

Resurgam

by ayerf

Darkness never dies. Sequel to Redivivus.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 18

Darkness never dies. Sequel to Redivivus.

AN: This story will not make much sense without first reading 'Redivivus'. Reading 'Tabula Rasa' may help in that respect too.

I aim to complete this by the time Deathly Hallows is released. I'll do my best to do so, but can make no promises.

Thanks to LadySunflower for betaing this.

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Prologue

Almost two years had passed since the defeat of Lord Voldemort in this miserable, Light loving world. The sickening resonance resulting from it was like a persistent ache in my entire skeleton. If I had been here at the time, things would have been very different. My Lord would have triumphed if he'd had a true Necromancer by his side. Instead he had *her*. The Traitor to the very creed of Necromancy. If she hadn't destroyed herself in the act of atomising Voldemort, I would have hunted her down and eliminated her. Although, admittedly, I might have died in the attempt. Traitor though Granger was, she was a formidable foe. Still, I wish that I'd had the chance to face her.

Two years was too long for the Light to be in power. It was high time for matters to be resolved. Dumbledore, Potter and every other Light wizard had grown complacent. They were unprepared; it would be ridiculously simple to overthrow them.

It was time meet with my accomplice, the last living Death Eater. Well, the last *oya*/ Death Eater. Snape is a shadow of the intimidating Dark wizard he once was. Rumour has it that he was affianced to the Traitor, and still waited for her to return. Didn't he know that even Necromancers cannot come back from scattered atoms on their own steam? Fool.

Peter Pettigrew, otherwise known as Wormtail, survived the attack of the undead by changing into his puny Animagus form and running for his life, like the coward he is. Nagini is more useful than he is, but unfortunately even big snakes like her can't provide what I require from him.

"Milady Atropos, is it t-time?" At Wormtail's stutter, I turned to face him. He shrank back from my cold, black gaze.

"It is. I told you that I would meet you, not for you to come to me. I thought I also told you that I am no Lady." I spoke softly, my words clipped and tone cold. After Wormtail quivered, I continued speaking, "But never mind that. Take my hand, I will use Side-Along Apparation to take us to our goal."

Moments later, we stood in front of a carved Grim Reaper guarding the grave of Tom Riddle. I could do this anywhere, but as Voldemort was resurrected here once before, I decided to make it a tradition. Wormtail's hand was quivering in my grip. It was only because he feared me more than the late Voldemort that he joined me. His cowardice could give rats a bad name, although this process would redeem Wormtail somewhat.

I closed my eyes, hoarfrost spreading out around me as I reached into the Dark powers gifted to me. My grip tightened around Wormtail's hand until he squeaked with pain, unable to get away despite his squirming. I hadn't explained to him exactly what the process of resurrecting Voldemort was going to include, as his sense of self preservation doubtless would have overcome his fear of me. He screamed as I began to steal his life force, the fabric of his body starting to fall apart as I did so.

My free hand outstretched, I let the pervasive cold of Necromantic magic fill me. Such a delicate process as this requires not so much concentrating as letting go and allowing the magic itself to guide you. Even with my eyes squeezed shut, I could see a glow growing brighter much like the birth of a star. This glow grew man-shaped until finally the light dimmed, leaving me almost blind. There was a clatter from beside me as Wormtail's silver hand landed on the ground, nothing else remaining of him. I blinked my eyes open, my vision steadily improving. On the ground in front of me lay the body of Lord Voldemort, a sight that would strike fear into the hearts of many... or rather, it would if he weren't naked, as no man looks frightening in his birthday suit. Bringing clothes back with him would have been a waste of energy, considering transfiguring a new set is child's play for a witch of my talents.

My heart skipped a beat as I realised that while I could detect an answering heartbeat from Voldemort, I had felt something else go wrong. I knelt by his side, observing his chest gently rise and fall with each breath. Reaching out with a trembling hand to touch his cool skin, my fears were proved right. Voldemort's body was back, but he was still technically dead. I hadn't felt his soul accompany his atoms. A look of complete consternation crossed my face as I came to the obvious answer to my 'little' problem. That Traitor Granger! She hadn't just atomised his body, she'd also banished his soul to the void. Now there was no way to ever resurrect him. At least not in the way that he'd done it before, I mused as I stared down at his empty form. There were other ways to perpetuate his legacy...

I took a firm hold of the body in preparation to Apparate to somewhere to carry out my modified plans, as specialised equipment would be necessary. Before I could do so, I spun away, feeling torn between screaming in pain and vomiting as extreme nausea twisted my insides. The feeling intensified, leaving me doubled over until the sensation passed. I cradled my head in my hands.

"What in the world was that!?"

In answer to my question, the pertaining knowledge rose from the treacherous memories of my reading of the *Necromantic Book of the Dead*, which has a nasty habit of keeping the necessary memories from me until after I need them... Like when resurrecting a Dark Lord. When Voldemort had been atomised, so had the Traitor. Their atoms had been scattered at the same time, with the same magical signature responsible for doing so. When I had used my powers to reassemble Voldemort, I had set in motion the exact same process with the Traitor, much like the first pebbles of an avalanche. *And the Traitor's soul hadn't been consigned to the void!*

"Oh, fuck..." I moaned, slumping onto my back beside Voldemort's body. I really should have been more careful with what I wished for, as my earlier thought drifted through my mind: *I wish that I'd had the chance to face her.*

AN: I originally planned for this to take place five years after Redivivus. But I decided to take pity on Severus. Two years was long enough for the poor chap to be alone.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2 of 18

Resurrection.

Disclaimer: I don't claim to own Harry Potter.

Chapter 1

The Great Hall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was full to the brim with students, alumni, Ministry officials and the faculty. It was March fifteenth, the second anniversary of Lord Voldemort's final defeat. This was the celebratory ball, although it was also a time to remember those who had perished. Comparatively few of those on the side of the Light had died, and a memorial statue in honour of them was to be unveiled at sunset, when Voldemort had expired.

"In memory of all who died so that we may live in peace, I, the Minister of Magic, reveal this sculpture. If any name should be missing, feel free to inscribe it; but it was tempered with Veritaserum, so you will find that it will only accept the names of those who truly served the Light." Rufus Scrimgeour Banished the gold sheet covering the block of metal in the centre of the room.

Surprisingly for a Ministry-funded project, the statue was quite tasteful. Cast in the shape of Yggdrasil, the tree of life in Norse mythology, the names of the deceased were inscribed on the trunk, within easy view.

Severus Snape let his eyes drift over the names, his gaze pausing on those of particular note to himself:

Filius Flitwick. The diminutive part-goblin Charms teacher had felled Lucius Malfoy in the 'Final' Battle; a simple Knock Back Jinx as effective as the Killing Curse that had killed him in turn.

Cedric Diggory. As the first victim of Voldemort's second rise, his life had been cut tragically short. For a Hufflepuff, he'd been acceptable at Potions.

James and Lily Potter. Severus counted their deaths as his own fault. If he hadn't told Voldemort the part of the prophecy that he'd heard, then... someone else would have told him. Stupid as it was to blame himself, Severus had hated James. Somehow that made it harder to handle.

Emmeline Vance. Another death that was Severus's fault. Yet Albus was at equal fault as he should have taken on the role of Secret Keeper for her when Severus had informed him that Voldemort wanted her dead.

Sirius Black. That bastard had made Severus's school years a misery, yet his death hadn't made the memories any easier to bear.

Severus's roaming eyes froze as they encountered the name that he'd known would be there, yet to see it still made his heart skip a beat: *Hermione Granger.* If she hadn't atomised herself in the act of doing the same to Voldemort, she would perhaps have been Mrs. Snape by now (or perhaps Granger Snape, with or without a hyphen; they'd never discussed the matter). The inclusion of her name on this monument was no surprise considering the Ministry had lauded her as a heroine, something that would not have happened had she lived. As a Necromancer, the Ministry had wanted her dead.

'Well, they got their wish. It's been two years...regardless of what my ring indicates, I don't think she can return, however much I hope she will.'

After extracting the object in question from one of his pockets, Severus inspected it for what seemed the millionth time. The gemstone set into the platinum band still glowed faintly white. Were Hermione alive, it would glow brightly. Yet if she were truly gone, it wouldn't glow at all. Crafted from his feelings for her, he'd given it to her as an engagement ring. It was the only remnant of her that he cared to keep with him at all times.

"Oh, Severus, you're not still mooning over that Granger girl are you?" The delicate tones of Narcissa Malfoy came from just behind him.

Ignoring the demands of polite society, Severus kept his back to Lucius's widow. She'd been after him ever since her late husband was barely cold in his grave and her release from Azkaban following her conviction after Voldemort's defeat. At first she pursued him out of fear that she'd be rearrested, and then out of the desire to have a hero of the Light as a husband. The use of Legilimency had revealed that she had no true affection for him, just for his Order of the Merlin (only Second Class for his considerable pains over the years, possibly due to the fact that he'd been out cold when Voldemort vanished. Had he not suffered a far greater loss, that slight might hurt more).

"What business is that of yours, Widow Malfoy?" he sneered, his voice cold enough to freeze anyone else in their tracks. Anyone living, that is.

"Now, Severus my love, you always used to call me Narcissa. What changed that?" the infernal social butterfly asked, laying her hand on his arm, which he shook off instantly.

"Don't lie to me, *Widow Malfoy*, you care nothing for me. It's my status as a war hero that you desire. As for Hermione, I told you before; I fully intend to wait for her. Even if it means waiting for my own death."

"She's not coming back. She'd want you to move on!"

"You don't know that. Even if she did, I highly doubt you're who she'd have in mind."

Narcissa breathed deeply for a few moments, her face doubtless flushed red with annoyance. "It's not healthy to mourn for the rest of your life. If you really don't want me, fine. According to Lucius's will, I am to remarry within a thousand and one nights of his death. He didn't want me to be alone. This is your last chance for my hand, Severus. It's not as if I don't have other options. Well?"

"By all means, find yourself your trophy, Narcissa. As long as it's not me, I'll give you my best wishes." *"I witnessed Lucius's will. He actually forbid her remarrying, but I'm not about to draw notice to her forgery."*

With a strangled unladylike grunt of rage, Narcissa flounced off. Severus turned to see her approach Percy Weasley (Order of Merlin, Third Class; how the ambitious prig had wrangled that was a mystery), who couldn't seem to meet her eyes as she spoke to him, unable to get past her cleavage.

"Hah! They deserve each other," he scoffed.

"Now, Severus, no one should wish a, er, lady of Narcissa Malfoy's qualities on anyone." Albus had snuck up on him. There'd be no running the Headmaster off in quite the same way. "I happened to overhear her comments to you, and I must say that she is right. Not even a Necromancer can come back from..."

"I know! Albus, we've had this conversation many times before. But I won't stop hoping. I can't."

"Why do you cling to a fruitless hope? What reason is there for your desperation?"

"This!" Severus shoved the hand clutching the ring under Albus's nose. He'd never shown anyone the source of his hopes before, in case the act would destroy the glow.

"That's the engagement ring you made for her, isn't it? Severus, you know better than anyone that when the glow is gone, so is your beloved."

"What? Can't you see? The glow, it... NO!" The glow had faded, leaving the gemstone dull. "It had a faint glow. She wasn't gone completely. There was still a chance..." Severus's face fell. He could feel his heart deadening with every beat.

"Dear boy, she's been gone for two years now. It's high time that you accept this. Your imagination must have been playing a cruel trick on you."

"No. Leave me alone, Albus," Severus snarled, stalking off as he closed his hand around the treacherous ring. His robes billowed around him as he made his way to the Whomping Willow, where Voldemort had been scattered into his component atoms. He'd avoided this part of the castle grounds, as his rooms were bad enough when coping with the void of Hermione's absence.

The Whomping Willow's usually flailing branches suddenly stilled as a bright flash lit up the surrounding area. For a moment Severus thought that there had been a lightning strike, but the sunset was unblocked by clouds. Hardly daring to hope, he unclenched his fist from the ring. The bright glow of the gemstone lit up his face.

"At last..." he breathed, looking up to cast his searching gaze around. Yet he couldn't see Hermione anywhere. "Hermione? Where are you?"

"Severus, you must let go... oh, my. Merlin's patched socks... it seems, my boy, that you were right." Albus had followed him outside, unwilling to let the matter rest.

"Where is she? The ring shows that she's back, but... she's not here."

"The wards would have set off every alarm in the castle if she'd come back within the grounds. Do you have any idea where she was born?" Albus asked, stroking his beard as he thought upon the matter.

"A Muggle hospital in Oxford, I think. Why? Do you think she's been resurrected in her birth place?"

"It's possible. I'd also guess that she may reappear wherever her parents' remains lie. That does seem to be the tradition..."

"Either place is where someone needs to be. Muggles frequent both... I hope you're ready for multiple Memory Charms. I'll take the cemetery, I know where it is." Severus immediately marched off in the direction of the gates to be able to Apparate.

"As it happens, I know where the probable hospital is. Fawkes!" Albus called after the Potions master, vanishing in a flash of flame as his phoenix familiar arrived.

From within a blade of grass... torn away from the yearly rush of rising sap in a semi-sentient tree... bacteria twitching in the moist soil, shivering in a burst of pain as something vital is taken from them... tumbling specks of pollen swirling in the wind, dispersed further by the passage of something unseen... plant roots splitting with the escaping nutrients... atom by scattered atom, they come when they are called by the inexorable force exerted...

An unseen, unheard and undetectable ghost imprisoned in the bounds of Hogwarts breaks free of the binding shackles...

Atoms become cells, cells become organs, bones snap together, muscles interweave, skin slips over, hair grows... all within the light of the reverse of a supernova... Mind, body and soul are brought together again in one confusing, jarring moment...

'I... what? Where? Who? How? I don't understand...' Bewilderment predominant in my mind, I gasped for breath. How long has it been since I last drew breath? My newly regenerated body fell to its knees, trembling. 'So cold...' Awareness of my lack of clothes was the next thing to occur, together with the realisation that there was no means for me to remedy the matter. I wrapped my arms around myself, although that didn't make much difference.

I opened my eyes, closing them almost instantly, unaccustomed to light, even the dying light of the sun. Before I could blink them open gradually, they snapped open in surprise as someone threw a covering over me, hands resting on my shoulders.

A man crouched before me, clad in a black coat and trousers. His face distinctive with strong features and a large hooked nose, shoulder length black hair falling forward into equally dark eyes.

"Hermione..." he murmured my name with a voice like melting dark chocolate, his hands drifting from my shoulders to cup my face, thumbs stroking my cheeks, the callused pads near the edges of my lower lip.

"Hermione!" his voice cracked on my name as he repeated it, a look of fear moving across his rugged features as he struggled to find some light of recognition in my eyes. I know him, he's important to me... as more of my memories surface, I know I love him, but I can't seem to speak. Severus. Severus Snape, that's his name. Now, if only I could get the words out of my mouth.

Severus's face crumpled, a lone, bitter tear streaking down his face from the corner of one eye. "Hermione, please. Remember me." His pained eyes stared beseechingly at me, but no sound escaped my lips as I tried to speak.

If my voice wouldn't cooperate, maybe my body would. I leant forward, untangling my arms from under the heavy woollen cloak covering me and threw them around Severus's neck, bringing our lips together in a kiss that quickly deepened.

Someone groaned, possibly me but I can't be certain; I was not terribly sure of anything at that moment, least of all anything to do with my physical state of being. I was aware of Severus's warm hands pulling me towards him, clutching me to his chest as he nipped my lower lip, his tongue gaining access to my mouth.

I had just enough warning to jerk away from him as a wave of pure pain descended on me. My teeth nicked my own tongue instead of his as my insides felt as though they were being rearranged by a wannabe doctor without anaesthetic. I bit back a scream as the torment increased beyond Cruciatus standards; far easier than it sounds as pain that great robs the ability to cry out. I was vaguely aware of my eyes rolling back, my vision blanking out as darkness claimed me once again. There's only so much the human body can take, after all. My shaky sense of awareness faded, Severus's voice ringing in my ears.

AN: Betaed by LadySunflower. Thank you!

Chapter 2

Chapter 3 of 18

Reunion.

Chapter 2

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"Hermione!" Severus barely managed to catch her as she convulsed in his arms and slid towards the ground. A frantic grab for her dangling wrist revealed a weak yet regular pulse. "Hospital wing," he muttered to himself, shifting his grip on Hermione in order to carry her safely, checking that his cloak covered her exposed body.

Minutes previously, as he'd just reached the gates to depart for the cemetery, the wards had all but screamed at him, drawing his attention back to the still oddly static Whomping Willow. There had been something pale clearly visible against the long shadows cast by the setting sun near the tree trunk. Severus hadn't been aware of moving, but he must have run as though the hounds of Hell were on his tail, because the next thing he was aware of was kneeling before that pale something. Hermione, huddled on the ground, naked. Immediately noticing her shivering, he'd taken off his cloak and wrapped it around her. His mingled relief and disbelief at her return had faded into fear that she might have lost something vital in the transfer from death to life like her memory. That fear had vanished with her kiss, only to come back with a vengeance when she collapsed, obviously in pain.

Frankly, it was a marvel that he'd managed to think clearly enough through his predominant concern for Hermione to manage to make his way to the hospital wing without being seen by judicious usage of a Disillusionment Charm or two. Hogwarts was crawling with panicked students, teachers and guests as they tried to discover what had tripped the wards. Ordinarily, the Hogwarts wards would only alert the Headmaster or his deputy to problems. This time it had alerted every single occupant of the castle. Severus was willing to bet that they were expecting Voldemort to walk through the main entrance at any moment. He frowned down at Hermione, where he'd placed her on one of the beds in the hospital wing. If she was back, then could Voldemort also be?

To her credit, Poppy Pomfrey had taken Hermione's inexplicable reappearance in stride when Severus had abruptly materialised in her domain carrying his not-so-late fiancée. Once he'd set Hermione down, Poppy had demanded that he leave her in peace to work, telling him to guard the entrance to the hospital wing in a bid to make him feel useful.

"Severus, you can stop pacing. She will be fine," Poppy called from behind the curtains surrounding Hermione's bed.

"What is wrong with her?" he demanded, sweeping the privacy drapes aside, absently noting that Hermione was now clad in a hospital-style gown.

Instead of answering, Poppy used an unfamiliar spell to draw something vaguely reminiscent of a silvery strand of memory from Hermione, which she twisted around her wand with a flick of her wrist. Another muttered incantation later and the thing dissipated. "According to the procedure I just enacted, Miss Granger's powers are suffering from some sort of magical interference."

Tapping her wand against her hand for a moment as she thought, Poppy turned on her heel and walked briskly into her office. She returned with a folder labelled with Hermione's name and the dates of her birth and death, although the latter was obviously redundant now. Flicking through it, Poppy found whatever she was looking for, nodding slowly.

"Compared to the scan I took in the last check-up before Miss Granger's death, the current results show distinct differences." Glancing up at Severus, Poppy huffed impatiently as she saw that what she was saying was meaningless to him. "Simply put, I suspect her death scattered her powers and something kept them from returning fully when she came back."

"Can you tell what she is lacking?"

"Not while she's unconscious, no. I need her feedback. Normally I would revive her, but I would rather not risk anything untoward happening."

"In that case, I will wait." Enlarging the chair stored in miniature just under the bed, Severus sat down, glowering up at Poppy, clearly unwilling to leave.

Rolling her eyes, Poppy sighed heavily. "Severus Snape, I am fully aware that you've only just got your fiancée back from the dead. I am hardly going to try to pry you from her side. How heartless do you think I am?" Tutting, Poppy turned on her heel, returning to her office, muttering angrily.

Ignoring the slighted matron, Severus clasped Hermione's hand in his, an intense stare fixed on her relaxed features, watching for any sign of wakefulness.

The door to the hospital wing opened an hour or so later, allowing Albus and Minerva to enter before closing and locking once more. The Headmaster could enter anywhere in the school at will, no matter what locks or wards were set.

Severus lowered his wand, paranoid that the entire Ministry had arrived before feeling Albus's distinctive magical presence. Poppy stepped out of her office, eager for news.

"Fortunately for Hermione, the Aurory was unable to detect the origin of this latest dark surge. The simple fact that it was much greater than her original surge as an awakened Necromancer means that they accept that the Hogwarts wards detected it too. Having the reputation as the safest place in wizarding Britain is useful for more than just propaganda," Albus stated without preamble. He produced three of his favourite magical squashy chintz armchairs, Vanishing one as Poppy gave him an affronted look, unwilling to sit down whilst on duty.

Minerva sniffed and Transfigured the chair provided for her into a stiff, straight-backed one, giving Albus a reproving look, presumably to remind him that this was hardly the time to relax.

"So you did feel the wards all but scream? I wondered if you would, being hundreds of miles away." Severus almost smiled at the thought of Albus being distracted whilst attempting to alter the memories of any Muggles around at the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford. Presumably, the results had not been too catastrophic, although it would explain Albus's delayed arrival at Hogwarts.

"Of course. The Headmaster is always alerted, whether at or away from the school." Albus popped one of his horrible sweets into his mouth, absently crunching it up as his brows lowered in his worry. "What concerns me is that I have my doubts that the Ministry would have been able to pick up anything on Hogwarts grounds."

All eyes settled on Hermione, who was still 'sleeping'. They exchanged nervous glances, unsettled by the unspoken thought that she wasn't the only one brought back from the dead. Severus caught himself rubbing at where his Dark Mark lay quiescent, praying that it would stay so to any God that would listen.

"Is it safe to revive her, Poppy?" Minerva asked, her voice quivering slightly.

"Not unless there is no other option."

"Nevertheless, there may be grave repercussions if we do not."

"Headmaster, I am the medical specialist in this castle. If I say that she should be left to wake up on her own, then she is left to..."

"Albus, Poppy, this quarrelling is pointless. She's waking up." Severus leaned close to the bed, resembling a bat all the more as his flowing robes draped over his looming form.

