. She kicked the corpse before conjuring stretchers under her youngest children, taking them up to the hospital wing.

Albus Dumbledore had not been standing still, but protecting his staff and students wherever he could, using admittedly illegal Portkeys to whisk the injured to the hospital wing. Great wizard though he was, he had limits, as the steadily rising death toll revealed. Part of the problem was that the Death Eaters avoided confronting him whenever they escaped from the attacking undead, so they picked off staff and students alike who were far enough away from Albus to be unprotected. He eventually called Fawkes, both for his Apparating ability and for his healing tears.

Now there were virtually no living Death Eaters left; Voldemort was raging. He didn't know how Hermione had transferred damage from herself to him, but the fact was that she was preventing him from taking as many of these Muggle lovers down with him as he could. He knew that it was highly unlikely that he would escape alive. Even if he did manage it, it was in a true Gryffindor's nature to sacrifice themselves in the name of the greater good. Hermione seemed to be the type, and he doubted that she had to be in his vicinity to transfer a mortal injury to him. His face contorted as he realised that it was unlikely that Hermione would die, as any damage seemed to instantly transfer to him. His incensed gaze passed over the assembled people, dead and undead, pausing at those he recognised. What really stung was that Potter would live and had a Necromancer to do his dirty work for him. The prophecy had misled him; this was the last time he would try to defeat fate.

Those glowing red eyes widened as a sudden thought occurred. They flicked to glance at Hermione; a slow smirk forming on his face. A flick of his wand and a nonverbal spell disarmed her. "Try to stop me now, Mudblood!" Voldemort twisted around, firing curse after curse at Harry Potter, who was steadily losing ground as he ducked, blocked and backed away.

"No *Priori Incantatem* to save you this time, Harry! I learned from our duel by my father's grave... I have a new wand now."

Potter's eyes were wide with fear with no back up from Albus Dumbledore, as the old man was occupied conveying his own sorrow to the flagging phoenix to enable more healing tears to be shed. The boy's jaw clenched, a defiant look coming over his face.

"Quite the Gryffindor, aren't you... Now, die like one, with your head held high." Before Voldemort could let his Killing Curse fly, his wand began to smoke. Seconds later, it burst into flame, a shriek of agony emanating from the core. An undignified yelp escaped the Dark Lord as the ashes of what had been his wand slipped through his fingers, his white hand both burned and stained. He stared in disbelief at his hand as the skin began to flake away, the flesh soon following suit as it shrivelled around the bones.

"What have you done?" Voldemort breathed, turning to Hermione, his accusing gaze drawn back to the gruesome sight of his disintegrating hand. The bones of his wand hand had collapsed into ash, but the process hadn't stopped there. His remaining hand was following suit, his nerves screaming the agony in a non-stop stream into his overloaded mind. "NECROMANTIC WITCH! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" he roared, his voice high and piercing, drawing the attention of the soon-to-be victorious living. The process accelerated as the resistance from his body faltered as more of it collapsed into ash.

Voldemort raised his head, screams of pain tearing from his throat. His terrified gaze fell on the architect of his destruction. Hermione was surrounded by a source of darkness so intense that she seemed to absorb the low light of the setting sun, the very fabric of time accelerated by the great energies of her attack. Scores of the dead fell, collapsing into dust as she reached the limit of her powers.

The Dark Lord's wordless cry of agony rose higher still, past the pain threshold of the observers. The screech cut off with a dry, choking rasp as Voldemort's lungs collapsed into ash. The remainder of his body followed suit. The last stage of the atomising was completed when even the ash was gone. In the moment of silence following, it seemed that the representatives of the Wizarding world held their breaths, all eyes rooted to the spot where the Lord Voldemort had last stood, the grass dry and yellowed.

Ragged shouts of triumph strengthened as Fawkes erupted into joyous song, circling the dead spot in the grass. Sparks flew from wand tips like fireworks as the victorious staff, students and selected Order members embraced each other. The sounds of jubilation doubled as the last of the dead army returned to dust.

"Hermione, you did it! We won... Hermione?" Potter, as the closest, was the first to realise that she had vanished. His voice trailed off plaintively as he called for his friend. He staggered over to where she had been standing, to fall to his knees, white faced as he registered what was there.

"Harry? Harry, what's wrong? What..." Dumbledore was just behind him, his wrinkled hand resting on the boy's shoulder. "Dear Merlin, no."

All that was left of Hermione Granger was a few ragged, singed strips of her crimson robes and the jewellery that she had been wearing; her engagement ring and charm bracelet.

He emerged from the memory in the Pensieve, bitter lines etched deeply onto his face. When he'd awoken in the hospital wing, he had found Albus sitting by his bedside. What the old man had to say, he'd refused to believe. With the proof of an unaltered memory in the accursed Pensieve, his denial was futile.

"Where are her belongings?" Severus demanded, ready to fight for the last vestiges of his beloved.

"I took the liberty of leaving them in your quarters. Her personal effects recovered from the battlefield are in her student record box on your desk. Harry accepted that they should go to you. He has little energy to hate, after losing so much," Albus murmured, concerned twinkle-free eyes fixed on the younger man.

"I need to be alone, Headmaster." Severus stood up, unable to meet Albus's piercing eyes.

"Very well. If you are sure... I will be here, if you need someone to talk to."

"Unless talking to you can somehow bring my Hermione back, I don't see how it can help."

"Severus, you are not the only one to have lost someone in the last battle of Voldemort."

"I realise that, Albus. But I cannot believe that they feel the same sense of loss that I do." Severus swept out of the office, leaving Albus shaking his head sadly.