A soft groan escaped Hermione as her eyes slowly blinked open. She frowned, glancing around the room, obviously disorientated. Blearily focusing on Severus, she squeezed the hand still gripping hers. She then abruptly sat bolt upright, eyes wide and fixed on where their hands joined.

"I can touch you!" she exclaimed, flushing at the apparent stupidity of the statement. "I mean, I haven't been able to for so long. It's a shock when you're not used to it. Not an unpleasant shock, far from it, just... odd."

"What..." Severus started to ask, only to be interrupted by Albus.

"Has Voldemort returned?"

"What? That's not possible." Hermione frowned, thinking hard for what seemed to be an endless moment. "Well, I suppose that he could be back in body for me to be resurrected, but it's impossible that he has in mind. I guaranteed that."

"How can you be sure?"

"I didn't just atomise him. I suppose you could say that I banished his soul, for lack of a better explanation."

"But if it was not Voldemort, what could have set off the Ministry's Dark Detectors?"

Hermione stared blankly at Albus before breaking into a short burst of hollow laughter. "I'd say that you're looking at it."

"If that is the case, then the Ministry has worryingly advanced Dark Detectors. Yet they could not pinpoint the location of the surge...."

Severus watched Hermione swallow nervously. "Then perhaps there was more than one Dark surge."

"How did you come back?"

"Not under my own steam." Hermione paused, deep in thought. "I don't know for sure, but it's possibly because a new Necromancer decided to try to resurrect Voldemort." She wearily massaged the bridge of her nose, eyes closed, obviously trying to get her scattered thoughts together. "Nor do I have any idea who that possible Necromancer could be. I do know that so much as thinking about the possibility gives me a headache."

"I have never heard of more than one living Necromancer in existence. Perhaps your headache is metaphysical?" Albus winced as Minerva poked him in the side, together with a dirty look at his dreadful sense of humour.

Severus was sitting close enough to Hermione to hear her mutter that the headache certainly felt physical to her. Poppy stepped closer, wand in hand to administer a pain relieving charm. Hermione's headache seemed to ease as her grip on his hand followed suit, having been almost uncomfortably tight.

"Well, now that we have that possibility to bear in mind, I shall leave you in peace." Albus stood, his chair vanishing with a 'pop'. He walked over to the door, turning back just before he opened it. "Oh, how remiss of me. Welcome back, dear girl."

"I cannot tell you how pleased I am to see you once more, Hermione. Your presence has been sorely missed." Minerva allowed a rare smile to escape as she too stood, her chair gradually dissolving into thin air.

"Thank you, Professors. I... I..." Hermione shrugged helplessly, unable to express herself for once. "I know," she murmured as the heads of the school departed. Severus made a mental note to ask her what she meant by that when he had an opportunity. At the moment, her health was the priority.

"Severus, I need access," said Poppy, tapping him on the shoulder. Sitting back, Severus glowered at the pesky matron when she prodded him again. "If you could manage not to touch her whilst I examine her...."

Once Poppy had completed Hermione's second power check, Severus snatched up her hand again, silently daring Poppy to protest.

"Hmm. It seems that your powers are slowly returning. Although from this, some will never return. Can you tell what is missing?"

Hermione's eyes darkened to cold voids as she dipped into her Necromantic powers, the temperature dropping. Within a minute of suffering chattering teeth, Severus and Poppy heard her answer as the ambience returned to normal.

"I think I have most of them to some extent. The most obvious one I'm lacking is the atomising trick, but I wouldn't be surprised if that never returns, what with my overuse of it. But I don't remember if any of my other powers were overused as well."

Poppy flicked through Hermione's medical records (with the date of death now neatly crossed out), pausing as she found what she was looking for. She looked up, meeting Severus's gaze, arching an eyebrow.

"There's something even more obvious that you are lacking, Miss Granger." Poppy withdrew the relevant report, handing it to Severus, blatantly disregarding patient confidentiality for once. He read through it, frowning. The answer struck, so obvious that he had missed it. The memory of a younger Hermione, blood streaming from her nose due to a failed Memory Charm he had tried to apply, flashed through his mind.

"What is it?" Hermione demanded.

"Tell me exactly what the Headmaster said about your headache just now."

"What? Severus, you heard him. Why ask me such a..."

"Humour me."

"Er... 'Perhaps your headache is merely metaphysical?'"

"That proves it beyond a doubt. He didn't say 'merely', Hermione."

"What? Of course he did, I'm the one with the eidetic... oh." Hermione blinked, shocked. "So this is what it feels like to forget things."

"What surprises me is that your perfect memory seems to be tied to your Necromantic powers. According to this report, you possessed the ability before your accident that awakened your Dark powers." Poppy took the report in question from Severus, replacing it in Hermione's file. "Now, keeping the hospital wing out of bounds to anyone else is not advisable with accident-prone students resident in this castle. Nor is there any need to keep you here for observation, as to be perfectly honest, I have no idea what symptoms to look out for. Severus is just as capable as I am in this case, if not more so. I am satisfied with your state of health; you may leave when you are ready."

Having crept through the castle under Disillusionment Charms, Severus and Hermione reached the closest entrance to his quarters without incident, although Mrs. Norris had probably sensed them when they snuck past Filch on his rounds.

Severus watched Hermione reappear as he tapped his wand on the top of her head, observing her reaction, or rather lack thereof, to standing once more in his rooms.

Releasing the charm on himself, he restrained the urge to shiver at the resulting warm trickling feeling.

"Welcome home," Severus murmured, keeping his eyes fixed on Hermione. "I would have hoped you would be more pleased to be here again."

"Oh, I am. It's just..."

"What?" he demanded, eyes narrowing. He briefly glanced around the room to check that the house-elves had done their work, returning his gaze to the girl shifting from foot to foot in front of him.

"It's not that long since I was last here, really."

"Of course, it wouldn't be for you." Severus set his jaw, unwilling to allow any of the last two years worth of pain to show. The burning in his eyes let him know that he was not entirely successful. He turned away, glaring in the general direction of the mantelpiece, fists clenching as a trickle of salty liquid rolled down his fallow face.

"Severus?" Hermione laid a hand on his shoulder when he failed to answer. He stiffened, fighting against the urge to shrug her off. "I didn't mean when I was here before Voldemort fell."

"What do you mean?" he asked, peering over his shoulder at her, the telltale dampness on one of his cheeks forgotten.

"Um, there's a reason why you've felt haunted by your own personal ghost in the time I've been gone."

"What? I grieved in your absence, yes, but..." Severus trailed off, staring suspiciously at her, remembering her odd comments in the hospital wing. "You were a ghost? But I never saw you."

"I was shackled to Hogwarts. Nothing, not even the ghosts, could detect me, so technically I wasn't one." Hermione stepped closer to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing herself against his side. "I know that you've suffered. I had to watch you do it, save for the times when you were away from here."

The thought that she had been there all along, suffering in silence, somewhat appeased his feelings of resentment. 'Concentrate on the fact that she is back. The past cannot be changed and dwelling on it will risk ruining what we once more have a chance to have.' But try as he might, Severus could not force himself to forget his time alone. He stood stiffly next to Hermione, gradually softening enough to hesitantly wrapped an arm around her shoulder. 'I will never forget what it was to be without her, but that is all the more reason to keep hold of her now that she's returned to me.'

Stepping fully into his arms, Hermione tucked her head under his chin. If Severus hadn't tightened his hold, she would have inadvertently stepped into the newly started fire as she suddenly gasped, reeling back. As it were, they both overbalanced, leaving her pinned against the hearthrug underneath him. Severus might have been able to support most of his weight on his elbows if they had simply tripped over, but he had been almost as blindsided as Hermione by the sudden return of her contact Legilimency.

The experience of all of the past two years worth of grief compacted into a single thought was not a pleasant one. Broken sobs escaped Severus, his formidable self-control torn to shreds by Hermione's inadvertent intrusion into his mind.

It was only when he had recovered enough to sit up that Severus realised that the continuing choked cries were not escaping him. Short of breath due to being under him, Hermione's weeping was not as loud as it might have been, but with his position straddling her, Severus could feel the sobs wracking her body.

'Merlin help me! How did I comfort her last time she was in a similar state?' Severus absently wiped the salty tracks from his own face before reaching down to Hermione. A tentative touch assured him that she was in no shape to attempt any more skin-to-skin Legilimency, allowing him to gently grip her jaw in an effort to focus her attention on him.

A new round of stronger sobs escaped as Hermione reached out for him, grabbing his collar with surprising accuracy for someone with blurry vision. She yanked him down to her, wrapping her arms around his neck as she buried her face in his shoulder.

Far from feeling disgusted that his best set of robes were being ruined by being used as an overgrown hanky, Severus instead felt protective of the snivelling girl in his arms.

"W-watching you suffer was bad enough," Hermione croaked, lifting her head from his shoulder, tears still streaming from her bloodshot eyes. "But actually feeling even the echo of what you experienced over those years alone... how did you survive it?"

"I had help. Certain meddlers refused to forget me." Pulling away from her, Severus rummaged in his pockets, grimacing as he realised that he was handkerchief-less. He used his thumbs to wipe the worst of her tearstains away. "But what is important is that I did, and through some miracle we are together again."

Sniffing, Hermione nodded. Even with her hair dishevelled and her face a blotchy mess, she looked beautiful. Granted, she'd probably look rather repulsive to anyone else, but he didn't claim to be impartial. His lips twitched in a rusty smile as he took her face between his hands and lowered his head.

Both of their lips were dry and cracked, causing even just a brushing kiss to be almost painful. Severus didn't care, and Hermione made no protest as he deepened the kiss, the pressure quickly increasing to bruising. Indeed, when he pulled away to catch his breath, Hermione's fingers slid into his hair and drew him closer still.

Lips parting, tongues tangling, Severus groaned into her mouth, his eyes sliding closed.

'To taste her again....'

In a move that felt as though it had somehow been choreographed, Hermione parted her legs as Severus shifted to lie between them, her hospital gown pushed up as his trousers were torn open. A strangled gasp escaped him to be muffled in her mouth as their bodies fitted together intimately.

'To feel her....'

Severus watched Hermione sleep beside him in his their bed. He assumed that the house-elf responsible for maintaining his rooms had transferred them to his bedroom as a more natural place to sleep. At least, he hoped it had been a house-elf, even though neither of them had been naked, it would be difficult to look any of his colleagues in the eye if one of them had been responsible.

Once he'd drifted awake, Severus had taken the liberty of using charms to remove their clothes. A modified cleansing charm took care of any remaining stickiness from their earlier activities, although washing it off manually could have been fun. For the time being, Severus was content just to observe the gentle rise and fall of Hermione's chest as she breathed.

Yawning widely, Hermione stretched. She blinked her eyes open, looking groggily up at him. When she opened her mouth to speak, Severus was expecting her to verbally reaffirm her love for him, only to be disappointed by her blunt statement that she needed to powder her nose. Really, he had no cause to complain considering that 'I love you' had very rarely escaped his lips in their time together. In fact, he'd only said it once, the day before he'd proposed. Which reminded him of something....

When Hermione returned from the bathroom, Severus was examining her engagement ring, the glow from it reflected in his eyes as he looked up at her.

"I believe this belongs to you." He held the ring out to her.

"You still want to marry me after all I put you through?" Hermione asked, nervously eyeing him.

He rolled his eyes, exasperated. As much as that question deserved a sarcastic 'no', he wasn't about to make her squirm. "Of course I do," he hissed, only just managing to bite back the addition of 'silly girl'.

She extended her hand, allowing him to slide it onto the relevant finger.

After enjoying a celebratory clinch, Severus spoke up. "Albus will not thank us for disturbing him now, if he manages to sleep tonight. I'm sure that we will manage to persuade him tomorrow."

Hermione raised her head from his chest, eyes wide. "What?"

"Over two years is a long enough engagement, don't you think?"

"Er, I guess..." Hermione sputtered, floundering. Severus observed her pull herself together. "Other people might not see it that way, but what does that matter?"

In their blissful reunion, the means of Hermione's resurrection did not cross their minds. As it were, if the thought had occurred to him to wonder at the identity of this probable new Necromancer, Severus would only want to thank whoever it was.

AN: Thanks to LadySunflower and septentrion for their wonderful betaing services.

Chapter 3

Chapter 4 of 18

Bonding.

Chapter 3

Disclaimer: As per usual, Harry Potter belongs to JKR.

AN: Many thanks to my betas, septentrion and LadySunflower.

"Is this not a little... sudden?"

"Albus, how long do you think it has been for me? For us?" Severus demanded, irked by his employer's questioning of his decision.

"If you had been together for all of that time, I would not feel so concerned. But you have been apart for two years."

"Not exactly, Professor," Hermione interjected. "I've had to watch Severus suffer, unable to do a thing because even the ghosts couldn't sense me."

"What do you mean, Hermione?" Albus was frowning, taken aback. Severus smothered a smirk, amused that the old man was not as omniscient as he was reputed to be. Although it had to be said that these were admittedly not circumstances within the formidable wizard's expertise.

"I didn't pass on. Nor did I become a ghost, I'm not sure why. I've been trapped within the bounds of this castle ever since...." Hermione turned away as she trailed off, her shoulders tense.

"Ever since you atomised Voldemort."

"Ever since I did that to myself."

"What? I thought that only happened to you because that spell backfired," said Severus, looking sharply over at her.

"It did. But as I cast that spell, then it follows that it was my fault," Hermione reluctantly confessed, as always unwilling to admit to her mistakes.

Severus looked away, loath to argue that point. There had been times over the preceding two years where the very same thought had occurred to him, resulting in days of brooding bitterness where he almost felt hatred towards her. But those days never lasted long, nor were they of any importance in the present or future with Hermione.

"Hermione, the decision to marry must not be taken lightly, nor for the wrong reasons," Albus warned.

"Headmaster, I want to marry him because we love each other, not because I feel I owe him that. Don't you think that we've suffered enough?"

Albus sighed heavily, shoulders lumping under the invisible weight of his own responsibilities. "Hermione, although you are of age in wizarding terms, in the Muggle world you would still require permission from your parents to marry. In all good conscience, I cannot allow this yet in my position of *in loco parentis* over you."

"My parents are long dead now," Hermione snapped, obviously upset by the idea that Albus presumed to act in their stead. "I don't know how old I am physically, whether my atomic structure has aged at all in the time it's been scattered, but my date of birth hasn't changed. Headmaster, we are going to marry regardless of who officiates."

Moving closer to Hermione, Severus made it clear to Albus without speaking a word that they were unified on this front. Raising an eyebrow, he silently dared the old codger to pry into his mind with Legilimency to make sure that he was certain.

Fawkes fluttered over, but did not show any sympathy for Albus's position; instead, he perched on Severus's shoulder, turning his head away from his 'owner'.

"Very well," Albus murmured, watching his familiar closely. "I have never known Fawkes's judgement to be wrong, while I admit that I have been so in the past. But are you sure that you do not want to wait and include your friends?"

Hermione slowly shook her head, sneaking a glance over at Severus before speaking. "I never had any dream of a large wedding. As a matter of fact, I never really dreamed about my own wedding at all. My friends may be disappointed not to be there, but I did warn them that we might elope."

"Also, Albus, it's not as if they have any right to complain. It should be enough for Hermione to have returned." Severus was aware that he was being selfish and possessive, but since when did he care about what Hermione's friends thought? He met Hermione's gaze and abruptly understood what she left unsaid: that even if she had planned for a large wedding, she couldn't have one because of the Necromancer intolerant Ministry. Even if she was able to have the most elaborate ceremony since Lucius married Narcissa, she seemed willing to make allowances for him.

"On your head be it! The Weasleys in particular can be ferocious when they feel left out. But regardless, you do need another witness. Fawkes does not count, however more intelligent he is than the average wizard. If you want your marriage to be legal, there must be at least one other human present. Who do you want it to be?" Albus asked.

"I am not afraid of the Weasleys' wrath, but Minerva is truly frightening when her fur is rubbed the wrong way," Severus muttered to Hermione. She nodded in agreement.

"Minerva it is, then." Albus's hearing was still sufficiently sharp, not requiring a repeat of his Deputy's name.

After Minerva had been summoned to the office, Severus was mildly surprised that she needed little persuasion to take part. Perhaps it was because Albus had already agreed, but then she had been very supportive of Severus during his time grieving. There was no reason to assume that her support would abruptly stop now. Also, being a staunchly traditional sort of witch, Minerva would no doubt prefer shenanigans between a married couple to those between an affianced couple under 'her' roof.

"Now, the only question is what type of ceremony to use. As it seems that you want it held here and now, a handfasting is the way to go, but there are many variations on the theme."

Severus shot a calculating look at Hermione. He assumed that she had encountered some descriptions of wizarding marriage ceremonies in the process of absorbing knowledge through reading every book she could get her hands on. But unless she had found the right information, he was about to get into serious trouble with her....

"By the traditional way, of course."

At Severus's words, Hermione stiffened, eyes widening with disbelief as her jaw dropped. No words were forthcoming from her, left speechless in her surprise.

"Severus Snape, I hope for your sake that you do not mean the tradition where witches are chattel," murmured Minerva, her voice low and threatening. Traditional though she was, Minerva was no pushover.

"Of course not! I meant in the most ancient way, where man and wife are truly equal."

"You are aware that there is no option for divorce with that method?" Albus asked, glancing between Severus and Hermione, the latter still looking shocked.

"I have already lost her once, Albus. If Hermione agrees to this, she cannot be taken from me in another way." Severus nervously looked over at Hermione, well aware that he was treading on thin ice.

Hermione opened and closed her mouth, still at a loss for words. She finally found her voice when cold sweat had started to trickle down Severus's back. "I was under the impression that divorce was unheard of with wizarding marriages."

"It is very rare. The Wizengamot will only allow it if enough of the vows made had been broken." In his position as Chief Warlock, Albus would know. "But an archaic handfasting is unbreakable unless all of the vows are sundered, and even then they can be virtually impossible to dispel. To proceed with this course of action, you must be absolutely certain. While I do have misgivings, it is not my choice to make."

Severus watched Hermione closely as she thought it over, her emotions shuttered. The most telling indicators were her eyes, although she was avoiding eye contact. Several uncomfortable moments passed before she put him out of his misery, finally looking up to meet his worried gaze.

"Divorce is not an option that I was raised to consider. My love for you is the only certainty I really feel at the moment, together with the fact that I want to marry you. I'll marry you whichever way you think best."

He reached out and pulled her into his arms, using the movement to disguise his sigh of relief from the onlookers.

"Now that you have decided, we should proceed. Minerva?" Albus stood up, prompting Minerva to help him place the wards to prevent the Ministry from detecting the ceremony. It would have to be a secret marriage until the Ministry relaxed its stance on Necromancers, something that was less likely than Potter proclaiming love for Severus.

After the wards had been set, Minerva pulled a hairpin from her compact bun and proceeded to Transfigure it into chalk so that she could draw the pentagram on the floor required to sanctify the office. Watching the formidable elder witch wince as she knelt down, chalk in hand, Severus had to suppress the urge to assist her. But neither bride nor groom could take part in the preparations. The exact reason why this was the case eluded him, but he could vaguely recall rumours of such horrors as impotence.

Stepping outside before completing the last stroke, Minerva waved Severus and Hermione inside the pentagram, Fawkes chirping from his place perched on Severus. He gently gripped both of the soon-to-be married couple by the shoulders, spreading his wings over their heads. The difference in their heights was minimised as both knelt on Albus's command.

"It seems that Fawkes is intending to lend his strength to your vows. A good omen, perhaps," Albus commented from his position standing next to Minerva, mirroring the stance of the couple within the pentagram. "I hope you realise that until we have conclusively identified the additional source of Darkness and dealt with it, you will have to delay your honeymoon."

"There have been two years of peace. Is it too much to ask for there to be a little more?" Severus growled, his exasperation echoed by Hermione's sharp exhalation between clenched teeth.

"For there to be Light, there must be Dark. We can hardly be surprised that the shadows are gathering once more. Now, I hope you have suitable vows prepared. These words are not to be taken lightly."

"Albus! It is quite obvious that they have had enough on their minds without thinking up any poetic statements. A handfasting of this sort uses traditional vows! I trust that you can remember what those are? I forget that you've never been married. I have." Minerva glowered at Albus. "Perhaps I should officiate and you be the supplementary witness!"

"Why not perform the ceremony together? It could be more fitting with this type of handfasting, anyway," Hermione suggested, shifting a little in discomfort at her prolonged kneeling.

Minerva nodded slowly. "That would be perfect. Speaking of perfect, this occasion calls for wedding finery." She Transfigured their clothes into finely embroidered robes, Hermione's pure white in stark contrast to Severus's deepest midnight blue. "Perhaps a glamour, too..."

"No thank you, Minerva. She is beautiful to me as she is." Indeed, Hermione looked radiant, all the more so when she blushed at Severus's words.

After exchanging a glance, Albus's lips twitched, while Minerva's thinned. "How do you know that I wasn't talking about using a glamour on you?"

"I take Severus as he is, metaphorical warts and all," Hermione interjected.

"Very well. We are prepared. Now, join hands so that we can commence." Albus crossed wands with Minerva, sparks flying with the tangible magic present in the room.

Severus grasped Hermione's hand, their fingers intertwining. Feeling her engagement ring digging into him, he was abruptly reminded that wedding rings had not been discussed. Yet if they were to be able to have a secret marriage at first, perhaps it would be best to leave exchanging rings until it was safe to do so. It was the binding cords that mattered with handfasting anyway, which themselves would only be as corporeal as the amount of raw magic captured within the pentagram.

"Severus Tobias Snape, do you freely choose to bind yourself to Hermione Jane Granger?" Albus asked, the tip of his wand glowing brightly, mirrored by the answering glow from the chalk lines on the floor.

"I do," said Severus, staring deep into Hermione's eyes as he spoke.

"And do you, Hermione Jane Granger, accept this man as your lawfully wedded spouse?" At her words, Minerva's wand glowed equally bright, the pentagram glowing ever brighter.

Hermione cleared her throat before answering, a hesitation that made Severus's heart skip a beat. "I do."

"Do you both vow to stay true to each other, in sickness and in health until death..." Albus was interrupted by Minerva's elbow in his side. She continued for him, adapting the usual vow for one allowing a Necromancer's death-defying powers.

"...until the end of time?"

"I do," Severus and Hermione chorused. The first cord flashed from the pentagram to their wrists. Usually, magical bonds were similar in appearance to tongues of flame. Severus felt deep satisfaction as he gazed down at the cord binding them, a thread of light so luminous that it made everything else within the pentagram seem dream-like.

"Will you promise to act in unity, to be as one heart, mind and soul?" Albus asked, watching Minerva warily to Severus's private amusement.

"I will."

"Yes, I will."

They spoke almost in unison, their slightly different responses rather ironic considering the vow made. The second bond flared into being, of slightly darker hue than the first, but equally visible.

"By the magic within and around us, do you solemnly swear to uphold your vows?" Minerva pointed both her own and Albus's wands at the floor, a last surge of magic transferring from the tips to the pentagram.

"I do," Hermione murmured, Severus echoing her a moment later.

The third and final cord wrapped around both of the previous bonds, tightening around their wrists until it threatened to cut off their circulation.

"By the authority vested in me as Supreme Mugwump, I pronounce you wizard and witch. You may kiss the bride," Albus intoned, raising his wand to point towards the ceiling, a shower of sparks erupting from it, Minerva following suit.

To the sound of the joyous phoenix song from Fawkes above them, Severus's lips met Hermione's in a firm, chaste caress as they both leant closer towards each other.

'My wife,' was Severus's triumphant thought.

Hermione pulled away enough to whisper 'husband' against his lips.

Before he could raise a hand to pull her more firmly against him, the binding cords around their wrists tightened even more, drawing a pained gasp from Hermione as it scorched their skin, Severus being more adapted to pain over his longer time alive. As it was, his breath hissed through his teeth, largely due to the sensation triggering his memory of the infliction of his Dark Mark.

With a blaze of light, the pentagram vanished, leaving a few scorch marks on the otherwise pristine floor. The glowing bonds similarly faded, leaving a branding of their intertwined initials behind. The accompanying pain vanished as the bond stabilised.

"So mote it be," Albus muttered, after walking over to examine their bonding mark. "Congratulations. That was a powerful ceremony indeed."

"Albus, you understate! I have never seen such power invoked, not even in a similar ceremony performed upon hallowed ground." Minerva was wiping tears from her eyes, a sight that Severus groaned internally at. Obviously it was impossible to avoid tears at weddings, even one with minimal attendance.

"There was a great amount of raw magic involved. But was the cause the wild magic inherent in the bride or due to that of Fawkes?" The phoenix fluttered over to his human, chirping playfully.

"It might have something to do with that Dark surge," suggested Minerva. "Even in this happy time, we must not forget the implied threat."

"Quite. Now, I am not about to suggest that you give up your wedding day and night to contribute to our search, but tomorrow we must pool our resources and discover exactly what happened yesterday, if we can."

"Very well, Albus. But after this is all over, I will be wanting to take a sabbatical. Willingly, this time." Severus got to his feet, tugging Hermione up too. After sweeping her off her feet, he strode over to the fireplace, only to be brought up short by the realisation that he had no hands free. Minerva took pity on him, flinging in a handful of Floo powder.

"Thank you..." Hermione called, even as Severus named their destination and stepped into the flickering green flames.

By some fluke, Severus managed to stay on his feet when he spun through out of his own fireplace. Fortunately for Hermione, he had ducked down far enough to avoid hitting his own head on the mantelpiece, keeping her head tucked under his chin. Unfortunately for her, Severus hadn't taken her feet into account. She suffered a stubbed toe upon arrival, stifling a yelp, flinching as Severus almost dropped her.

Tightening his hold, Severus carried her through to the bedroom, unceremoniously dumping her on their bed as he scurried through to the bathroom in search of a healing salve.

Retrieving the salve, he glowered at his own reflection. Inadvertently injuring his new wife was not an auspicious start to their marriage. He only hoped that he wasn't about to find himself sleeping on the sofa on his wedding night. Then again, if Hermione was that angry with him, he still had all day to persuade her to let bygones be bygones.

"Severus?" At least she didn't sound angry; just exasperated. "Of all the times to take a leak!"

Stalking back through, Severus's affronted entrance was spoiled when he tripped over the slightly overlong robes Minerva had Transfigured. Stumbling over to the bed, he gave Hermione a dark look when he noticed her lips twitching with a suppressed smile.

She had already taken off her shoes, leaving Severus to attempt to gently tug her stockings off, only for Hermione to take his hand and indicate that she was wearing a suspender belt, courtesy of Minerva.

"I believe that it's your job to remove this."

Fumbling around for a moment under her robes, he unfastened the stockings from the belt and gently drew them off one by one, focussed on baring her feet.

Opening up the salve container, he scooped some out and proceeded to rub it into her feet, concentrating on the offended toe.

"Mmm, nice as a foot rub is, it's not really what I had in mind."

"My dear," Severus murmured, slipping his hands over her robes to the belt holding them closed. "It's not what I had planned either."

"Patience might be a virtue, but it's not one of mine. Get on with it!" Wand suddenly in hand, Hermione proceeded to Banish his clothes out of existence.

"If you had your way, I would be forced to walk around with no clothes on!" Severus growled as he tore her wedding finery open, referring to the frequency of her ruining his clothes when stripping him.

"Sounds good to me," she muttered, shrugging out of her robes.

"I see Minerva followed tradition," said Severus eyes roving over her completely exposed skin. Almost completely exposed; she was still wearing the suspender belt. He yanked it off her, growling under his breath.

He moved to straddle her, only for Hermione to dodge, grabbing his arm and tugging him to lie down, twisting his body around as he fell to land on his back. She straddled him, a predatory grin on her face. Apparently, she wanted to be on top for their consummation. He wasn't about to complain; the view was much better than with missionary position....

I awoke at dawn, blinking in the light magically transferred from windows that were probably far above. However interesting the magical theory of the spells achieving it, I had more important concerns.

Rolling out of bed, I swiftly dressed, leaving my slumbering blanket-cocooned companion behind. I had picked the right man to share a bed with, something that my delightfully sore nether muscles attested to.

Before leaving, I paused to write a brief note. While I felt no need to explain myself, social niceties had been drilled into me at a very young age. It was doubtful that I would manage to shake some of the more ridiculous ones. Although long dead, I could sometimes still hear my mother lecturing me about manners and etiquette. Honestly, if I wanted to be nagged by the dead, I would bring them back to life.

Upon reaching my destination in a few short minutes, I paced up and down, biting my lip absently in deep contemplation. Even after all this time, I still experienced doubts, something that made me resent myself. A powerful witch, let alone a Necromancer, could not afford to be insecure.

"No second thoughts," I whispered sternly to myself. In my self-loathing, I could feel my eyes darkening, the chill from the void spreading like quicksilver through my body. I spun on my heel and yanked the door open, consciously having to melt the ice clinging to my skin to avoid sticking my hand to the door knob.

It was time to do what I am best at.

Chapter 4

Chapter 5 of 18

Something wicked this way comes...

Chapter 4

Disclaimer: JKR owns the Potterverse.

AN: Many thanks to my wonderful betas, septentrion and LadySunflower. Any remaining errors are entirely my own.

The morning after his wedding did not start promisingly for Severus. Hermione had got up earlier than him, leaving a note to explain that she was intending to make use of the superior array of books provided by the Room of Requirement in an effort to find out how to trace the presence of the probable new Necromancer. The honeymoon was over before it even started, although thinking of the promised sabbatical after this mess had been cleared up helped Severus to regain a tenuous grip on his temper. When he next saw his new wife, he would have words to say to her. Specifically, words about leaving him a note instead of explaining in person about where she was going. Assistance with his morning erection would have been appreciated too.... While not a morning person, Severus did want the chance to try being one now that he had someone to share them with once more.

Having shoehorned Slughorn back into service as Potions master on very short notice, Albus had freed Severus from his teaching duties so that he could concentrate on assisting the other members of the Order in the know.

Severus was grudgingly escorting Potter from the gates to Albus's office when complete darkness abruptly fell, light temporarily reappearing for a few seconds before it was smothered once more. Potter cried out, shocked by the sudden darkness where there had previously been bright sunshine illuminating the corridor. The Auror-in-training was as yet unaware of Hermione's return, something that would soon change.

"Hermione," Severus hissed under his breath, barking to Potter to follow him into the darkness, as he hurried off to the Headmaster's office. Or rather, tried to, only to slip on the hidden sheet of ice that had formed even as he started to move. He swore, retrieving his wand to send a Patronus message to Albus to ask what was going on, only to receive no reply. The same was the case with Minerva. Only then did it occur to him to check with the source, but no answer was forthcoming from Hermione. Severus proceeded to further the education of Potter by reciting his extensive vocabulary of profanity.

A few minutes after the unexpected display of powers associated with Necromancy, normal conditions returned. Severus got to his feet, running all of the way to the gargoyle guarding Albus's office, Potter following closely behind him. A full-strength glower from Severus was all that was needed to persuade it to allow him to step on the rising spiral staircase, where he was disturbed to notice traces of what appeared to be blood.

Upon entering the office, Severus was relieved to see that none of the occupants were bleeding, although all were sprawled on the floor.

"What the..." Potter exclaimed. Severus was inclined to echo him, frowning down at Ronald Weasley, wondering why the young man was already there.

Three casts of *Renervate* revived them, Albus looking around wildly, Minerva and Weasley still too groggy to be alert.

"Albus, what happened?" asked Severus, urgently.

A puzzled frown crossed Albus's face as he pinched himself. "Ow! So I am still alive. But why...."

"Albus, tell me!" Severus demanded, exasperated by Albus's rambling.

Sighing heavily, an indecipherable expression on his face, Albus instructed them to look in his Pensieve. Severus and Potter exchanged a puzzled glance, both equally concerned by the grief visible within Albus's twinkle-free eyes.

They stepped over to the stone bowl of the Pensieve, having presumably been extracted from its hiding place by either Albus or Minerva before the darkness fell.

Potter looked back at Albus, nodding towards Ron. "Is Ron all right?"

"Harry, the contents of the Pensieve make any answer I can make now rather futile. Any questions you have can be answered after you have observed the memory, if any remain."

In no mood to be courteous, Severus pushed past the dawdling Potter. He reached over to make skin contact with the surface of the swirling memories, allowing himself to be tugged in.

Severus was frowning at the surroundings depicted in the memory when Potter dropped in beside him.

"We're at the Burrow."

"Really? I would never have guessed, Potter," Severus sneered, pointedly looking at each of the Weasleys present, sitting down to eat their morning meal. "What is interesting is the presence of Narcissa Malfoy."

Potter blinked, staring at the out-of-place head of blonde hair. "I assumed that was Fleur, Bill's wife."

"I heard on the Hogwarts grapevine that the newest Mrs. Weasley is pregnant. She is doubtless still in bed."

"Oh, yeah. I see Bill's collecting a tray for her." Potter shifted impatiently. "Why did Dumbledore insist that we had to see this, Snape?"

"Potter, when one is observing a Pensieve memory, it is sensible to withhold all questions until everything has been seen and heard. Or in words that you might understand, shut up."

Clearly hard pressed not to retort angrily, Potter turned away, his eyes fixed on Ginevra Weasley. As Severus remembered, Minerva had mentioned some months previously that Potter had successfully proposed to Miss Weasley. Potter's exercise of looking at his fiancée was probably a means of keeping his cool, while possibly intending to remind Severus of his own 'loss'.

Potter managed to keep quiet, allowing Severus to observe the rest of the events captured by the memory without too much interruption.

"Percy, why is Mrs. Malfoy here?" Ginevra asked, looking at Narcissa with some distaste.

"Well, Ginny, you see, during the glorious anniversary of the defeat of You-Know-Who, Narcissa and I were able to renew our acquaintance." The most ambitious, pompous scion of the Weasley family puffed out his chest, adjusting his horn-rimmed glasses as he sent a besotted look in the direction of Narcissa.

"Glorious?" Ronald muttered, eyeing Percy disbelievingly.

Severus was standing close enough to the twins to hear them murmur 'renew our acquaintance' in unison, making disgusted faces at each other.

"As a matter of fact, with all of you here, now would be an ideal time to announce some wonderful news," Percy all but simpered, reaching for Narcissa's hand and clutching it tightly. "Narcissa has agreed to be my wife."

Potter's startled exclamation blended in with those of the assembled Weasleys: an outcry of disgust from the majority. Even Molly found little positive to say about the infamous Widow Malfoy joining their family.

Folding the *Daily Prophet* (which Severus noted was from that very morning), the man of the house spoke up. "Percy, are you sure about this?" Arthur stood firm in the face of a poisonous glower thinly disguised as a smile from Narcissa. "No offence meant to you, Narcissa, but my son is on the rebound after his last fiancée broke their engagement."

"Good for Penelope," Ronald hissed to his sister, who nodded reluctantly in agreement. Severus understood her regret; Penelope Clearwater was far more desirable to have as a sister-in-law than cold, beautiful Narcissa.

"Father, I know my family history. Almost all Weasley men have successful marriages on the rebound. I am certain."

"Welcome to the family," Molly said brightly to Narcissa, the indications of her internal agony her wide, strained smile and false tone to her voice.

"Thank you, Molly. It is a great honour to join such an illustrious family."

'So, it was *status*,' Severus mused to himself. *Malfoys in the gutter, Weasleys hailed as a family producing heroes. Narcissa had probably been a social climber ever since she was born.*

The Weasley children, barring Percy, snorted derisively into the breakfast that Molly had just served. Before she could give them anything more than a reprimanding look, the famous family clock abruptly let out a sharp chime.

Severus strode over to it, the memory of Molly dashing past him to reach it first. Potter followed, inhaling sharply at the same time as Molly gasped. All hands on the clock were pointing towards *mortal peril*.

The panic really set in when the crockery began to shatter as the food and drink expanded as it froze, a deep chill spreading throughout the formerly cosy room. As could be expected within a Pensieve, only the breaths of the memories could be seen, neither Severus nor Potter really experiencing the cold in a way that could affect their bodies.

"Arthur! Fleur and Harry's hands, where are they?" Molly called.

"They're not completed yet! Come on, we have to leave. Chances are we'll be in less danger if we go somewhere safer: Hogwarts." Arthur stood, his children and Percy's guest following suit.

"Dad! What about Fleur? She can't move fast in her condition." Bill made for the stairs, but before he could even leave the room, the front door was thrown open, an indistinct shadow passing through.

"Wh-Who's there?" Arthur asked. Molly peered past him, her knuckles white as she clung to him.

The shadow was almost impossible to focus on, but there was a vague impression of slight movement. Severus narrowed his eyes, rubbing a hand across them as they began watering with the effort of watching something virtually invisible.

"Show yourself!" Bill ordered, wand trained in the general direction of the open door.

There was a shift of movement, and then the intruder revealed herself, casting aside her concealing robe seemingly woven from shadows.

There was a moment of stunned silence, Potter choked back a cry of surprise. Severus recoiled, his eyes wide. *Impossible!*

"Hermione?" Ronald murmured, unable to believe his eyes, a wide grin spreading across his freckled face.

"You're alive!" exclaimed Ginevra, slipping past her brother and running towards her miraculously returned friend.

Ginevra skidded to an uncertain halt when Hermione looked up, her eyes the twin black, inhumanly cold voids of an active Necromancer. She raised her fist, uncurling it to reveal a deadly atomising spark.

An involuntary whimper escaped Ginevra. "*Hermione?*"

Bill didn't hesitate, launching what appeared to be a non-verbal Stunner. Hermione drew her wand with her other hand, silently Conjuring a shield just in time to ricochet the hex directly back at him, too fast for the Curse-Breaker to dodge. He fell with much of the same grace as a sack of potatoes.

The power of that enspelled shield was tangible to Severus, something that should not have been possible within a memory. There could be no doubt that the wand powering that spell had an extremely powerful core... such as the Chimaera scale within Hermione's. Shaking his head in disbelief, Severus stepped closer in order to examine the wand in question. As far as he could tell, it was identical to the one that had been in his keeping for the past two years. *'This is impossible!'*

Before anyone else could attack, Hermione had grabbed Ginevra by her hair, dragging the struggling girl into the line of fire to act as a human shield. Any idea of attacking or escaping her captor left Ginevra when the lethal spark was held within her sight.

"I wouldn't move if I were you," Hermione said, conversationally. A strangled, frightened moan escaped Ginevra.

"What are you doing?"

"Let Ginny go!"

"We're your friends, why are you doing this?"

Severus could not tell which Weasley said what. Nor did he care, standing stock still in front of the ruthless Necromancer who was at once unmistakeable as his wife yet was also a creature that bore no resemblance to the Hermione Gr... Hermione *Snape* he knew so well.

"Why?" Hermione mused, her tone of voice sending unpleasant shivers down Severus's spine. "Because I can."

Swallowing hard, Narcissa tugged her arm free of Percy's grip. Head held high, she walked over to Hermione, who wordlessly threatened to start atomising Ginevra. Halting within reach, she spoke up.

"You have far more reason to spare Ginevra than you would to spare me. Take me as your hostage instead."

Raising an eyebrow, a smirk quirked Hermione's lips. "Admirable sentiment. But you misread this situation. You see, there's a difference between a hostage and a human shield."

"You're not a killer, Hermione. Now, why don't you put a stop to all this nonsense and have breakfast with us?" Molly murmured, her voice trembling, having shifted to kneel beside Bill's unconscious body.

Only Voldemort's laugh had raised Severus's metaphorical hackles in quite the same way as the malevolent chuckle resulting from Hermione at Molly's words.

"I assure you, I have no problem with cutting the strands of life." Snapping her fingers, Hermione watched with detached interest as Narcissa dropped to the floor like a puppet with cut strings.

Percy fell to his knees beside the prone form of his fiancée, crying out when he couldn't find a pulse. "She's dead!"

Still watching Hermione, Severus searched futilely for any sign of the woman he'd married. *She may have killed in the past when she had no other choice, but she wouldn't do this. Not my Hermione.*

Only the fact that she was still holding onto Ginny, threatening to reduce the girl to scattered atoms, prevented the Weasleys from attacking Hermione. With the exception of Percy, they may not have liked Narcissa, but she had been a guest in their house.

"Lights out," the Necromancer drawled, using her powers to cause localised darkness to fall. The last thing that could be seen was the malicious grin on her face as she touched the atomising spark to Ginevra's skin.

"No!" Potter echoed the agonised cries of the unseen Weasley family as Ginevra's scream trailed off into a dry rasp.

Hisses and cracks reverberated as hexes and curses were fired blindly, no light from them to be seen in the unnatural darkness.

"What makes you think I'm still over there?" Hermione asked, taunting them, her voice somehow simultaneously thrown to appear as though she was behind each of them.

A choked gasp and muffled thud from where Arthur had been standing heralded another death.

"Gotcha..." Charlie exclaimed, then fell silent, falling to the floor with a thump.

"Arthur? Charlie? No..." Molly's shrill sobbing was cut short.

Bellowing with rage, Fred and George doubled their attack, only to die together.

Percy screamed in his fury, pouring his overwhelming grief into a whirlwind of destructive magic, crashing and clattering resounding throughout the Burrow. Abruptly, silence fell once more, only broken by the sound of more falling bodies.

The chill faded, light gradually returning to a very blurred scene. The Necromancer Severus refused to believe it was Hermione had left devastation in her wake. Gradually the view cleared as Ronald shakily got to his feet from behind the overturned table, tears trickling down his ashen face. Hearing Fleur calling for her husband from upstairs, he staggered over to his brother, careful not to step on any of the other bodies sprawled on the flagstones.

"Come on, Bill! Get up! *Rennervate*, dammit!" Tugging on Bill's cold wrist, Ronald sobbed softly when he finally registered that his brother was dead. He glanced at the other bodies, looking away, shuddering, from the glassy stare of the dead.

Fleur called again, her French accent stronger in her distress. Blinking back tears, Ronald stumbled to his feet. "Gotta get Fleur then get out of here! *She* might come back."

Severus watched Weasley pick his way out of the kitchen, reaching down to close the eyes of the dead within reach, not having time for anything else. A choked sound came from Potter. Turning his head, Severus observed the green tinge to Potter's face with some trepidation. Grabbing the boy by the shoulder, he mentally reached up to lever them out of the memory.

"Potter, hold it in. Vomiting within a Pensieve memory, no matter how distressing, is not recommended."

After resurfacing from the Pensieve, Severus tugged Potter away from it, just in time for him to throw up all over the office floor, splattering their shoes in the process. Minerva kindly used a Cleansing Charm to eradicate the mess, moving over with a glass of water to take charge of Potter.

"The events depicted in that memory are impossible," Severus stated, sparing a pitying glance for Weasley, who had recovered enough from his time on the floor to remember what he had lost. "Hermione left a note for me this morning, stating that she would be in the Room of Requirement, researching how to find the source of the Darkness."

"It is a little known fact that the Room of Requirement can open a portal to anywhere in the outside world that the operator desires. We only have Hermione's word that she used it only for research today," Albus explained from his place behind his desk, having moved in the time Severus had been within the Pensieve.

"Shortly after Minerva and I had watched that harrowing scene ourselves, Hermione came in. I had no choice but to attempt to knock her out with a cast of Sectumsempra, in the hope that it would subdue her as it did over two years ago. She used her instant darkness speciality and dodged. I think I hit her; the consuming shadows certainly faltered. But then darkness fell again, literally for us. The next thing I knew was a terrible cold, then nothing. I can only assume that she fled."

"I'm surprised that she didn't kill us like she did the rest of my family," Weasley moaned, still slumped on the floor.