Despite the realisation that going to his quarters could only torment him, Severus headed directly for them, using the door in the teacher quarters corridor to avoid meeting anyone.

His quarters were just as he'd left them. They looked as though they still accommodated two people. Come to that, he could still smell Hermione's scent in the air, as though she was either hiding or just out for the day. Avoiding the sight of the open bedroom door, Severus made his way to the study. The sight of Hermione's desk piled high with books, finished and unfinished work brought a lump to his throat. He stumbled over to his own desk, zeroing in on the foot square wooden box with Hermione's name, year and house engraved on the lid. The sight of the word 'deceased' was like a jolt of *Crucio* to his soul.

Closing his eyes tightly, fighting against the sting of unshed tears, Severus reached over to pull the student record box closer. He opened it, looking through half-closed eyes at the contents. Hermione's academic record lay inside, together with her wand. A metallic glitter drew his eye, then his hand as he snatched whatever it was up to examine it more closely. It was the charm bracelet, unmarked save for a few black stains which rubbed off easily. Severus held the cool metal for a long moment, before slipping it back inside the box, closing it up. Swallowing hard, he turned to leave, before picking the box up and taking it with him. He didn't want to find it in his rooms again, lying in wait for him.



Rubbing an impatient hand over his bloodshot eyes to dash any hint of tears away, Severus left his quarters, unable to be so tantalisingly close to where he'd last been alone with his late fiancée. Had it only been a few days ago that he'd last spent the early hours of the morning making love to Hermione? Now she was gone, with no body for closure. Even in the Pensieve, she'd just vanished. One second she'd been there, the next she was not. Yet it was also clear that she was dead. Necromancer though she was, even she couldn't come back to life when her own body had done the same as Voldemort's and been reduced to its component atoms.

'That transference spell must have been the cause. I knew it was dangerous. I knew it had to be untested for a reason. Yet there was nothing I could do to stop her, and even if I had somehow managed it, Voldemort would have killed her. Bastard, gutter slimed, whoreson! Why did he have to take Hermione with him into death? Why couldn't he have dragged down Potter?'

An enraged, wounded, wordless cry escaped him. He rammed his fist into the nearest suit of armour, denting the breastplate. It swore after him as he stalked off, the pain in his now throbbing hand insignificant next to the pain inside him.

"Professor, I'm sorry. About Hermione..."

Think of the devil; Potter had appeared out of the woodwork. "Shut up and fuck off." Severus shoved past the boy, beyond any form of civility. Potter's jaw dropped, stunned by the bad language coming from the normally controlled man. The two youngest Weasleys were with him, admittedly pale-faced after battling Death Eaters, but whole. Albus had told him who had died, and of the nine members of the Weasley family, none had expired.

"Now, Severus, Potter was only expressing his respects..." Minerva frowned at him, blocking the corridor.

"Potter this, Potter that! Why couldn't the fucking Boy-Who-Lived have handled the fucking Dark Lord? Why did Hermione have to die? Get out of my way, you dried up old prune."

Minerva gasped, her shock at Severus's invective allowing him to slip past, heading for the entrance hall. The castle was suddenly stifling, far too overloading with interfering busybodies, who thought of themselves as helpful. He turned back, feeling slightly guilty for snapping at Minerva that way. She was injured herself, after all.

"My apologies, Minerva. I need to be alone, not surrounded by a never-ending stream of commiserating morons. I'm not about to do anything drastic, so I don't need a babysitter." He slipped away, hurrying down the steps, across the grounds towards the gate, where he Disapparated.

Severus knelt before the cenotaph dedicated to the Grangers. He stared at it for a long moment, the gravel beneath him rattling as he shifted. He drew his wand, composing himself until his hand was no longer shaking. After a few minutes careful work, he sat back on his haunches, bleak gaze fixed on his handiwork. Below the names of her parents, their dates of birth and death, he'd carved:

'Hermione Jane Granger

19.09.1979-15.03.1997

*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*

That old lie'

Reaching into Hermione's record box, Severus pulled out the charm bracelet. He hesitated for a moment before using his wand to break the links, allowing him to remove each charm. These he set into the stone around his carving, transfiguring them to match the texture. While he had thought to keep the platinum bracelet with him, this cenotaph would be a less painful place to keep the items that had last touched Hermione.

The parchment rolls recording his beloved's achievements were all that was left. The tip of his wand flared as he seriously contemplated burning them. He pulled them out, arranging them before the plinth. Before he touched his wand to them to set them alight, a glint caught his eye. Brushing aside the parchment partially concealing it, Severus snatched up what was revealed in the glow from his wand. The engagement ring he had crafted himself, using the deep magic of his own love for Hermione.

The white glow of the gemstone had faded with her death, incontrovertible proof for the last of his futile denials. Severus's eyes suddenly widened as they darted back to the ring in a double take, dropping his wand in his surprise, the tip extinguishing as it left his hand. He lifted the ring closer to his stunned, incredulous gaze to ensure that what he had noticed wasn't a trick of the light. The bitter lines etched into his face softened as hope overtook the grief in his heart. The faint white glow of the ring was reflected in his dark eyes.

"I'll wait for you, Hermione."

Finite Incantatem

AN: The epitaph is a slight rearrangement and change of the end of Wilfred Owen's poem *Dulce Et Decorum Est*. It seemed fitting...

I am fully aware that I am evil. At the end of the last chapter, it seemed that Severus had bought it. Well, I spared him. What more do you want? A happy ending? Bear in mind that I am planning a sequel, (to be written and posted in a year or two, so be patient) so a truly happy ending is still on the cards.

As of September 2007, Tabula Rasa, a complete mini-sequel is up, together with the promised sequel, Resurgam.