Potter had collapsed into a chair Transfigured beside the Pensieve, tears streaming from his hollow, blankly staring eyes, taking little to no notice of the conversation around him. "Oh, God, how *could* she?" He groaned, a pained, animalistic keening following his words. *Ginny....*

Staring down at Potter, Severus's gaze was for once not contemptuous but empathetic. He knew very well what it was to lose the woman he loved, albeit in different circumstances.

"But this doesn't make any sense!" Severus exclaimed. "The Necromancer responsible for the Weasleys' deaths may have looked like Hermione, but she would never do such a thing."

"I'm sorry, Severus, but if by some minuscule chance that she were innocent, surely she would have stayed?" Minerva shook her head, looking very dubious at the prospect.

"Not if she thought you were trying to kill her."

"I am not Voldemort! She knows that. No, Severus, the fact that she ran reveals her guilt." Eyeing him sorrowfully, Albus hesitantly continued in a voice pitched so that only Severus could hear it, knowing that what he had to say would not be taken well. "I may be able to annul your marriage if you didn't consummate it. Even if you did, I could try to break the binding. With your agreement, it might at the very least weaken it."

"There is no need to resort to that. I know she can't have done it!"

"Severus, you are blinded by your love for the gal," Minerva interjected.

"Inform Poppy of these developments, and we'll see just how deluded I am."

"Very well. She is currently in the hospital wing, stabilising Fleur. Doubtless she will want to know the details in order to care better for her patient. I'll summon her." Albus stood, moving over to the fireplace.

After Poppy had dried her tears, she spoke up in a trembling voice. "Severus is right. Miss Granger could not have done this."

Severus opened his mouth to object to her usage of Hermione's maiden name, only to realise that the matron didn't know that they were now married.

"How so?" Albus asked, looking pale behind his beard.

"Because she can no more reduce anyone to their component atoms than I can," Poppy stated. "Death stripped her of the power to do so. As far as I can tell, she will never get that ability back. She's fortunate that her other Necromantic powers returned so that she could escape."

"If her innocence could so easily be proven, why didn't she stay? I would not have killed her until I heard her defence."

"Really, Albus? Perhaps not on purpose, but would you have been able to keep her alive until someone who could heal her arrived?" Looking uncomfortable at Poppy's questioning, Albus opened his mouth to answer, doubtless in the affirmative, but could not. Severus knew that the old man was wondering if he could have performed the incantation to close the wounds inflicted by Sectumsempra with such negative feelings in his heart.

Albus inhaled sharply, tugging at his beard as a guilty look crossed his lined features. "We must find her. If I did manage to hit her with enough force to shake her control over the enveloping dark, she might be unable to heal herself."

Severus blanched, remembering the hints of bloodstains on the spiral stairs.

"The ice!" Poppy exclaimed. "There was what looked like blood on the stairs as I came up here, but not enough to cause me undue alarm. But the melting ice may have washed most of it away. Where can she be?"

"I sent a Patronus message to her before the darkness lifted..."

Minerva interrupted Severus. "What did she say?"

Severus chuckled hollowly, highly tempted to slap his forehead in self-reproach as the likely reason for Hermione's lack of response occurred to him. "Nothing; I forgot that she has never learned how to send a message using her Patronus."

"I'm sorry, Severus, but you saw what happened to the Weasleys. We could not risk giving her the benefit of the doubt." Albus removed his spectacles, rubbing wearily at his eyes.

"Hermione told us, she told you, that another Necromancer was likely to have brought her back. Who is to say that she was not impersonated?" Poppy suggested, her tone reproving.

Severus nodded slowly. Before the Necromancer had removed her strange robe, there had certainly been time for a disguise to be applied.

"Polyjuice?" Weasley put forward, sounding hopeful that his estranged friend might not have murdered the rest of his family in cold blood. "But... but, if it was Polyjuice, then the real culprit managed to get hold of a part of Hermione when she's been dead for...." Trailing off, Weasley seemed to realise the implications of what he was saying.

"For impersonation to be the case, the new Necromancer had to have been plotting for over two years. If that was so, why hadn't he or she made a move before now? Or perhaps our position is more precarious than we realise," said Albus, absentmindedly tugging gently on his beard.

"Whoever killed them is as good as dead, even if it really was Hermione," Potter snarled, his threatening tone somewhat spoiled by the occasional hiccups escaping him.

"It wasn't her. I know Hermione too well to suspect it even for a moment." Severus frowned over at the Pensieve, a thought that had been nagging him finally brought to the forefront of his mind. "Even if she has recovered her atomising power, I can prove that it wasn't her."

After a couple of prods from his wand, Severus raised a finger to point at the resulting figure of Hermione's impostor, from when her fist had been upraised. "I should have realised this earlier, but the evidence is undeniable. You definitely attacked the wrong witch, Albus."

There was no bonding mark branded onto 'Hermione's' exposed wrist.

Chapter 5

Chapter 6 of 18

She's here...

Chapter 5

Disclaimer: Not mine! Well, nothing but the plot, anyway.

AN: Thanks to septentrion and LadySunflower for betaing this.

"Married?" Muted by his loss, Weasley's surprise was not nearly as satisfying to Severus as it would have been without this new Necromancer's handiwork.

"W-what?" Potter spluttered, doubtless being unfamiliar with wizarding handfasting marks.

"I married Hermione yesterday, Potter. If the Weasleys' murderer had really been my wife, she would have had our entwined initials scorched onto both wrists."

"Could it have been covered up with some sort of charm?"

"No, Harry. There's no glamour charm that could cover a bonding brand, as the powerful binding magic would dissolve it," Weasley explained, presumably having learnt the knowledge about the marks from his parents.

"Congratulations, Severus. Now, if I am no longer needed here, I should return to my post. Fleur Weasley should not be left alone. When she regains consciousness, the knowledge of her loss might endanger her unborn child," Poppy said, nodding to Albus and Minerva, patting Weasley and Potter on their shoulders before leaving the room.

Considering the circumstances, Severus was not surprised when Potter and Weasley did not express good wishes on his marriage. But he was not expecting Potter to lurch to his feet and lunge forwards, grabbing hold of the front of Severus's robes.

"If you'd invited us, this might not have happened," Potter hissed, thrusting his face up close to Severus, his eyes bloodshot behind his glasses.

Opening his mouth to protest, Severus's eyebrows shot up when Weasley stepped forward to pull Potter off him.

"No, Harry. Don't. Just... don't. It doesn't matter now. It's already happened, nothing can change it. Not even if we went back in time."

Potter's shoulders slumped, the fight draining out of him as suddenly as it was sparked.

"What matters is bringing my family's killer to justice."

Minerva snorted. "I'm sorry, Ronald, but the only way to bring a Necromancer to justice is to kill them in such a way that they cannot come back. As Albus and I know from our experiences with Grindelwald, that is no simple task."

"I never said it would be easy! First, we've got to find her. But how?"

"Fawkes," Albus called. The phoenix appeared in a flash of fire. "There is a Necromancer on the loose. I need you to find her and subdue her if possible."

But Fawkes just cocked his head at Albus for a long moment, before letting out a despondent squawk.

Minerva rolled her eyes. "Albus, Fawkes is not an owl. Even if he was, he would need a name at the very least, surely?"

Frowning, Albus replied, "Actually, Minerva, Fawkes has been able to track down people for me before with an uncanny ability similar to owls. Admittedly, he did know precisely who he was looking for."

"Albus, it is entirely possible that your phoenix would be reduced to so much ash if he did find Hermione's impostor. It is just as well that we have no way to send Fawkes after her," Severus said grimly. "Although, if we had a name, we might be able to scry for her."

Minerva inhaled sharply, before using her wand to Summon a forgotten book from the floor. It was close enough to the door that it was a wonder that Severus hadn't tripped over it as he had charged inside. "Hermione had this with her. She must have dropped it as she fled."

The book was several inches thick. Severus almost despaired when he saw this, wondering how they were to find whatever Hermione had, when Minerva felt alongside the spine at the top and flipped it open, revealing a bookmarked page.

"Trust Hermione to leave us a clue," Weasley commented, clapping Potter on the shoulder.

Severus could see Minerva's eyes almost blur as they swept across the page in her haste to read. She tapped the page, nodding sharply before looking up. Minerva wasted no time, simply stating the spell that could reveal this hostile Necromancer's identity.

"*Sanguis Clamare*. From the description, it's blood magic. 'Like calling to like'. We need the blood of a Necromancer..."

"There's still drops of Hermione's on the floor," Potter interjected.

"It needs to be willingly given," Severus stated before Potter could even bend down. "I do have some left over from when Hermione provided me with some, but..." Sighing in resignation, he made no move to collect it. "I have heard of that spell. We cannot perform it until nightfall."

Both Potter and Weasley looked more than a little disgusted that Severus would have some of Hermione's blood in his possession. He idly wondered how much more disgusted they would be if they knew precisely how that blood had been 'given' to him.

"It is as you say," Minerva reluctantly agreed, closing the book with a snap in her frustration.

"Pity that *Accio Necromancer* won't work, then," Potter grumbled.

Arcane runes flashed into being, sparking across the structure of the castle within sight. A heartbeat later, everyone within the room flinched as the wards all but cried out, a high pitched wailing within Severus's head. Looking at the others, he gathered from their screwed up eyes that they were experiencing the very same thing. Potter and Weasley had covered their ears with their hands, a futile effort considering that the wards were sounding the alarm without passing through any auditory nerves. Even Fawkes seemed affected by the racket: his feathers were ruffled.

Albus got to his feet with a fair turn of speed for a man of his advanced age, raising his hands as he mouthed an incantation. It was possible that Albus had chanted it; Severus was incapable of telling with his ears ringing in protest, despite the fact that the din was only mentally inflicted.

Unfortunately, Albus's spell failed to quiet the wards. The wailing wards only increased in volume to the point where all those who could hear them were forced to their knees. His chain of thought continually broken, Severus managed to wonder whether the entire castle was experiencing this alert before he slumped to the floor, insensate.

Warbling phoenix song roused Severus, who raised himself up on his elbows, blinking up at a similarly groggy Albus, whose head was resting on his hands, slumped at his desk.

"The wards!" Albus suddenly exclaimed, as he sat bolt upright.

Severus's eyes widened as he registered what Albus had seen, scrambling to his feet to stagger closer. He touched a shaking hand to the runes scorched onto the walls, mentally gibbering at what it might mean.

Albus was frantically manipulating some of his mysterious instruments, tugging at his beard in obvious distress.

Muttering something vicious under her breath, Minerva sat up, gingerly climbing to her feet to sink into a chair next to the desk.

Potter and Weasley grunted as they helped each other to stand, moving to hover beside Albus and Minerva.

"Albus, what happened?" Minerva asked, her voice growing more strident when he failed to answer. "Albus?"

"Tell me that these scorch marks do not mean what I think they do, Albus," Severus almost pleaded, turning to face the venerable wizard, who had dropped his face into his hands.

Inhaling deeply, Albus raised his head. He heaved a sigh, looking sadly from one expectant face to another. "The impossible has happened; the wards have failed. They collapsed within the last five minutes. Fawkes did his best to keep us conscious."

"She's here," Weasley whispered, voice trembling and eyes wide with fear.

"Necromancer or not, how did she shatter the wards? Surely no one is that powerful?" Potter asked.

"According to these records, the attack on the wards came from both within and without the grounds. But we have no time to find out exactly how it was done." Albus got to his feet.

'Caught between a rock and a hard place,' Severus thought, regretfully tracing the scorched rune on the wall.

"We must evacuate Hogwarts, Albus. Immediately."

"Indeed, Minerva, although it may already be too late. I only hope all of the students are wearing their uniforms... and that the staff are wearing the requisite piece of jewellery." Albus murmured, referring to the contingency plans arranged after the defeat of Voldemort. A little too late for those who died in the battle on the grounds, but it seemed that the plans would be of some use now.

Severus reached into one of his pockets to remove the brooch he used to fasten his cloak closed. Minerva pulled a jewelled hairpin from her tightly wound bun, placing it beside the brooch Severus had just placed on Albus's desk.

Albus gave them a resigned look. "I cannot afford to be distracted; none of you are likely to survive battling a Necromancer."

"What? Professor, you can't make us leave," Potter protested.

Mortally afraid or not, Weasley had enough substance to vehemently agree with Potter.

"This is most inadvisable. If you will not leave, I must summon the rest of the Order. There is safety in numbers, after all. Fawkes! Get help, as fast as you can." Albus reached down to tap his wand against a model of the castle.

"We can only hope that everyone will have been Portkeyed out of here, including the occupants of the hospital wing. You did include a way to check into our contingency plans?"

Albus raised an eyebrow at the portraits looking on with some interest. Within a minute, word had been passed along his internal spy network to check on the castle's occupants. The information trickled back rapidly, allowing Severus to see how effective the portraits were in action. He made a mental note to ensure that the house-elves hadn't sneaked an oil-based spy into his chambers.

"Nobody left? Including the house-elves? Excellent. I would advise every portrait in the castle to move to canvases in other locations. Now, in the interest of minimising any damage to the structure of the castle, we should try to confront this hostile Necromancer on the grounds."

Before they could leave the office, Potter almost tripped over as his limbs stiffened. "Impossible," he breathed. "Oh, God, no."

"What is it?" Minerva snapped, gripping Potter's shoulders tightly, her nerves too tightly wound to be gentle.

"I... I just heard something horribly familiar. The Basilisk."

"Within and without..." Albus mused. "She must have been standing right at the edge of the wards, reaching under the very fabric of the castle to bring that monster back to life."

"How are we meant to get out of the castle without that dirty great snake killing us?" Weasley asked.

"Albus, with the wards down, surely it is possible to Apparate within the castle? Without any need for you to lower them?" Minerva suggested, her nails steadily digging into her palms. Severus wasn't too keen on facing a murderous Necromancer himself, but at least this was the first time for him. Minerva had been at the mercy of another Necromancer before Severus had even been born.

"Of course! I would suggest that we Apparate to the standing stones across the bridge. Fawkes will know to bring any help there; it is certainly no longer safe to stay here to await the rest of the Order."

Within a minute after their arrival at the stone circle, thick fog had swirled in. Severus could barely make out the shadowy figures of his allies, let alone the stone sentinels marking out the entrance to the bridge.

"We know that you are here. Show yourself!" Albus demanded sternly.

Laughter came from the direction of one of the stones, but Severus could see nothing.

"Five against one? That really isn't a fair fight." The Necromancer's voice still sounded like Hermione's, but the sound of it raised the hairs on the back of Severus's neck in a distinctly uncomfortable way. That discomfort only deepened when she continued speaking. "Just as well that fair fights never concerned me."

Before any hostilities could start, someone stepped forward. Minerva, by the sound of her voice. "I-I demand to know who we face. We know that you are not Hermione. Your murderous ruse at the Burrow failed."

"You actually think that my only reason for culling the Weasleys was to turn you against your pet Necromancer?" Their unseen foe laughed shortly. "It seems that you need a translator. Perhaps when your cowardly friend shows her face, you can ask her."

Bristling, Severus was about to make a sharp rejoinder when Weasley spoke up, voice trembling.

"You proved yourself to be inhuman when you murdered my family. At least show me some decency by giving me the name of my enemy!"

There was silence for a moment, before she spoke, this time her voice far closer. "Tell the ferryman that Atropos sent you."

That was an assumed name if Severus had ever heard one. Before he could analyse the significance of the name, Weasley gasped. Severus spun on his heel, wand upraised. There was nothing to be seen but swirling fog and a slumping shadow that had Weasley's long limbs.

Before anyone else could attempt to help the unfortunate Weasley, a huge mass of shadow suddenly appeared out of the fog, almost giving Severus the impression that one of the standing stones had moved to their defence.

"Leave Ron alone, yer monster!" Hagrid bellowed. He swiped at the air around Ron, trunk-like arms flailing. Severus surmised that the half-giant at the very least managed to clip Atropos when the fog abruptly lessened, a pained groan muffled almost instantly. When Hagrid lunged for the origin of the sound, it was obvious that the

Necromancer had not been injured too grievously. With a hoarse cry, Hagrid's massive body collapsed, his breathing strenuous.

"Hagrid!" Potter all but screamed, echoed by Weasley's weak cry from the ground.

"Harry, no!" Before Potter could even try to attack, Albus held him back. "We will be picked off one by one if we do not act together."

"Too late," Atropos sneered. If he could have cried out, Severus would have, as what felt like an icy hand gripped his heart, stilling it. Distantly, he heard his wand clatter to the ground as he clutched at his chest, falling to his knees.

The pressure eased, allowing him to register the after effects of the hexes that had strewn the space around him as those still standing acted to save him. The fog had lifted further still, allowing Severus to more clearly make out Albus, Potter and Minerva.

For a tense moment, it seemed as though this Atropos had been hexed into the next life. Then Potter grunted, staggering backwards into Albus and Minerva, who were barely able to keep the brat on his feet.

Severus snatched up his wand, staggering to his feet. He could hear his pulse hammering in his ears, his legs feeling as though they were going to collapse at any moment. Shaking his head in a futile attempt to clear it, he hissed one of his specialised curses, modified with a foe-seeking charm.

Blood spurted onto the ground almost within reach of Severus. The flow was stemmed almost immediately, but not before Severus lunged. For a moment, he had Atropos within his grasp, his hands tightening around her unseen neck. Then he only knew pain.

"C'mon, Snape. They need us."

Slowly, Severus uncurled from his foetal position on the ground. He squinted up at where Weasley was crouched beside him, snatching his hands away from their position shielding his groin as he saw the corner of Weasley's mouth twitch. Severus refused to look at him as he wiped the damp tracks of tears from his burning cheeks, his teeth grinding together when he heard a poorly disguised snigger from the whelp.

"What happened?" Severus said, glowering over at Weasley as he sat up.

"Um, well, I guess that bitch kneed you in the..."

"After that," snapped Severus, narrowly resisting the temptation to insult the grieving fool.

"Seems Dumbledore was right about us lot being a liability. Atropos," Weasley spat the name, "is using Harry and McGonagall to herd 'em towards the castle. Towards the Basilisk. We have to help them!"

"Weasley, we would be better off waiting for the rest of the Order to... Weasley!" Severus growled under his breath, lurching to his feet and hobbling after Weasley, who had set off across the bridge.

'Doesn't Weasley realise what the road to hell is paved with?'

By the time Severus had arrived, the foolhardy boy had either been caught in the crossfire or used as a human shield by Atropos, for he was slumped against the entrance to the castle. He still appeared to be breathing, although somewhat raggedly.

It was alarming to see Albus clearly flagging, exhausted by the constant battle to keep himself and the others alive. Minerva and Potter were managing to get a few hexes off, but the invisible Necromancer they were fighting was occasionally putting their hearts under strain much like she had done earlier with Severus, and presumably Weasley and Hagrid. Severus got the sickening impression that Atropos was merely playing with them. He only hoped that he was wrong, or none of them were likely to survive this encounter.

"Enough!" Atropos snapped from behind Severus. He spun, wand at the ready, only for it to fly out of his hand. Four other wands flew past him, to land along with his own out of reach on the ground. "As supposed *heroes*, you're all pathetic, even Albus Dumbledore of Necromancer killing fame."

Severus shifted his weight slightly, seeing Potter do much the same behind him. Both sprang forwards towards the wands, only to fall short as that horribly familiar sensation started again. This time, Severus couldn't breathe either.

"Thought that you'd catch me monologuing? Not a mistake either of you will make again."

His ears ringing, Severus failed to catch what she said next. He was vaguely aware of Albus bellowing something. His sight was fading, black spots clustering together to block out everything. A bone deep chill took hold of him, splintering his thoughts beyond incoherency.

Just as Severus's battered, exhausted body could take no more of the punishment being inflicted on it, the Necromancer's attack abruptly ceased. His heart began to beat again, thudding reassuringly within his chest. The blotches in his vision cleared as he sucked in a shuddering breath. As he raised himself up on his elbows, Severus noted that Potter was doing the same thing, although wobbling a bit on one arm as he straightened his glasses.

Atropos had shrugged off her disguising robes, now a burning heap on the ground, and was using her wand to rapidly extinguish the flames burning on her underlying clothes.

Facing her stood Hermione, Fawkes perched on her shoulder. Her wand still had flames flickering from the tip. Looking at her, Severus felt a jolt of primal fear at the feral expression on her face, not helped by the bloodstained condition of her robes. His wife's eyes were still brown, but were growing darker by the second.

Glancing over at the other Necromancer, Severus blinked. It was like looking at a twisted reflection of Hermione, although at the moment both looked almost identical, equally enraged. Either Hermione's impostor was still taking Polyjuice, or something else was at work here.

Fawkes flew over to land beside Weasley in an effort to revive him. Hermione reached down to help Potter up, then stepped towards Severus, gripping his hand to assist him to his feet.

"Granger," Atropos sneered, inclining her head mockingly as she patted out the last smoking parts of her clothes.

If he had not been an Occlumens, Severus wouldn't have noticed Hermione slip into his thoughts using her contact Legilimency. As it were, her foray into his mind only took a heartbeat.

"Strand Breaker," said Hermione, referring to the mythical Atropos. Contempt dripped from her voice as if she had said 'murderer'.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Severus's lips twitched. Even when confronting evil Necromancers, Hermione was still a know-it-all. His smirk faded as the words reminded him of something... but what?

Minerva inhaled sharply from close behind him, presumably recognising the same thing as Severus had.

Albus muttered something from his position next to Minerva, but the words were muffled by his beard. Severus was about to ask him to repeat it when a horribly familiar spark leapt from Atropos's outstretched hand towards Hermione. The heat emanating from the atomising ember threatened to singe his eyebrows, making his eyes water in

protest. Heart in his mouth, Severus breathed a sigh of relief as he watched Hermione casually swat the spark away to be extinguished on the ground.

"I may have atomised myself before, but that doesn't mean that you'll be able to," Hermione snorted derisively. "Necromantic powers are neutralised when used on a Necromancer. But just in case there's an exception...." She stepped forwards, her eyes darkening to deepest black as the atmosphere tingled, an electric tang in the air.

Both Necromancers staggered back as though struck by unseen blows. Severus could feel the Dark magic roiling between them, shadows gathering where there should be none. Barring himself, those watching were breathing raggedly in response to the corrosive nature of Dark magic on the soul, although Severus felt a little nauseous. The Dark magic he had practised on occasion paled in comparison to that inherent in Necromancy.

Quickly tiring of trading blows that seemingly had little effect, Atropos smoothly switched into a duelling stance, wand held at the ready. She didn't bother to bow, instead launching into non-verbal attacks immediately. Hermione dodged the first few attacks, readying her own wand to counter-attack.

Severus stepped back, preventing Potter from sidling towards their wands with a hand across his chest.

"Don't even try, Potter. That's some seriously Dark magic being unleashed by that creature. Even an Auror-in-training should be able to detect that."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance," Albus murmured, reaching a hand towards the wand. The skin around his eyes tightened as he expended the effort to wandlessly Summon them. Severus found it reassuring to feel the familiar carved handle of his wand as he took it from Albus.

Before they could support Hermione, her attempted shielding charm had an unforeseen reaction when Atropos's next hex struck it. The spells connected in a shower of sparks, a thread of golden light connecting their wands, fast spreading to form a web of light around both Necromancers. A deep rumbling resounded from the vibrating wands, causing the hairs on the back of Severus's neck to stand up again, an uncomfortable instinctive reaction.

"Priori Incantatem," Albus stated, echoed by almost everyone present. It was not advisable for outsiders to interfere. Severus suspected that attempting to would risk injury to those outside the effect, if not within as well.

The expression on Hermione's face was inscrutable as she stared from the connected wands up to Atropos. The other witch was eyeing her wand with some alarm, the vibration increasing.

The rumbling emanating from the wands abruptly ended in a pained-sounding roar. The golden light binding the wands tarnished rapidly until it was as if a web spun by shadows incarnate bound them.

Someone beside him choked. Severus could understand why, he was resisting the urge to vomit himself as a deep sense of wrongness permeated him to the bones.

Jerking her wand to point straight up, Atropos broke the connection. Her face white, lips tightly compressed, she dropped her wand, stepped back and Disapparated.

Hermione staggered back, her face just as pale as Atropos's had been, her eyes wide, staring down at the trembling wand in her hands in dismay. She glanced over at Atropos's wand where it was shaking on the ground, biting down on her lip until blood stained her teeth and trickled down her chin.

"All of you, get out of here, *now*," she ordered, stepping towards the other wand.

Severus protested, reaching for her shoulder. Hermione twisted away, turning her head to give Albus a meaningful look.

"Fawkes, go to the Standing Stones and take Hagrid to safety." Albus sounded more weary and saddened than Severus had ever heard him. The phoenix obeyed instantly, disappearing in a flash of fire. "Can you stop it?" Albus asked.

Hermione didn't answer, her attention focused on the currently sparking wands.

Swallowing hard, Severus again tried to reach for her, fully cognisant of the fact that the Chimaera scale core within her wand and presumably within Atropos's, too was on the verge of exploding.

A hand closed around his shoulder before he could grab Hermione, dragging him into the claustrophobic squeeze of Side-Along Apparition.

"No!" Severus exclaimed, jerking himself free of Albus's grip. They stood on the outskirts of Hogsmeade, the turrets of Hogwarts' castle still visible. Minerva had grabbed hold of Weasley while Albus had taken Severus and Potter..

Steeling himself, Severus tried to Apparate back to Hermione, only to fail. It felt like the usual wards present at Hogwarts had been erected where they currently stood. A sharp screech from behind him made Severus jump. Fawkes was perched on Hagrid's unconscious body, eyeing Severus reproachfully. The phoenix was obviously in possession of more powers than he had realised....

An almost blinding flash from the direction of Hogwarts caught Severus's attention. Someone cried out as the familiar turrets collapsed, an ominous mushroom cloud of dust rising from the ruins, the sound catching up with the sight in time to rock the ground beneath their feet. From the raw feeling in his throat, Severus had a suspicion that he had been the one to cry out.

Hogwarts had fallen, but that was immaterial to Severus: Hermione was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 6

Chapter 7 of 18

In the nick of time™... or not.

Chapter 6

Disclaimer: The Potterverse is not mine.

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and LadySunflower for betaing this so quickly.

It took a long time, but gradually I became conscious of a deep, dull pain throughout my body, coupled with an odd tingling from my left shoulder. Groaning, I forced my eyes open. I stifled a cry of shock, flinching back from the unexpected sight of a sharp beak and keen, penetrating dark eyes, surrounded by bright red feathers.

"Fawkes?" I winced at the sound of my own voice, as gravely as a chain smoker's.

Dumbledore's phoenix chirped softly, blinking rapidly to chase the remaining tears from his eyes. I squinted down at my shoulder, unsurprised by the unmarked skin showing through the cut in the bloodstained fabric. I had known from myths and legends that phoenix tears had healing properties, to be backed up as fact when I read about it.

Back in the Headmaster's office, I hadn't managed to move fast enough. Then again, if I hadn't dodged at all, I might have been killed. Making darkness fall before Dumbledore had finished casting his curse had been a mistake. Whatever his intentions, I'm sure that he was not intending to kill me immediately. From my glimpse of Ron, looking grief-stricken, something must have happened to one of the Weasleys... or to Harry. This other Necromancer must indeed exist, and somehow pinned the blame for her or his deeds on to me.

In the dim light shining through the closed curtains, I could see that I had managed to Apparate into my childhood home. I was lying in a pool of my own blood, staining the carpet and threatening to seep into the dustcovers over the furniture. Judging from the sheer amount, I should have bled to death, yet I hadn't felt its cold grip ... my rudimentary attempts to stop the bleeding must have had some effect. That and Fawkes must have arrived just in time.

The room began swimming in front of my eyes, accompanied by a rising feeling of nausea. Closing my eyes did little to help, but at least it put an end to the nightmarish vision of my family home.

"Ouch!" I gave Fawkes a wounded look. Why had he pecked me on the arm? I shifted away from him, looking down when my hand encountered what felt like cool glass. It was a potions vial, presumably left over from the supplies provided for me to take home after the debacle at the Department of Mysteries, and incidentally still within the 'best before' date. Madam Pomfrey had explained the inclusion of a vial of Blood Replenishing Potion as a precaution, as there was a possibility that my cursed scar would reopen in such a way to cause heavy bleeding.

My eyes slipped closed again, the precious vial slipping from my grasp in a similar way to my hold on consciousness. My head slumped back to rest on the floor, my thoughts fading into a vague sense that there was something I was forgetting....

The next thing I knew, I was spluttering, choking as Fawkes forced the open end of the vial into my mouth. Snatching the vial out of his beak, I raised my head, wincing as several strands of hair parted company from me, stuck to the carpet by the drying blood.

It took a few moments for the potion to take effect after I gulped it down, grimacing at the aftertaste. My thoughts cleared, my body strengthened. Within minutes I was able to sit up. I blinked, amazed at the speed with which the symptoms of my blood loss were cured. Giving Fawkes a sidelong look, I could only guess that he'd somehow included some of his tears into the potion. *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* hadn't mentioned dexterity as one of the many talents of a phoenix....

Squawking impatiently, Fawkes pulled at my sleeve. I pushed myself into a sitting position, wary for any lingering dizziness before I tried standing.

"Ow. Stop that!" Fawkes had pecked me again. He gave me an indecipherable look before breaking into song.

Clutching my head, I inhaled sharply as alarming flashes of Fawkes's own thoughts streamed into mine; a process which I could only assume had something to do with what he was singing.

Hogwarts was under attack, the wards sundered.

It was the surge of adrenalin that got me moving, lurching to my feet, plucking my wand from my pocket even as Fawkes swooped up to perch on my shoulder.

Before I could Disapparate or allow Fawkes to take me with him in his mysterious mode of instantaneous fiery transportation, I staggered, as if from an unseen blow. Wide-eyed, I stared around. I hadn't felt anyone alive in the vicinity except Fawkes and the nearest Muggle neighbours. I glanced down at the bloody mess that was the carpet. Perhaps it was something to do with my blood loss. Whilst hardly a Healer, I could imagine that it would cause the sort of headache afflicting me with the phantom blow, despite the medication Fawkes had forced into me.

I suppose I should count myself fortunate that the next delay occurred just before I was once more preparing to leave. I reeled back, clutching at my shoulder as the wound reopened. My hands were soaked in my own blood as the carpet and my clothes were all but drenched once more. Even as Fawkes shifted to apply more tears to the open gash, I choked, hands flying to my throat in an attempt to pry off unsewn hands. A moment later, the constricting sensation passed.

Feeling my grip on my wand slipping, I wiped the worst of the blood covering my hands off onto my robes before Transfiguring part of the nearest dustsheet into a reflective surface. Peering into it, I examined the red marks on my neck. It was very disconcerting to see the fast developing bruises in distinct finger shapes. What was more, they reminded me far too much for comfort of the marks left by Severus's hands on my hips and arse after a particularly vigorous bout of lovemaking.

Shaking my head, I turned away from the disturbing sight. Whatever had happened could be solved later. I was needed elsewhere....

Fawkes spread his wings above my head, unfurling them over me. Sparks were flying as we vanished from my childhood home in a flash of fire. I had no time to worry about my former home burning down as a screech escaped Fawkes, his talons losing grip on my shoulders, tearing the fabric of my robes as he scrambled to keep hold of me.

It felt like parts of me were threatening to be left behind. In a horrible, wrenching moment, I was torn away from Fawkes. I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out as I vanished into darkness, the sole point of light the flaming phoenix fast disappearing.

The next thing I knew, I was choking on a mouthful of water, my scream finally audible, if garbled by the water. I clawed and kicked my way towards the murky light overhead, breaking through the surface of the water within seconds. Thankfully, I hadn't been thrown deep underwater, wherever I was.

Gulping in a few deep breaths, I gazed around, trying to get my bearings. Unfortunately, everything was swathed in swirling fog. All I could see was rippling water and the vague shapes of what were probably trees further off.

I nearly swallowed my tongue when I felt something grab me, lifting me from the water. Looking down, I flinched when I saw a huge tentacle wrapped around my waist, easily as thick as both of my arms. Then a nervous laugh escaped me as I realised both what it was and where I was. The Giant Squid was taking me towards the shore of the Black Lake; I had been thrown into the grounds of Hogwarts by whatever force had separated me from Fawkes. I suspected that it was the pure magic of a phoenix objecting violently to intermingling with the taint of a Necromancer's Dark magic. If that was the case, I was lucky that I hadn't suffered an allergic reaction to phoenix tears.

Fawkes swooped down to lift me from the gentle grip of the Giant Squid when I could make out the boathouse at the base of the cliffs Hogwarts was perched on. Rather than taking the risk of being separated again, he was taking me the rest of the way by air. I certainly wasn't about to try Apparating, not when I had come so close to Splinching. Besides, it was dangerous to attempt to Apparate when wet, as the weight of the water added to the Splinching risk. The flight quickly dried me off on the surface, although it lingered below my clothes. Typical!

From the air, the castle looked to be deserted. Either I was far too late and everyone had been reduced to dust, or Dumbledore had implemented some sort of evacuation plan. I could see that the mist had cleared slightly, particularly near the main doors to the castle. As Fawkes swooped down, I could see that the Necromancer was somehow shrouded in shadows, making my eyes water in the effort to keep an eye on her, as she turned out to be.

She had Ron slumped against the steps, easily visible with his shock of red hair, muddled though it was. Dumbledore and McGonagall were advancing towards the

shadow, with...

'No! Don't you dare!

Seemingly able to read her mind, Fawkes dived down to land us both between the Necromancer and her victims. Before my feet had touched the ground, I'd launched my chosen spell at the would-be murderess of my husband and best friend.

My instinctive guess that some type of magical material was responsible for the shadows cloaking the Necromancer was correct. My elementary burst of *Incendio* worked perfectly to expose her. Shrugging off her burning robes, she used her wand to extinguish the flames on the rest of her clothes.

With my first unobstructed look at my enemy, I stiffened. No wonder she had managed to shift the blame for whatever she had done on to me: she was my exact double!

I frowned, glowering over at her as I made sense of what I was detecting from my doppelganger with my powers.

'No, not just my double...' I realised, a chill running down my spine. I couldn't pick up her heartbeat, although I was close enough to see her pulse shifting the skin at her throat. It wasn't because I didn't have that power anymore, either, as I could detect the heartbeats from the others. There was only one person who I'd never been able to use my Necromantic powers to detect: me, myself and I.

The fact that it was another Necromancer shouldn't block my powers, either. No, there was only one explanation, particularly as it would also explain the headaches that had been afflicting me ever since I resurrected headaches that were rather similar to those plaguing me during my third year at Hogwarts, come to think of it...

'Somehow, she's me. But how?' I wondered. Narrowing my eyes, I noted a few details that had initially escaped me: a few extra lines on my other self's face. A Time-Turner? Has something gone drastically wrong in my future?

She had a bruise forming on her left temple, directly where my headache had originated prior to my departure from my parents' home. Glancing at her shoulder, I could see a tear in her clothes, almost exactly where mine had been, if at a slightly different angle. No matter what, I couldn't take my suspicions about what this meant into account. Not when I had loved ones to defend.

Fawkes squeezed my shoulder reassuringly before fluttering towards Ron, but I had no attention to spare. After I'd helped Harry up, I lingered long enough to use my touch Legilimency on Severus, on the off-chance that my other self had let slip a different name. I knew from my own travels in time that it was increasingly dangerous for more people to know of paradoxes, as tears resulting in the fabric of reality were surprisingly resilient when very few people knew that they were there. To my knowledge, nothing tore reality apart quite like meeting yourself. Particularly as it usually drove the person in question insane....

'Bingo! Atropos, huh? She seems to share my parents' love for mythical names.'

"Granger," she sneered, nodding in snide acknowledgement of me as she brushed the last smoking parts of her clothes out, undoubtedly using some Necromantic ice to keep from burning herself.

"Strand Breaker," I spat contemptuously, surreptitiously non-verbally Summoning any Time-Turner in the vicinity. Nothing arrived, not that I had expected it to. If I were her and all evidence suggested that I was I wouldn't come into a battle with such a vital delicate object.

My attention was firmly fixed on Atropos as she sent an atomising spark at me. That made me doubt her origin from my future, as I knew perfectly well that it wouldn't work on me fast enough to do anything but feel marginally uncomfortable from the heat. If not from my future, where did she come from? She was definitely me, regardless of her origins. That made her all the more dangerous.

After taunting her, I tried a specific Necromantically-powered attack, only to stagger back. My attempt to give her a taste of her own medicine by stopping her heart had backfired. Thinking about it, if a blow to her head gave me a corresponding headache, then any attack I could make was bound to inflict equivalent damage upon me.

'Bugger! How the hell am I supposed to fight? Oh, joy, it seems that she hasn't realised what I have. That or she doesn't care!'

Atropos had just tried to freeze my blood. I hoped that she'd learnt her lesson, only she began to launch conventional magical attacks. Or at least as conventional spells a Dark witch would use. Thankfully my reflexes were up to dodging, although I'd have to start casting my own spells soon, even if it risked collateral damage. From what I could tell by the colour and brightness of the spells, most, if not all, of the curses were lethal.

The next oncoming curse followed me when I attempted to dodge, so I hastily applied a Shielding Charm, praying that it wasn't unblockable. Even as I did, I had a gut feeling that I'd made a mistake. That feeling was proved right as the distinctive golden web of light caused by Priori Incantatem came into effect, complete with an almost deafening rumbling.

My wand was vibrating in my grip, almost causing me to drop it. I looked over at Atropos, who was watching her wand apprehensively.

How stupid could I get? As she was me, she was bound to have the same wand. The only consolation was that she was equally stupid, if not more so for inadvertently bringing me back to life in the first place.

The vibration was increasing, almost shaking my hands from their death-grip on my wand. My heart felt as though it was sinking to my feet. The realisation accompanying the unpleasant feeling had only just fully dawned on me when the wands ceased making the ear-throbbing rumbling. An ear-splitting shriek of pain emanated from the wands.

We had what was effectively the same wand. A paradox like that under the conditions of Priori Incantatem can't be good.

I swallowed hard as the golden light rapidly darkened to jet black shadows. I could feel both my soul and my stomach rebelling against the sickening Darkness surrounding me.

Atropos broke the connection, discarded her wand and made her escape. I was a little too preoccupied with trying not to panic to even think of pursuing her. The Chimaera scale core within both wands was perilously close to immolating the surrounding area: Hogwarts.

Both wands were still vibrating, my own rattling my bones up to my elbows, if not beyond. I might have been able to restore one wand, given enough time and energy, but two? Impossible. But I had to try. I could taste blood in my mouth from where I'd bitten through the skin on my lower lip, but I couldn't care less.

"All of you, get out of here, *now*," I ordered through clenched teeth, stepping towards Atropos's wand. *Please go. This will be easier without anyone else to worry about.*

I deftly escaped Severus's clutches, giving Albus a pleading look. Thankfully, the Headmaster nodded his understanding.

There was no way I could manage to restore the cores of both wands at once, so I concentrated on my own. I heard the others Disapparate, breathing a short sigh of relief, before my breath froze in my chest. I could feel something coming. Something Undead. Something big....

Snatching up Atropos's wand from the ground, I turned towards the castle doors whilst still trying to persuade the Chimaera scale in my wand to kindly behave itself and go back to the condition it was while still attached to the beastie.

The doors smashed open a heartbeat later. What blood was left in my face drained away at the sight of the Basilisk. Thankfully the eyes were as dead as the rest of it, but

judging from the blue sparks visible in the gory sockets, it could see me well enough. Even if it couldn't Petrify me again, I was still in grave danger from it. I couldn't spare the power to tear its soul away, nor could I even slow it down by freezing it. Every last iota of my Necromantic powers were spared for attempting the impossible. My bitter growing realisation was that it didn't seem to make any difference whatsoever.

"Fuck it all!" I snarled, far beyond any sham of social civility in the circumstances.

Collecting the wands together in one hand, I pulled my arm back and let fly as the Basilisk opened its mouth wide and lunged for me.

I hadn't survived to complete my Apparition lessons, let alone take the test. But all that meant was that it was illegal for me to do it. Not that I cared; my mere existence was illegal. Of course, completing my lessons may have meant that I wouldn't have got my second immersion for the day in a large body of water. This time it was on the far side of the lake, far enough from Hogwarts that the initial explosion didn't harm me physically. But the subsequent collapse of rubble into the lake did raise tidal waves.

If it wasn't for the padding provided by the overgrown lakeshore, I would have been torn to pieces. As it were, I was half-drowned and felt as though I'd been run over by the Knight Bus. It took me some time to disentangle myself from the weeds, too weary to call on my powers to make them wilt. Once I was free, crawling to lie on drier land, a strangled gasp escaped me. I had come very close to being crushed by the Giant Squid as it was washed up on the lakeshore. Its tentacles still struggled feebly. I had no way of assisting it back into the water either... unless I could somehow summon the others here.

I fingered my marital branding thoughtfully. It had to be there for more than just decoration, surely? Keeping an eye on the ailing Squid, I frantically tried to recall everything that I'd ever read about them. If only I still had my eidetic memory!

As I drew a mental blank, it would have to be trial and error. I supposed that just thinking with enough intensity might work, as there must be times where voices can't be used when a spouse is needed. I hoped that was the case, as coughing and choking on successive waves of water had left my voice a mere pained whisper.

'Severus, I need you.' Nothing.

'Severus Snape, get your arse down here!' The midges and mosquitoes had started to gather again, leaving me weakly swatting at those hungrily approaching me, detecting the warm blood in my veins and still staining my chin. Still no Severus, though.

'Severus... Oh, hell, what's his middle name?' I eyed the Squid regretfully as I accepted that there was no way for me to call my husband to my side. Unless...

'Husband mine, I need you!' Finally the brand glowed red, thankfully not causing any pain.

Moments later, Severus had appeared with a nearly inaudible 'crack' by my side, one of his hands gripping his similarly glowing brand.

"Hermione!" he exclaimed, dropping to his knees and reaching for me. I must have looked worse than I felt, or perhaps he had feared that I'd been caught up in the destruction of Hogwarts. Which I had been, now that I think of it.

"Squid," I managed to rasp, pointing to the fading animal.

Wand in hand, Severus Levitated it back into the water where it soon revived, waving its tentacles in thanks before diving below the surface.

Now that the rush of adrenalin keeping me going all this time had faded, I could barely keep my eyes open. Each blink lasted longer. I yawned widely, wincing as the action made my throat ache. I could hear Severus speaking to me as if from a great distance, his words might as well have been in another language.

I struggled against the rising tide of exhausted sleep as the nagging sense that I'd forgotten something increased with every heartbeat. I forced my eyes open as it occurred to my conscious mind, blearily focussing on Severus's concerned, scowling face inches from mine.

"Sev'rus," I whispered, grabbing hold of whatever part of him I could, fingernails dragging in his coarse robes.

"What?" he asked. My eyes slid closed as my tenuous hold on consciousness failed. Severus gently but firmly shook me awake immediately, long enough for me to say what I had to.

"Ollivander...." Blissful darkness swallowed me, away from the regrets of failing to save Hogwarts.

Chapter 7

Chapter 8 of 18

Success and failure

Chapter 7

Disclaimer: JKR owns Harry Potter.

AN: Thanks to septentrion and LadySunflower for betaing.

Severus cursed under his breath. Was Atropos ever going to stop her bloodthirsty rampage? In his mind's eye, Diagon Alley was in ruins, populated by the restless dead.

Shifting his hands on Hermione's body so that he could safely pick her up, Severus stood. Closing his eyes in concentration, he Apparated to Hogsmeade's outskirts, hoping that the others were still there.

"Severus! Where did you go... oh. Is she..."

Cutting Minerva off, Severus spoke sharply. "There is no time. Ollivander is likely to be Atropos's next stop, with her wand destroyed."

"I fear that you are right. Although she hardly needs one to wreak havoc, she is going to want a replacement," Albus mused. "Minerva, be gathering the rest of the Order, to meet at the usual place. Harry, neither you nor Severus are fighting fit after the rigours of Atropos's attacks. Make for number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Poppy and Fleur

Weasley should be there already. Fawkes, please take Hagrid there."

Fawkes gave an affirmative chirp from his position atop of Hagrid before leaving with the injured half-giant in a flash of fire.

Potter opened his mouth to protest, but Albus would have none of it, giving him a stern look over the top of his glasses.

"Against my better judgement, you stayed earlier to fight Atropos when you would have been better off leaving. Do not disobey me now, Harry. Besides, Ronald needs you."

Shoulders slumping, Potter heaved a sulky sounding sigh before hefting Weasley into his arms to take him to the Order Headquarters. The boys vanished, thankfully leaving nothing behind as they Disapparated. It seemed that Potter was capable of Apparating safely when not in top form, a useful skill for a future Auror.

Minerva gave Albus a searching look before nodding sharply, Disapparating without saying a word.

Shifting his grip on his bride, Severus voiced his misgivings. "Be careful, Albus. I do not think you should go alone to rescue Ollivander. It seems that there is nothing this Atropos is not capable of."

Albus gave Hermione's soundly sleeping form a long, inscrutable look. "If what I suspect about Atropos is true, it is unlikely that she will be as much of a threat at the present time."

Brow furrowing, Severus opened his mouth to ask what Albus meant by his cryptic statement, only to be left alone at the edge of the village when the rescue 'party' departed.

The sound of approaching people spurred Severus into action. While the people of Hogsmeade were more than capable of providing a warm welcome to those in need, he didn't want to take his chances with their reception of Hermione. Not after their last impression of her was of her raising their dearly departed from the grave and subsequently allowing them to collapse into ash when finishing off Voldemort at Hogwarts. He Disapparated with his burden just before the first Hogsmeade inhabitant came into sight.

Knowing that Poppy would have her hands full with Fleur, Weasley, Potter and Hagrid, Severus Apparated directly into the grubby bathroom on the second floor of Grimmauld Place to begin dealing with Hermione's injuries himself.

After thoroughly Scourgifyng everything that could be cleaned, Severus set the bath and filled it with water; steam rose as the recalcitrant hot water tank began working. Even with magic, it was advisable to clean any wounds to prevent infection. Poppy generally used specialised Cleaning Charms, but Severus had little knowledge of them, so it would have to be the manual way. Almost of their own volition, his eyes trailed over his wife's body. The manual way looked to be far more... interesting, anyway.

A Disrobing Charm made fast work of undressing Hermione, the torn and blood stained clothes dropping to the floor. Testing the water temperature first, Severus carefully lowered her into the bath, bracing her shoulders with his hand to keep her head from slipping below the water lapping at her collarbone. That drew his attention to a distinctive set of bruises on her neck. He reached out with his shaking free hand, laying it over some of the marks. It fit exactly. Severus could feel a horrible suspicion dawning, but he discarded it for later inspection after he had finished with his duties in caring for Hermione.

In the process of cleaning the grime of the terrible events of the day off Hermione, he discovered several more bruises, one being hidden by her hair over her left temple until he swept it back in the process of rinsing it. There were also several scratches of varying degrees scattered across her body, but no sign of the injury inflicted by Albus's cast of Sectumsempra. The sneaking suspicion in the back of his mind also noted that there was no sign of another wound caused by his specialised Cutting Curse. Fawkes must have healed it (or them).

He'd dried Hermione off and had been about to put her in a bed in the room she'd last used during her fifth year at Hogwarts, when it occurred to him that when she awoke she wouldn't want to be in the same room that she'd shared with her dead friend. For the time being, he took her to a spare room, which was thankfully relatively clean.

Poppy had soon finished with her other charges, explaining how she'd handled them whilst examining Hermione, having sent a quick Patronus message to find out where Severus had put her next patient.

"Fleur Weasley is sleeping. She briefly woke up when the wards caused that cacophony. I'm just glad that Albus thought to enchant the boxes containing my supplies with Portkeys. Otherwise poor Fleur may well have lost her child if I hadn't been able to give her another dosage of a calming draught and Dreamless Sleep.

"Hmm. You have been through the wars," Poppy muttered, directing her comment to the still-sleeping Hermione.

"Hagrid is going to have a heart condition for the rest of his life. If Ho-Hogwarts hadn't fallen, then he'd have been forced to retire." From the hitch in Poppy's speech, Potter had presumably told her about Hogwarts' fall. Or perhaps she had deduced as much from the need to evacuate the castle.

"If Potter and Weasley were Hagrid's age, they'd be in pretty much the same condition, but they're young. They will be fine."

"And Hermione?" Severus prompted impatiently.

"Thirteen bruise locations, one of which indicates that someone tried to throttle her, another overlying a skull fracture, scratches largely focussed on her limbs, a bitten lower lip... traces of Blood Replenishing Potion detectable, but no sign of the injury requiring it."

"Fawkes healed it."

"Fine bird, that one. I wish he were my familiar, but then he'd run out of tears." She set to work on healing Hermione, Severus watching as the bruises began to fade and the scratches knitted together. "She will be fine by the time she wakes up, barring some magical and physical exhaustion, but only time and rest can set them to rights."

Severus graciously opened the door to let Poppy leave.

"Not so fast, Severus Snape. Potter mentioned that you were attacked by this other Necromancer, too."

Opening his mouth to protest, Severus could feel his cheeks burning when Poppy began a diagnostic spell. There was no way that she'd miss detecting some rather embarrassing bruises....

"Count yourself fortunate that Potter spoke up, Severus," Poppy said sharply, scowling up at him. She aimed her wand at the affected area, lips tightly compressed as she proceeded to heal it. "Such injuries to your genitals can result in sterility if left untreated. You're a married man, now. It's not just your future children at stake.

"The one good thing about exposure to the Cruciatus Curse is that it gradually strengthened your heart. If You-Know-Who hadn't repeatedly used you as a magical punching bag, you would be in Hagrid's circumstances by now, which might well have led to the breakdown of your marriage."

"Hermione wouldn't stop loving me just because of a heart condition," Severus snapped.

"Couples just as devoted to each other have been broken apart by the inability of one to fulfil the other's sexual needs."

Severus subsided, able to see her point, yet in denial that Hermione would ever reject him for something beyond his control. Thanks to the Dark Lord, there was no need to find out if such a situation would ever happen.

After Poppy had left, admonishing him again to take better care of himself, exhaustion overcame him. Severus flicked his wand at himself, undressing. He cast a couple of Cleaning Charms, disregarding the resulting dryness of his skin, before slipping into the narrow bed beside Hermione. Cursing when he almost tumbled out of it, he snatched his wand up again to expand the bed. So what if it blocked the door?

Hermione was still dead to the world when Severus awoke, dim sunlight lazily streaming in through a gap in the curtains drawn across the grimy window. Even that small amount of light irritated his stinging, bloodshot eyes. It felt like he'd been drinking heavily the night before, yet without the pleasure of the alcohol.

Rather than risk waking Hermione whilst disentangling their limbs, Severus took the precaution of retrieving his wand from under his pillow to cast a soporific charm on her, lifting it after he'd shifted from the bed.

Dressing quickly in freshly laundered robes, he could only guess that a house-elf had been obtained for such things whilst the Order was in residence at Grimmauld Place. Unless Molly Weasley's ghost was at work. Whatever the case, there was also a set of robes for Hermione, already modified to fit her. Whoever had supplied them apparently knew that she currently lacked a wand to Transfigure them to fit.

A groan from the bed alerted him to the fact that Hermione was stirring. She squinted up at him through screwed up eyes, and yawned hugely.

"I'll be back soon, with breakfast," Severus promised, leaning down to kiss her. By the time he'd opened the door she'd dozed off, snoring softly.

The sight of Ollivander sitting at the kitchen table in the dingy basement made Severus forget all about collecting breakfast in bed for Hermione.

Albus smiled up at him from his place at the head of the table, dipping chocolate biscuits into his tea whilst trying to avoid dunking his beard in.

"For once we were successful, then," Severus stated.

"It makes a nice change," commented Minerva, handing him a steaming cup of coffee.

Ollivander shook his silvery head, blinking his strange eyes. "I still find it hard to believe that it was not really Miss Granger that I sold a wand to yesterday."

Smirking, Severus jumped at the chance to correct him. After all, it wasn't every day that you could correct someone with uncanny near-perfect knowledge. "Actually, Hermione is my wife now."

"Congratulations." Ollivander looked thoughtful. Perhaps he was thinking of what wand would be likely to match a child born of the Granger-Snape union, but Severus was well aware that making such a guess was futile with such an unfathomable man.

"Regardless of Atropos's seemingly innocuous visit to replace her wand, we should get Poppy to check your health after breakfast," Albus suggested.

Frowning, Severus wondered why he felt a twinge of unease when Ollivander politely refused, saying that he did not want to be a bother. The nagging sense that something was wrong continued, turning his stomach and making it difficult to eat the plate of toast offered to him.

The entrance of some of the other Order members distracted him from his suspicions, allowing him to tuck into his breakfast.

"Snape," Alastor Moody greeted him before sitting across the table from him. "I hear you robbed the cradle."

Swallowing a mouthful of toast, Severus returned the compliment. "Moody. I'm surprised that you refrained from saying that I robbed the grave."

Moody laughed shortly. "That too. I hope your missus can deal with this more typical example of a Necromancer."

"Don't we all?" Severus muttered. "I fear that this Atropos is more than she can handle."

"How can that be?" Ollivander asked, joining the conversation. "Surely all Necromancers are on even footing?"

"No," Albus said, saving Severus from the need to answer. "I can tell you that Hermione was more powerful than Grindelwald, but that was before she atomised both herself and Voldemort. She no longer possesses that key power."

That nagging feeling returned in full force to Severus as Ollivander made no reaction to the news that had Moody all but ranting. Albus managed to get him to calm down, stating that if they all worked together, they were sure to find a solution. Lips compressed into a tight line, Severus stared down at his coffee, swirling the viscous liquid with a spell similar to that enchanting a self-stirring cauldron.

Severus looked up when the kitchen door swung open. Seeing that it was Hermione, he pulled out the chair next to him for her to sit down, but she made no move, seemingly frozen in the doorway, her eyes transfixed on Ollivander. Eyes that were fast darkening....

Ollivander had caught sight of exactly who stood in the doorway. A strange smile crossed his lined features.

"For heaven's sake!" Hermione snarled, irises completely black as she stepped forward, right arm outstretched as an eerie light gathered in the palm of her hand. "Are you all incapable of taking a *pulse*?"

The light streaked from her hand to strike Ollivander square in the chest. The breath froze in Severus's chest as he realised exactly what had been nagging him: the aged wand maker hadn't drawn a single breath that morning. No wonder he hadn't wanted Poppy to examine him!

A hollow laugh resounded from Ollivander as he stood up. Hermione's eyes were wide, her face fast paling as she realised that her attack had failed.

Hexes began flying at the newly revealed zombie, but these also had no effect, somehow absorbed by the roiling Dark magic now tangible in the room. Those closest to Ollivander went flying against the nearest walls, furniture smashing, masking the sickening cracks of bones breaking.

From the corner of his eye, as he attempted to inflict various obscure curses on the undead wizard, Severus observed Hermione grab something from the fireplace. He spared a quick glance at her, before ceasing hexing to watch, incredulous. Hermione had picked up the poker from the fireplace, empowering it with what paradoxically looked to be icy fire. She hurled it at Ollivander, impaling him on it, the cold fire simultaneously burning and freezing those parts of him it touched, until he yanked it from his chest, casting it aside. The damaged parts of his body rapidly healed.

"Nice try," he sneered. Severus blinked. That didn't sound like Ollivander at all. It seemed those under a Necromancer's control were wholly in thrall, from speech patterns to loyalties.

"Now, watch your friends die. The only way to stop this seemingly frail corpse is to reduce it to ash... Oh, but you can't do that!" Ollivander cackled.

The zombie turned to those still standing, shrugging off the curses still oncoming as if they were flies landing on him, slowly, menacingly advancing. Attempts to Disapparate to safety failed, the magical fabric within the house distorted by the wild, Dark magic at work. The door banged shut, refusing to open, the fire roaring far too high to Floo away.

"Do you trust me?" At Hermione's desperate question, Severus turned an injured look on her, quite insulted that she needed to ask.

"Of course I do!" he spat. "Do you have any other tricks up your sleeve that could stop this~~thing~~? Or was it telling the truth?"

"Yes, it was, but I have an idea," she said, sounding hesitant.

"Do it, then!" Severus demanded.

Hermione grabbed hold of his wrist, her fingers cold against his skin. He gasped as he felt her mind slip through his Occlumency barriers as though they were not there. Then... Severus's wand dropped from his grasp as his muscles suddenly jolted. He could feel Hermione usurping his control over his body, catching hold of her body as it fell limp, preventing it from falling to the floor.

Ollivander had almost reached the others, Albus pushing them behind him as the oldest one present, and therefore presumably thinking of himself as most expendable.

As a bystander in his own body, Severus watched as Hermione began focussing intently on the palm of his hand, a flickering spark forming. He could feel the great effort involved, together with a rather detached impression of the heat as the atomising spark brightened. His teeth were tightly clenched, sweat trickling down his face and spine with the effort Hermione was expending from within him. Severus could feel his body protesting, the skin blistering beneath the deadly ember. Although she could use her Necromantic powers in other bodies, it was clear that those other bodies did not have her resistance to them. As soon as she could, she threw the spark at Ollivander, striking him between the shoulder blades.

Screaming horribly, the zombie twisted around, ranting incoherently as he gradually collapsed into ash. Even somewhat detached from his senses as he was, Severus mentally gagged at the smell of burnt human flesh permeating the room. Ever practical, Minerva cast a freshening charm, banishing the foul stench in the air.

Shifting his hands so that they touched her skin, Hermione slipped back into her own body. Unfortunately, this meant that he was all too aware of the pain caused by the burn on his hand. Despite Minerva's recent spell casting, he could still smell burning flesh. A fresh wave of increased pain made him look down at the nauseating sight of his hand blistering further. A moment later, the damage was halted as his palm was covered by a thin layer of ice, Hermione's hand outstretched over it. Observing that her hand was trembling, Severus just had time to grab her before her legs gave way beneath her.

After Poppy had healed those injured by the zombie's attack, she restored Severus's hand back to its healthy state. Hermione tucked into her breakfast half-heartedly. Something was clearly bothering her, but Poppy would allow no discussions until she was satisfied that her long term patient wouldn't faint on her feet. Finally, she gave a stiff nod before returning to the room appropriated to treat those needing more intensive care, where Hagrid and Fleur were still cloistered.

"It seems that you will be equally matched against this other Necromancer," Moody growled, "provided that you face her whilst possessing your husband."

"Provided that I don't mind reducing my own husband to ash, you mean," Hermione snapped, giving Moody a venomous glare. "There is no worse way to die than being atomised. I would know."

"It would be a worthwhile sacrifice!" Moody hammered his fists on the table, making the crockery on it rattle.

"You volunteering?" she sneered.

"I would give my life, as any decent wizard would!" barked Moody.

Severus prepared to intervene, seeing that Albus and Minerva were clearly readying themselves for the same thing.

Slamming her cutlery back on the table, Hermione shoved back her chair and stood up. "It wouldn't just be you. It'd take burning up everyone in the Order just to make Atropos feel uncomfortable, and that's not even taking into account those she helps along to their doom."

"If that is what it takes, then it would be worth it." Moody glowered at her, his magical eye almost sparking in his anger.

Hermione grabbed hold of his wrist. Whatever she did only took a moment, but Moody was pale faced and shaking by the end of it.

"Hermione!" Albus exclaimed, reaching out to hold Hermione back from Moody lest she repeat whatever it was that she'd done. "What did you do?"

"Gave him a taster of what he's so keen for everyone else to do, that's all. It's better than the alternative," she murmured darkly.

Passing the duty of restraining Hermione over to Severus, Albus put his face in one of his hands, his voice both muffled and exasperated when he spoke. "With power comes responsibility. A Legilimens does not, I repeat, *does not* implant thoughts into others' minds."

"My apologies," muttered Hermione, clearly not sorry at all. Severus couldn't blame her; he had no wish to be reduced to ash. Moody had no right to speak for anyone other than himself.

Albus lowered both his hand and his brows, giving Hermione a reproachful look. She didn't bat an eyelash, just stared right back at him mutinously.

"Could you do that to Atropos?" Moody's voice was hoarse. To Severus's ears, it sounded as though the infamous Auror had sampled a few too many of Mundungus Fletcher's dubious cigars. "Not just a taster, either, I mean."

That brought Albus and Hermione's standoff to an abrupt end as both of them twisted around to face Moody.

"No..."

"Alastor, it would..."

Both of them spoke at once. They paused, glancing over at the other, before Albus inclined his head, allowing Hermione to speak first.

"I can't do to her what I did to you without touching her. And touching her would be monumentally stupid."

Moody's mouth firmed to a lopsided slash. "I see. You're too cowardly to..."

"How dare..." Severus exploded, looming over Hermione in a protective fashion.

"Alastor, Severus, calm down. Hermione, please explain."

Looking reluctant to say the least, Hermione gave Albus a dubious look. "I suspect that's dangerous knowledge to impart, Professor."

"Better that the truth comes out whilst the rift in reality is not being actively widened."

Severus could feel Hermione's muscles tightening beneath his hands where he rested them on her shoulders. Absentmindedly kneading at them didn't seem to have any effect. "That's a moot point. Just because I'm not within sight of her doesn't mean that no damage is being done."

"You are speaking in riddles," Severus murmured into her ear, whilst feeling the suspicion arising once more in him that he'd last felt when seeing injuries on Hermione matching those afflicting Atropos.

She grumbled under her breath, but elaborated. "We're one and the same. It would risk ending the world to touch her. Reality doesn't like paradoxes."

"That can't be right!" Weasley protested. "You would never murder my family."

"*What?*" Hermione sounded as though she'd been winded. Wincing, Severus realised that he hadn't had the chance to tell her of her friends' deaths.

Too late, the same thing occurred to Weasley. "Oh. Erm, yesterday, when you came into Dumbledore's office, you were attacked because, well...."

Her head bowed as if under a great weight, Hermione said nothing. Severus could feel her breathing raggedly.

"I'm sor..."

"Sorry?" Hermione's voice had a hysterical edge, her head jerking up, almost giving Severus a mouthful of her hair. "So am I, Ron, but sorry just doesn't cut it." She muttered something under her breath, which Severus got the gist of as not blaming Albus for attacking her because she would have done much the same thing.

Albus opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione cut him off. "Just forget it. We have bigger problems on our hands, namely my other self."

Clearly unhappy, Albus allowed the matter to slide.

"I don't get it," Potter said, slowly shaking his head. "How can there be two of Hermione?"

"My best guess is that she comes from the future. She is older than me, after all."

"What makes you say that?" Lupin asked from his position lurking behind Potter. He was nursing a healing broken arm after being hurled into the wall by the travesty that had been Ollivander, otherwise he might have managed to deal with the zombie with his unnatural strength gained by his status as a werewolf. Much as Severus loathed agreeing with Lupin, he was wondering the very same thing. He shifted so that he could see Hermione's face.

"Of course!" exclaimed Minerva. "I doubt anyone but a witch would notice the fine lines marking a few extra years."

"But if Atropos is you, Hermione, why's she come back to her own past to kill her own friends?" Weasley asked.

"I never said that she was sane," she said softly, a strange, bitter smile on her features.

"Ministry info on Necromancers says that all of them go that way in the end. It's part of the reason why the powers that be have zero tolerance," Nymphadora Tonks unthinkingly put in, the Metamorphmagus's hair shifting to a sheepish off-white when she realised what that implied about Hermione. "Um, sorry!"

"It is not necessarily the case that Atropos is from your future, Hermione. I find it unlikely; there are too many inconsistencies." Albus looked around at the assembled members of the Order. "But I do agree that she is almost certainly you in some shape or form."

"What are you implying, Albus?" Severus asked, crossing his arms. As usual, it appeared that the old man knew more than he was letting on.

"Just that we should keep an open mind. Wherever Atropos's origins are, it is clear that it will be no simple matter to deal with her. Minerva, have we heard from the others yet?"

Minerva shook her head, looking disgusted. "Those that are not here either refuse to fight alongside a Necromancer or against one. They are either too afraid or prejudiced."

"Then we should begin. We have at least two objectives: finding a way to deal with Atropos and finding her in the first place, as there has been no sign of her since she replaced her wand." Albus moved to the head of the righted and repaired kitchen table, sitting down.

"It's simple enough, Albus, as you well know. We finish her the same way you finished Grindelwald." To illustrate his point, Moody drew a line across his throat with one of his fingers.

Pandemonium erupted at Moody's suggestion, even those who held no fondness for Hermione expressing distaste at such a brutal method of killing.

Severus drew his wand, pointing it directly at the retired Auror's heart. "We cannot kill Atropos, not when doing so clearly risks killing Hermione, too. Albus did not tell you that what harms one of them harms the other?"

Both of Moody's eyes, the magical and the natural ones, seemed to light up. He drew his own wand, aiming it at Hermione. "That makes finding this Atropos immaterial when we can kill her right here and now. What's a little collateral damage?"

Before Severus and Moody could come to blows, Albus reached out, calling both of their wands into his custody. "We have no way of knowing if killing one would kill the other, Alastor. Unless there is no other way, I will not condone Hermione's death. That being so, we will investigate every other possible avenue of dealing with Atropos."

"You can't risk everything and everyone because of me!"

Grabbing hold of her, Severus leaned over Hermione, lowering his face until their noses almost touched. An almost crazed look was in his eyes. "I lost you once already. You are not putting me through that again." His fingers dug into her arms, threatening to bruise her. He loosened his grip after she winced, his fingers trembling as he struggled against the urge to shake some sense into her.

"I'll have nothing to do with any plan that involves killing Hermione. I've lost my family. I won't lose one of my best friends, too." Weasley glowered at Moody. Potter stepped up beside him, lending obvious support without needing to say a word.

Most of the rest of the assembled Order were either looking away, declaring neutrality or discomfort on the matter, or joining Potter and Weasley in glaring at Moody.

"Enough! You will follow my lead on this, Alastor," Albus demanded.

"Fine," Moody spat. He stomped into a shadowy corner to glower darkly at Hermione.

It was decided that the best way to deal with the problem posed by Atropos in the short term was to capture her using the only method Albus knew would work: causing blood loss. As soon as possible, all members of the Order still in service would learn Severus's very own Sectumsempra curse. Whilst causing any pain to Hermione was not acceptable to Severus, it was far better than the fate of Grindelwald... he shuddered at the thought.

Beyond keeping intelligence channels open, Albus had no way of tracking Atropos down other than using the spell discovered before Hogwarts fell. Hermione pointed out that at the time she found that particular method, she'd had no idea that Atropos shared her genetic material. Unsurprisingly, that would confound the blood magic behind the spell. For the time being, she had no other suggestions, bemoaning the loss of her eidetic memory.

The rest of the day was spent in the Black family library, everyone who could be spared scouring through the books. Severus realised with a sharp pang that he had lost his most useful books when Hogwarts was destroyed, as he kept those he didn't use regularly at Spinner's End.

Watching Hermione slam her current book closed, blinking back tears, Severus assumed that she was mourning the loss of the library at Hogwarts until she spoke. "Is

there anything like the Room of Requirement in the wizarding world?"

Albus shook his head. "Not that I know of. It is time to get into contact with the Ministry. Perhaps they have material on Necromancers, including how to track them."

Bored stiff by her reading, Tonks brightened, her hair flashing back into her habitual pink from the dreary brown it had been. "The Dark Detectors might be able to find her if Hermione stays put here. Not that you'd be stupid enough to go to the Ministry when they'll soon be in Necromancer hunting mode."

Severus selected another book, glowering down at the dusty cover. He doubted that the Ministry would be of any use, but it was clear that the wizarding public would be at more risk if the Magical Law Enforcement were kept in the dark. Besides, after the evacuation and subsequent destruction of Hogwarts, it would be impossible to keep the knowledge from the Ministry.

"I hope to be able to persuade Rufus Scrimgeour not to consider Hermione a threat, but I am afraid that it will be too much for him to differentiate between them," said Albus, shaking his head despairingly. He suddenly looked sharply at Tonks. "The Dark Detectors do not show that there is a Necromancer at large?"

"Nope," Tonks said grimly. "The only explanation is that they've been tampered with. If they can't be reset to pick her up, that'll make Atropos all the harder to track down." She stood up, almost tripping over her chair. "I'll swap places with Kingsley. He's going to be ticked off that he's been kept out of the loop this long as it is."

The search was fruitless. Albus had managed to come up with a charm that would automatically search the books for any words associated with Necromancers, but there was no mention of how to find one. More ordinary tracking charms were still generally considered Dark magic, but attempts at using them were also useless. Mundungus Fletcher had gone to scour Knockturn Alley for more material, but Severus suspected that was just an excuse not to be in the same room as Hermione. Quite a few of the other members of the Order were also uncomfortable to be in her presence, but persevered nonetheless.

Unwilling to remain in Grimmauld Place for another night, Severus had retreated to Spinner's End. In the morning, he intended to search the remainder of his own books for any useful information.

"So this is where you grew up? It's, ah, very...."

Turning to Hermione, Severus smirked. "It is almost as dilapidated as Grimmauld Place. But at least we are alone now." His eyes hardened.

"Severus?" She involuntarily backed away as he advanced, stiffening when she came into contact with the nearest wall. Before she could get away, Severus placed his hands on the wall either side of her head, restricting her movement further when he leaned in.

"Do you recall what you said earlier, when Moody was so keen to kill you?" he asked, his voice deadly calm. Hermione's eyes widened, looking very much like a trapped wild animal as she raised her eyes to his.

Severus's emotions were roiling when he stepped into the shower. On top of all of the other recent events, reading Hermione the riot act was too much for his typically iron self-control. At least any stray tears were concealed by the spraying water.

He was just finishing rinsing his hair directly under the showerhead when a tentative touch on his back startled him. Twisting around, he slipped, just managing to keep himself from bashing his head on the tiled wall. Flushing, he turned off the water before accepting his towel from Hermione, not looking at her.

"I'm sorry! I thought...." She sounded like she'd been crying.

Drying himself off, Severus did not speak until he'd towelled his hair off, making it stick up worse than Potter's. He finally looked at her, raising an eyebrow as he noted the lack of clothes.

"If you had in mind ambushing me in the shower with amorous intentions, then we both might have needed to see Poppy, as I demonstrated. On the whole, a bed is a far better place, unless Levitation Charms are applied." Severus hoped that Hermione would think that the hoarseness of his own voice was due to shouting rather than crying.

"Then take me to bed," Hermione murmured, extending her hand to him. Severus took it, tugging her towards him as he slid his grip to her waist. She squeaked in surprise as he lowered a shoulder, hefting her over it to carry her into his bedroom.

She pounded her fists on his back. "Caveman!"

Ignoring the derogatory term, Severus dropped her on his bed, snatching his wand up. "Unlike Hogwarts, there are no wards barring conception here," he explained as he cast a non-verbal charm on himself, causing his genitals to glow briefly.

Eyes darkening with desire, Hermione pulled him down to lie beside her. A satisfied sigh slipped through her lips at the renewed contact of their skin. She brushed her lips gently against his, but Severus was in no mood for tenderness. It appeared that Hermione was more than willing to match his bruising kisses, her tongue battling with his.

They broke apart, gasping for breath, Severus partially on top of her, her breasts pressing against his chest.

"I take it you want to be on top this time?" Hermione asked, breathless.

"Not exactly," he breathed in her ear, delighting in the shiver running through her. She shot him a quizzical look through heavily lidded eyes. He stood, coaxing her into the position he had in mind.

Severus generally preferred to be able to see Hermione's face when making love, but this wasn't the more usual tender encounter. This was something far more powerful, almost violent in its intensity.

On her hands and knees at the edge of the bed, Severus stood behind her, hands on her hips, doing his best to avoid hurting her with each deep thrust. Although she seemed to be finding the unavoidable twinges involved as pleasurable as they were painful, from the cries she muffled against a pillow.

Leaning forwards, Severus reached beneath her, hands roaming, caressing her.

Eyes rolling back in his head as he reached completion, it was inevitable that Severus became unbalanced on his decidedly shaky legs. He fell forward on top of Hermione, barely managing to catch some of his weight on his arms as they were almost as shaky as his legs. Hermione fell flat on the bed, pinned on her stomach beneath Severus, their limbs tangled.

Rolling to the side, Severus managed to get into a position comfortable enough to sleep in, spooning up against Hermione. He was about to drop off when the hitching quality to Hermione's breathing roused him. For a moment, he thought she was crying until the movement of her arm beneath his own, draped around her, clued him in. He came fully awake, mortified.

"Hermione, you did not...."

"Indeed not," Hermione murmured, equal parts frustration and unfulfilled desire in her voice. "You going to do something about it?"

Chapter 8

Chapter 9 of 18

The eye of the storm is hardly a respite.

Chapter 8

Disclaimer: The wonderful world of Harry Potter is not mine.

AN: Thanks to septentrion and LadySunflower for the stunningly quick beta.

The next day, Severus left Hermione going through his books at Spinner's End. They had been eating breakfast and commiserating over the loss of Hogwarts' library and Room of Requirement when the same idea seemed to strike both of them at once.

"Do you still have a Pensieve tucked away in your Welsh getaway, Albus?" Severus demanded the moment he was in the former Headmaster's company.

Brows furrowing, Albus thought for a moment, his expression clearing as the relevant memory came to him. "I had forgotten about that. I take it you would find one useful?"

"Invaluable, actually." Severus smirked. "Hermione can remember reading books that contained all there was to know about Necromancers, but she cannot remember the contents."

A remnant of his famous twinkle returned to Albus's eyes. "And a Pensieve would provide the necessary focus. Very well, I will retrieve it."

Severus was waiting for Albus to return with the Pensieve, when he heard raised voices abruptly cut off mid-word, as though someone had belatedly remembered to cast a Silencing Charm. His curiosity roused, he padded through the corridors to where the racket had originated from. The door to the study was only pushed to, allowing Severus to peek inside. He observed Moody and Lupin in the midst of an argument...a surreal sight due to the wildly gesticulating arms and flapping mouths with no sound reaching his ears. Unfortunately, before Severus could manage to make use of his lip-reading skills, Lupin threw up his arms in exasperation, storming away. Moody cancelled the Silencing Charm, growled something vicious under his breath and stumped off. Both of them left through the second door into the room, a shortcut to the library.

Moments later, Albus was calling Severus from the Entrance Hall. Putting aside contemplation of Moody and Lupin's quarrel until he could discuss it with Hermione, Severus made his way through the dilapidated house to collect the Pensieve.

Flicking another silver gossamer strand of memory into the Pensieve, Hermione frowned at Severus. "What could rile Lupin enough so that he would raise his voice? He's always so soft-spoken."

"Whatever Moody was yelling about, Lupin obviously... disagreed."

"I somehow doubt either of them would admit what they were arguing about. You can forget about Veritaserum, too." Hermione gave him a knowing look. "Don't try to deny it; I saw that glint in your eyes."

"My only supplies were at Hogwarts," Severus said mournfully. He frowned at the swirling memories in the Pensieve. "I should make myself scarce, knowing how dangerous even memories of that book were to non-Necromancers. Albus should have something for me to do."

Engrossed in finding the right part of the memory, wand twirling above the stone basin, Hermione nodded distractedly. Severus leant down across the Pensieve, tilted her chin up and slanted his mouth over hers, kissing her thoroughly.

It was late afternoon when Severus returned to Spinner's End. Hermione was eating a late lunch. She offered some tidbits to him when she looked up from the pages of notes spread around her. Hungrily, he dug into them. He waited until after they had finished eating before explaining where he had been.

"I was sent to the Weasleys' home with Moody and Lupin, to recover the bodies."

"Harry and Ron didn't go?"

Severus shook his head. "Albus forbid it. He thought that they would have enough problems with post-traumatic stress disorder as it is."

Hermione snorted. "It will be a miracle if everyone doesn't suffer from that by the end of this. Presuming that anyone is left alive...." She shook off the grim train of thought. "When will the funerals be?"

"Memorial services, on the whole, actually. The only funeral can be for Ginevra."

"What?" Hermione asked, looking sickened. "Let me guess, she stole the bodies." She turned away, pacing across the grubby tiles of his kitchen. "I hope I'm wrong about what she's done with them... what else is that monster going to do?"

"Also of concern is what Atropos has already done. Before I left Grimmauld Place, I overheard Tonks reporting to Albus about the Ministry's Dark Detectors. The last annual maintenance check shows that they were tampered with at some point last year. What is more, the Dark Detectors were reset then." Severus rolled his eyes. "The Ministry's dug their own grave with their lax security," he spat contemptuously.

"Just as well that I found something in my memories of The Book. It's guaranteed to find her." Hermione seemed strangely reluctant to speak.

"Let me guess: there is a snag. Just like with the last spell from that accursed book. No, Hermione. We will find another way."

"Actually, this spell isn't like that one, *darling*," she said, mock-sweetly, a saccharine smile plastered across her face. "It's been tested. It won't kill me to use it."

"Then why do you seem hesitant to use it, *dear*?" Severus didn't even attempt to copy her expression, unsure whether his facial muscles could pull it off. Instead, he glowered down at her, arms crossed over his chest.

"Because the process is not terribly pleasant. Well, that and attempting to find a Necromancer is dangerous even for me; especially when the Necromancer in question is

more powerful than I am, older and therefore more experienced."

Within a pentagram drawn in her own blood, Hermione stiffened. Her eyes rolled back in her head, only the whites visible. His misgivings, returning full force, made Severus itch to step forwards and drag her out of the perceived danger.

"Whatever you do, don't move beyond the line of blood. If anything goes wrong, Vanish the blood." Hermione's earlier instructions rang through his head. *"I know that it's counterintuitive with the normal usage of pentagrams, but attempting to manually wipe it out or otherwise interfere with it will suck you drier than a vampire could manage."*

Just as he was about to Vanish the pentagram, Hermione's reproachful look just before she 'drew' the pentagram swam before his eyes. She would have his head for interfering on little more than a hunch.

Moments later, Severus was wishing that he'd acted on his instincts. Although the pentagram prevented any sound from reaching his ears, Hermione was clearly screaming in agony. His attempted Vanishing Charm failed. Severus was about to risk his life to get Hermione out when she slumped down. One of her hands crossed the blood. Sparks flew as the pentagram vanished, leaving the tiled floor singed.

The next thing Severus knew, he was kneeling beside her, holding her trembling body close. She was still conscious, although her eyes were staring at nothing, wide and terrified. Severus almost couldn't recognise her. He tried calling her name, shaking her, even Legilimency, but nothing worked to draw her out of the stupor she was in.

"Nothing else for it," he muttered, hating himself even as he drew his hand back. The harsh *crack* of his palm striking Hermione's face hard enough to snap it to the side seemed to echo through the room.

Gasping, Hermione blinked, her eyes focussing on Severus. She raised a shaking hand to her undoubtedly stinging, reddened cheek. To Severus, her stricken gaze looked accusing, causing the leaden weight in his stomach to sink further.

He almost choked in surprise when she grabbed hold of him in a desperate embrace, resting her head on his shoulder, tears dampening his robes. Gradually, she stopped trembling and pulled away, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

She tried to say something, but grimaced, rubbing her throat. She'd screamed herself hoarse.

"Poppy should be able to restore your voice. Albus needs to know about whatever happened to you, too."

Hermione shook her head, scrambling to her feet and backing away, when he made to take her to Headquarters using Side-Along Apparition. She pointed towards her cheek, marked by his hand.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry about that. I just needed to snap you out of it, nothing else worked."

Exasperated, eyes rolling towards the ceiling, Hermione grabbed his wand and attempted to heal her cheek herself. Comprehension dawning, Severus repeated the charm with considerably more success, although the same charm did nothing for her voice.

The long-suffering Poppy healed Hermione's throat with no problems. "There are times when I might as well be your full time Healer," she grumbled under her breath, returning upstairs to tend to Hagrid.

"Severus tells me that you attempted to find Atropos using blood magic described in a Necromantic manual. Did you find out where she is?" Albus asked.

Hermione laughed mirthlessly. "No. Suffice to say that she doesn't want to be found."

"That much is obvious." Albus sighed heavily. "She had laid low since her mischief with poor Ollivander, apart from stealing the Weasleys' bodies. Can you try to find her again?"

Severus opened his mouth to put his foot down, only for Hermione to lay her fingers across his lips, the unspoken message being that she could speak for herself.

"Frankly, it would risk my sanity to do so. Do you really want two insane Necromancers on your hands?"

"I take it that the method is dangerous, then," Albus stated.

"Screaming myself hoarse should give that impression! The method involved a pentagram drawn in my own blood, as Severus probably told you. That pentagram nullified most forms of magic, including my Occlumency. I touched Atropos's thoughts."

Concerned, Albus asked whether Atropos was an Occlumens too.

"And a Legilimens. The bitch detected me before I could find out where she was. Her mental attack was... well, she tried to twist my mind so that it reflected hers."

Both listening practitioners of the mental arts winced sympathetically.

"It would have worked, too, if Severus hadn't snapped me out of it."

The thought of what could have happened to Hermione if he hadn't acted turned Severus's insides to ice. He bent close to whisper in her ear, "That blasted book of yours is nothing but trouble."

"I did learn something useful before she detected me. We have about a week before she makes another move."

"Indeed?" Albus thoughtfully stroked his beard. "Why is that?"

"Even Necromancers need to rest. She can't keep up continuous attacks."

Indeed, Atropos laid low for the rest of the week. Numerous alternative attempts to find Atropos's hiding place failed. Severus narrowly avoided losing his fingers when the crystal ball he was using to scry with split cleanly into two, clearly showing that any attempt to scry was doomed to fail. Hardly surprising, considering that both Necromancers were technically the same person.

During the futile search, Albus spared an hour to take Hermione on a walk into wizarding London, under Potter's Invisibility Cloak of course. The infuriating old man just gave Severus an enigmatic wink when he asked where he was taking her.

Tugging Hermione aside when they returned, Severus's questions were answered by the brand new wand in her hands.

"Dumbledore took me to Ollivander's shop. He thought I could contribute more to the search in conventional ways if I had a replacement wand. I'm glad he did, I felt like I was naked in public without one."

Examining the wand, Severus was surprised to see that, unlike her previous wands, it was not vinewood. Frowning slightly, he realised that he had seen a wand made of

this type of wood before. An infamous wand....

"Yew and phoenix feather, according to the label on the box. Dumbledore said that's the same combination as Voldemort's was." Hermione rubbed at the back of her neck, clearly uncomfortable with the similarity. "When I got my last wand, Ollivander wanted a feather from Fawkes in exchange."

Lips twisting, Severus handed the wand back. "I would not be surprised if that feather is the core of your new wand."

"Nor would I."

"With Ollivander dead, who did you pay?" he asked, wondering who the next proprietor of the famous wand shop was.

"No one was manning the shop. Dumbledore put some Galleons in the till, though. We were hardly about to help ourselves!"

When it was clear that Atropos could not be found unless she came out of hiding, Albus called a council of war. "It is a blessing that the students were evacuated to their homes. At least that way, there is no big target for Atropos like Hogwarts was."

"But then why did she attack my family?" Weasley asked, the dark circles around his weary eyes testament to his living nightmare. "We were hardly a big target. Come to that, she said that you'd be able to explain, Hermione."

"She lied," Hermione said shortly. "Understand this, Ron: she's insane." She thought for a moment before continuing. "I suppose it's also possible that she had some sort of grudge against you."

"Me? What have I ever done to her?" Weasley squawked.

Hermione couldn't answer, frowning as though she knew the details but couldn't recall them.

Calling the meeting to Order, Albus steepled his fingers. "It is obvious that we have to wait for Atropos to make her move. When she does, our best chance of dealing with her is to capture her as killing her would also kill Hermione. As I said before, Cutting Curses will cause blood loss, weakening our enemy enough to bring her into our custody. Is that clear?" At the general affirmative, Albus narrowed his eyes at Moody. "Alastor?"

"Crystal," the veteran Auror muttered, his magical eye fixed on Lupin's back.

On the morning of Thursday, 25th March, Tonks had Flooed to the Ministry for her next shift when she staggered back through moments later, breathless.

"What is it, Nymphadora?" Albus asked. For once, Tonks ignored the usage of her given name.

"The Aurory has found Voldemort. Cornered him, too. Every Auror available, even those still in training, has been requisitioned." Tonks explained, her hair flickering every colour of the rainbow, seemingly out of her control in her excitement. "Come on, Harry!"

Potter jumped to his feet, eyes wide behind his glasses. He followed Tonks, only to knock her into Lupin's arms, when the werewolf stopped his lover in her tracks.

"Please be careful, 'Dora."

Suddenly noticing Hermione's absence by his side, Severus didn't notice Tonks reassuring her furry boyfriend, sweeping past her upstairs.

He couldn't see Hermione, but the general lack of light in the hallway, coupled with the chill, made it obvious that she was there. Knowing that Lumos would not work, he groped around in the dark until his fingers touched her rigid back.

"It's not him," she said, her voice strangled with emotion. Rage or fear, Severus did not know. "~~It can't~~ be him."

Stepping forward to put his arms around her, Severus felt helpless. Useless. He had no idea of what to say.

She shrugged out of his embrace. From the movement of the air, she had whirled around to face him. *I did not die for no reason!*

The light gradually returned, revealing Hermione standing in front of him, her face a rictus of fury, eyes only just starting to fade from black to brown. Blood trickled from her clenched fists. Severus gently pried them open, to see that her nails had dug deeply into her palms. He was about to cast a healing charm when Poppy opened the door, scowling at the sight of Hermione bleeding. Tutting, she whipped her wand out, healing the torn flesh before her patient's eyes had finished returning to their normal hue.

Albus had followed Poppy out. "*Tergeo*," he murmured, removing the bloodstains from Hermione's hands. "Even if Voldemort's soul has found a way back from the void, you are not to blame. You did everything in your power to stop him..."

"Just as *she* did everything in her power to bring... him... back..." A strange expression flitted across Hermione's face. "Unless..." She shook her head. "Moot point, anyway, now that the Aurors have been called out. He's probably already dead."

"Would it kill you to explain?" Severus asked, frustration bleeding into his voice.

Hermione's reply was interrupted by a voice from behind them. "You four, kitchen, now. Potter's back," Moody growled.

Chapter 9

Chapter 10 of 18

Necromantic mayhem at the Ministry.

AN: Many thanks to my betas, septentrion and LadySunflower.

Concealed by a Disillusionment Charm, I watched from the shadows as the assembled Aurors collected Lord Voldemort's corpse and Disapparated. I presume that they were afraid that I'd show up and kill them for daring to execute 'Voldemort'.

Little did they know, they had actually done me a favour. The Muggle soul I had transferred into Voldemort's body had rapidly come to the stage where he fancied himself in love with me. He'd become clingy...an obstruction to my plans. He'd served his purpose, too. If push came to shove and I had need of the same thing again, I could repeat the process.

However, I couldn't let them think that they could get away with killing someone who had been under my protection, particularly when I had recovered from my exertions in the week I'd laid low. That and my Muggle-in-Voldemort was good enough in bed for me to regard his death as a waste. I had been intending to switch him back into his own body and Obliviate him using my new wand. Not that I really needed an excuse to attack my next target; it was the next logical step....

Bold as brass, my Disillusionment Charm removed, I entered the Ministry building through the visitor's entrance, pinning the badge produced by the automated system onto my robes with tongue firmly in cheek: *Jane, Pest Control*. Obviously not the whole truth, but no lies were detected preventing me from entering. Giving my full birth name or my assumed name would have risked bringing down everything the Ministry could throw at me, provided that they were sensible enough to class even deceased people as high risk in their security system.

I sauntered over to the wand registration desk, my week-old 'purchase' in hand. The surly Ministry employee didn't even bother to look up, missing the fact that the business end of my wand was aimed directly between his eyes. He opened his mouth, doubtless to demand I hand over my wand, only to gasp his last breath instead, slumping down onto the desk.

It was laughable that no one had noticed that something was wrong. Granted, I hadn't used the Killing Curse with its distinctive green flash, but any usage of a Dark curse within this building should set alarms screaming if anyone competent was employed.

Stepping into the lift conveniently situated on the same floor as the Atrium, I sent it to the Minister's office. The workers stepping on and off the lift with each floor ignored me, the most alert just giving my nametag a cursory glance before looking up to observe the convoluted flight of the enchanted memos.

At my destination, the Minister's vapid secretary informed me that he was in an important meeting. Apparently, if I wished to see him, I would have to make an appointment.

"I'm here on behalf of someone else. A surprise for the Minister." I winked at the secretary, who stared blankly at me for a moment before almost squealing and waving me in, after sending a memo ahead of me. I had timed my visit well. It was Minister Scrimgeour's birthday, allowing unannounced expressly surprise guests access where on an ordinary day it would have been forbidden.

Inside his opulent office, Scrimgeour was speaking with two Aurors I recognised from my first visit to the Ministry: Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt, whose full names I had made sure to learn; I made a point of learning about my enemies.

Scrimgeour glowered at me over his spectacles, his bushy eyebrows lowered. A moment later those brows lifted as his eyes widened. To complete the comical picture he presented, his face paled to the skin tone of an anaemic vampire.

At the same time, Tonks and Shacklebolt twisted around to face me. The former mouthed 'Hermione' questioningly at me, before she too paled, comprehending which Necromancer was far more likely to have waltzed right into the Minister's office.

All three snatched their wands into their hands with commendable reflexes. Tonks immediately produced what I presume was her Patronus, a silver wolf bounding straight through the wall. I let it go, grimly anticipating the arrival of the cavalry. All the more for me to reap....

'*Expelliarmus*.' My non-verbal command had their wands scattered on the floor behind me before any offensive spells could be cast. Tonks lunged at me, fists flying, displaying her part-Muggle roots. While my mind was my most formidable weapon, I wasn't lacking when it came to physical fighting skills, as Tonks found to her terminal detriment. As a Necromancer, I can detect other people's heartbeats without being in contact with them. This allowed me to relatively easily land a killing blow to the rash, unfortunate Tonks, causing a cardiac arrest. Perhaps she would have survived if someone gave her prompt medical aid, but I was hardly going to allow that to happen. Not when she had been one of the Aurors daring to kill 'Voldemort'.

"Tonks!" Shacklebolt roared, before grabbing the nearest chair and hurling it in my direction in a display of brute strength. I rolled my eyes as I used a Banishing Charm to send it straight back at him, sending him crashing to the floor in a bone-shattering crash.

"Now, Minister, I told your secretary the truth when I said that I was here on the behalf of another."

After watching me take out two of his best Aurors, Scrimgeour made no ill-advised attempt to attack me. He held his head high, fists tightly clenched, but his shaking knees betrayed his fear.

"We executed your precious Dark Lord. After all the deaths he caused, there is no justification for seeking revenge."

I chuckled darkly, shaking my head in disbelief. He actually thought that Voldemort had killed many? If he knew how many I've killed in my time, he'd be wishing that the late Dark Lord was wreaking havoc in my place. "My dear Minister, I could claim that I'm after vengeance, but that wouldn't be entirely true. Nor would I need justification, either, if it was the case."

"Th-then upon whose behalf are you here?" Scrimgeour sputtered.

"You'll very soon meet him," I promised, gathering my power into a superheated spark before casually flicking it at Scrimgeour.

"Right about now, in fact," I murmured as his scream trailed off into a dry rasp. "Rufus Scrimgeour, meet Death."

I don't remember much of the next minute or so, because I allowed myself to slip into the consuming haze of a berserker rage. Any user of Dark magic can succumb to one if they're not careful. For anyone other than a Necromancer, the personal consequences of one far outweigh the benefits. Granted, it's impossible to be harmed whilst in one. But after the rage has passed, the former berserker is left more defenceless than the average Muggle in the time it takes to recover. A situation like that can be fatal, even to a Necromancer.

However, Necromancer or not, I'm still human. In order to manage to kill so many without feeling so much as a twinge of remorse, I needed to disconnect myself from reality. What better way than to allow the beast within to surface?

Looking around from my position kneeling on the floor of the Atrium, I blinked away the last of the daze left by the fury possessing me. I was surrounded by bodies sprawled on the floor, the fountain running red with blood. I eyed the gory sight dispassionately. I'd seen worse. Hell, I'd *caused* worse.

My reflexes may have been somewhat dulled by the rigours of the blood-soaked rage, but that didn't stop me from reaching up to snatch a beetle out of the air as it whizzed past, intent on escape. A very familiar beetle....

"I know just what to do with you," I whispered, smiling down at the struggling insect.

"What I don't understand is why he didn't attack..."

I had been listening to a grimly triumphant Harry describing Voldemort's third downfall when a corporeal Patronus burst out of the fireplace, using a new discovery by the Unspeakables that allowed a Patronus to travel through the Floo network with no need for Floo powder.

Remus Lupin leapt to his feet at the sight of the silver wolf, his chair falling to the tiled floor with a clatter. He was reaching for it as it ran over to him in order to take the message when it abruptly faded into silver mist.

"Dora?" Lupin whispered, looking as though he'd been struck.

Dumbledore placed a consoling hand on his shoulder. "There is only one thing that can interrupt a Patronus, I'm afraid."

"The death of the caster?" Harry queried, swallowing hard when Dumbledore nodded sadly. "Remus, I'm so sorry."

"We don't even know where she is was," Remus all but howled, pounding a clenched fist against the table, his body trembling.

"Tonks was with me when we found Voldemort. Atropos must be out for revenge this is all my..."

Harry's words trailed off, although I could tell that he was still speaking. I could hear nothing but a ringing in my ears coupled with distant screams. I shook my head in an attempt to clear it, dropping my head into my hands when I felt faint, nausea rising inside me as the screams grew either louder or more numerous. Possibly both.

Eventually I had to cut myself off from my Necromantic powers as best as I could to avoid blacking out, eyes tightly shut to keep the table from swimming.

"...mione, it's not your fault. Hermione!" Gradually, I became aware of Severus on one side of me and Minerva on the other, both leaning over me in their concern.

"I know," I rasped, feeling parched although I'd recently finished a cup of Minerva's finest tea. "I just felt a lot of people die."

"Any idea where?"

"Not really. Somewhere," I waved vaguely behind me, "in that sort of direction."

"Can you tell whether it was wizards or Muggles being killed?" Ron asked from across the table.

"I could only hear their screams, not any other details," I said slowly, rubbing the bridge of my nose in an attempt to clear my head somehow. My thoughts were sluggish; it felt like the gears inside my head were smothered in rust.

The feeling gradually passed, but before it did, whatever it was affecting me weakened my Occlumency shields sufficiently for Atropos's mind to touch mine. She didn't seem to be aware of the mental contact this time as her own Occlumency skills were also affected, presumably by whatever it was she'd been doing.

I kept the contact up long enough to ascertain where she was before Occluding. That short glimpse into my other self left me feeling shaken to the core, and I hadn't even intruded deeply enough to find out exactly what she was doing, not that I really needed to as it involved killing in some way. Looking around at the others, they were watching me in varying degrees of concern and bafflement.

"What do you mean by that, lass?" Moody asked from the corner, both eyes fixed on me.

Thinking back to what I had last said, I frowned, wondering what about it was so difficult for them to understand. "Wizards don't sound any different to Muggles when they die. But there's more important things...What? Why are you all looking at me like that?"

"Hermione," said Severus, pitched just for my ears, "the last thing you said was: 'I know just what to do with you,'"

I think I know exactly who really said that, and the fact that it slipped through my lips too was... not good. Glancing around, I could tell that they thought I was losing it. They were quite possibly right, too, but there were more important things to deal with.

"I know where Atropos is. She's at the Ministry."

"Oh, dear Merlin, no. We have to stop her!" cried Minerva.

I couldn't meet any of their eyes. Not even Severus's. I didn't have the heart to tell them that it was probably too late. From what I had guessed from touching Atropos's mind, there was a high body count already.

Moments later, we had arrived in the Atrium using a newly made illicit Portkey courtesy of Dumbledore.

His magical eye riveted on where Atropos was picking her path through the bodies between her and the fireplaces, Moody levelled his wand.

"No!" Severus yelled, held back by Lupin, his wand snatched away from him. Dumbledore echoed my husband, only to discover that Moody had confiscated his wand.

So this was what Moody and Lupin had been arguing about. Obviously the death of Tonks had convinced Lupin that Atropos had to die whatever the cost.

Atropos turned her head, raising an eyebrow almost imperceptibly. Something was wrong here, but what? The smirk slipping across my her face triggered a memory deep in my mind from two sources: The Book and a more ordinary Dark Arts manual, concerning...

"Don't!" I screamed. "She's got a..."

Moody ignored me, launching his curse non-verbally. Atropos made no attempt to block it, her wand out of sight, presumably in her robes. The curse struck her throat in an angry red flash. Even as she staggered back, tripping over the nearest body to land on top of another, I was forced to my knees, clutching at my own throat, gasping for breath. It felt like my air pipe had been severed....

In a nauseating rush of Dark energy, Moody's curse returned to the caster. He successfully blocked the lethal spell from Atropos's direction, but he didn't anticipate an additional burst being returned from me.

For a moment, Moody just stood there. Then he toppled over, his head rolling from his shoulders when he hit the floor. Thankfully there was no blood, or I would have lost my lunch.

Struggling up into a sitting position, tracing a shallow cut across her neck, Atropos looked with grim satisfaction at Moody's body. Fingering the matching cut on my own throat, I swallowed. That could have been me....

Atropos must have enchanted herself so that any mortal blow would backfire, somehow modifying the more normal death curse used by vengeful Dark magicians with Necromantic powers so that she wouldn't die with the would-be killer. I had used a more advanced version of a death curse to transfer any damage from myself to

Voldemort before I had atomised him... and myself.

"Alastor...." Lupin said hollowly, looking sickened.

Severus shrugged out of the appalled werewolf's slack grip, moving to pull me up from the floor. He wrapped an arm around my waist and another around my shoulders to hold me up, my knees threatening to buckle if too much weight was placed on them. Tightly pressed against my back, I could feel him trembling with suppressed emotion.

Dumbledore had his hand outstretched to wandlessly Summon his wand to him from Moody's corpse when Atropos performed the risky manoeuvre of Disapparating whilst not in a standing position. Her attack on the Ministry had obviously destroyed their Anti-Apparition wards in much the same way as Hogwarts'. If her physical state was anything like mine, I'm not surprised that she escaped whilst she still could.

Minerva, Harry and Ron's hexes struck the Ministry worker's body where she had been a split-second before, the concentrated cutting curses creating a gory sight that would have caused me to throw up if I'd been capable of summoning the energy to do so. As it was, I dry heaved, resolutely looking away.

If only Moody and Lupin had followed Dumbledore's plan, Atropos might have been captured. Yet in their place, I might have done the same thing. However, that didn't mean that I could forgive them. After seeing what my death did to Severus last time, I had no wish to put him through that again. He'd also made it quite clear to me that he didn't want me to die if I could possibly avoid it.

"We must search for survivors," Dumbledore ordered, giving Lupin a stern look. He obviously felt that watching Moody die made it pointless to reprimand the grieving werewolf. Hearing Severus's ragged breathing in my ear, I knew that he'd be having words with poor Lupin anyway.

"If there's any left." After the murders of his family, Ron had become quite pessimistic. I couldn't blame him, particularly when it was quite possibly the most realistic frame of mind around a Necromancer like Atropos.

"Hermione, I'm taking you to Poppy, at Grimmauld Place. Don't argue with me, you're in no shape to help here."

I twisted around in Severus's arms to glower up at him, only to bash my nose against his chest when one of my feet shot out from under me. Hanging on tightly to Severus, I waited until I was able to stand on admittedly shaky legs before turning to see what had tripped me. My sharp eyes picked out Moody's magical eye still rolling across the floor from where it had shot out from under my feet.

Growling under my breath, I turned back to Severus, pushing against his chest to get him to stand back so that I wouldn't get a crick in my neck whilst setting him straight.

"It's only phantom pain, I'm fine. Besides, Necromantic powers give me an edge none of the rest of you have when it comes to detecting the living and the dead."

"Hermione..."

"There's a time and place for being overprotective, Severus, and this isn't it," I hissed, conscious of the fact that this argument didn't need to be overheard by anyone else, although Lupin may well have been able to hear it due to more sensitive hearing from his lycanthropy.

Severus looked at me long and hard, his lips twisting in displeasure. "Very well. But I'm not letting you out of my reach, let alone out of my sight."

Even without the need for Severus's steadying grip on my elbow, his close presence was welcome in a place where I could feel so much death caused by someone who, for all intents and purposes, was me.

The most sensible thing to do would be to find anyone still alive and then begin to account for those who had died. We had just reached the lifts when my eyes were inexorably drawn to something just above the 'call' button. A beetle, pinned to the wall with what looked to be a broken hairpin. A beetle with some very familiar markings....

I choked, fighting back the bile rising in my throat. I wanted to turn away, but couldn't, my eyes transfixed to the mortal remains of Rita Skeeter's Animagus form.

"What's wr..." Harry started to ask, before inhaling sharply. "Is that who I think it is?"

"Horrible," Ron muttered from behind me, sounding as though he was about to be sick.

The ringing in my ears blocked everything else out. From the way my vision was threatening to fade out and the desperate need for air taking hold of me, I was hyperventilating.

Someone grabbed hold of my hands, bringing them and their own, larger hands, up to close over my nose and mouth, limiting my air intake. That same someone gently pushed me down to sit on the floor, crouching behind me. The attack gradually passed, allowing me to become aware of Harry filling Minerva, Dumbledore and Lupin in about Skeeter's secret. Severus for it was of course him behind me waited until my breathing returned to a more normal rate before taking his hands away from my face.

Minerva tugged the pin out of the beetle, gently lowering it to the floor out of our path and changing it back into Rita's human body, struggling against the rigor mortis to close Rita's glassy eyes, after removing her jewelled glasses.

After recovering my composure, I could tell that all survivors of the attack within the range of my powers had fled the building, leaving the dead behind. Except....

"There's a group of people still alive in the bowels of the building."

"Where?" asked Dumbledore.

"I don't...." I trailed off, staring into space as I realised that I actually could tell where they were. A room that seemed to call to me, muffled as it was by the death echoes resounding in the building. "They're in the Death Chamber."

Chapter 10

Chapter 11 of 18

Aftermath.

Disclaimer: JKR owns Harry Potter. I can only take responsibility for the plot.

AN: Many thanks to my wonderful betas, septentrion and LadySunflower.

Ordinarily, Albus might have directed the Order to split into pairs to search the building. Due to their very own pet Necromancer detecting exactly where the survivors were, that was clearly unnecessary. Jabbing the button to call the lift, Severus helped Hermione into it, ignoring the irritated looks she was giving him. She probably thought that she didn't need quite as much support as he was giving her, a view he corrected by temporarily releasing her until she swayed on her feet.

"Level Nine," Albus ordered. As part of the Wizengamot, the lift was enchanted to allow him access wherever he wanted, regardless of security breaches.

The lift soon arrived at their destination. Most of the occupants charged out to the single entrance of the Department of Mysteries, eager to find the survivors. Hermione didn't move, her head cocked as though she was listening to something above them.

"Did Atropos miss anyone?" Severus asked, guessing that she had sensed some other hint of life.

Lupin, who had been slumped against the side of the lift, lifted his head at these words, but said nothing.

"Not exactly... Headmaster, could you send the lift up? Quickly. Whatever spark of life I can feel is dwindling."

Albus did as she asked. "Say when."

The lift stopped at the top floor, where the Minister's office was located along with the other bigwigs.

As soon as he stepped out of the lift, a low moan rose from the back of Lupin's throat. Nostrils flaring, he staggered into Scrimgeour's office. Keeping his hand under Hermione's elbow, Severus followed, Albus on his heels.

Lupin was crouched on the floor, cradling Tonks's body in his arms, rocking slightly as bitter tears trickled down his rugged features. The Metamorphmagus's hair was limp, mousy brown in colour. Uncomfortable with witnessing this, Severus looked away. It reminded him far too much of his own state whilst bereft of Hermione.

Kingsley lay sprawled on the floor, the unnatural angle of his neck making it clear that he was dead, as if the splinters of a shattered chair impaling him did not.

A pair of wire-rimmed spectacles were also half buried in a pile of ash scattered in front of an ornately carved desk, presumably the mortal remains of Scrimgeour. Opportunistic bastard though the Minister had been, like virtually all of his predecessors, no one deserved to die like that. With the exception of Voldemort, Severus corrected himself.

Shrugging out of Severus's grip, Hermione knelt beside Lupin. She beckoned to Severus and Albus, motioning for them to restrain the grieving werewolf. While they pulled him back, she caught hold of Tonks, gently lowering the body to the floor.

The three men watched Hermione extend her hand, palm down, across Tonks's chest, her eyes sliding half closed. Severus was not surprised to see her irises begin to match the darkness of her pupils.

"What are you doing?" Lupin asked, his voice hoarse. He began to struggle, requiring Albus to magically restrain him.

Ghostly light began to gather between Hermione's outstretched hand and Tonks. A rushing sound much like that of wind through trees rose to audible levels, to the extent that it throbbed through Severus's bones, yet without shaking the building. The wild magic made his hair feel like it stood on end, but there was no sign of the gut-wrenching Dark magic.

Her shoulders tense, outstretched hand shaking, Hermione was clearly approaching her limits. Grunting with the exertion involved, she lowered her hand, shoving the light into Tonks. For a moment, nothing happened. Then Tonks's spine arched off the floor, her eyes snapping open as she sucked in a pained-sounding lungful of air. She flinched, her hair turning white as soon as she set eyes upon Hermione.

Albus released Lupin, watching with a benevolent smile as Lupin virtually Apparated across the room to grab his beloved in a desperate embrace. Severus was more concerned with Hermione, who had backed away from Tonks, her expression shuttered.

Looking behind Severus, Hermione drew his attention to the feline Patronus scrambling through the lift shaft. Padding over to Albus, it disappeared when he touched it.

"Minerva wants to know where we are. The survivors in the Death Chamber are largely Unspeakables, only one of which seems willing to assist us. I suggest we go there now, if you are fit to move, Nymphadora."

"I escape death by the skin of my teeth and you still call me by that wretched name," Tonks grumbled, turning to Lupin. "Make sure that he's gagged at my funeral. *That* name better be nowhere near my eulogy."

Tonks proved to be even more unsteady on her feet than usual. As there was also the threat of brain damage due to the length of time Tonks had been technically dead, Lupin deemed her unfit to assist them, taking her to be seen to by Poppy, agreeing to meet them in the Department of Mysteries.

'No doubt Lupin intends to come back, but in his place, I would find it all but impossible to tear myself away.'

By the time they arrived at the Department of Mysteries, the survivors had all left, except for the solitary helpful soul, an Unspeakable.

At first sight, Severus thought that Unseeable might have been a better term. A middle aged wizard, Croaker possessed a face and build of such average qualities that he seemed to fade into the background, beneath the notice of any observer.

"Croaker, Unspeakable, at your service."

Feeling his lips twitch, Severus just managed to keep himself from smirking. Croaker lived up to his name, his voice sounding as if he'd gargled gravel his whole life.

Minerva sidled over to Albus, who looked a little lost, having presumably tried to place which year in Hogwarts he had been. "Same year as I was, he kept getting called to Headmaster Dippet's office: the teachers kept losing sight of him, you included," she hissed, on the edge of Severus's hearing. "His first name is also the same as his last."

"Ah! Croaker. I am not surprised that Atropos missed you. But how did the other occupants of the Death Chamber escape her notice?"

"I don't rightly know. But I saw 'er kill the 'ead of Department, then retreated to the Death Chamber along with seven of my colleagues. They didn't want to stay around any longer than necessary, particularly not when they 'eard that you 'ad another Necromancer with you." It seemed that Croaker had a habit of dropping the aitches, which made Severus idly wonder if the man was a more upmarket relation of Mundungus Fletcher. "This Atropos saw the last of us go in, but didn't follow. Pressed up against the door, as I was, I 'eard 'er push at it, then her footsteps rushing away as if she'd been burned."

"Perhaps you can shine some light on this mystery, Hermione. Croaker, if I might introduce..."

"We've met," Hermione said shortly.

Frowning for a moment, Croaker's eyebrows shot up as he recognised her. "Seems that rumours of your death 'ave been greatly exaggerated."

Severus was looking between Hermione and Croaker, wondering when they could have met, when he remembered the single mention of an encounter with an Unspeakable in her diary. At the end of her fifth year, after the battle in the Department of Mysteries, an Unspeakable had been despatched to Hogwarts to remove certain memories of her time there. That *Obliviate* had not worked due to her eidetic memory, but had caused Hermione considerable pain. Eyes narrowing, hand twitching towards his wand, Severus's belated retaliatory actions were brought up short by an elbow to his side.

"Who will guard the guards?" Hermione murmured reproachfully, guessing what he had been about to do.

Wincing, Severus moved his hand away from his wand. The reminder that he had caused equal pain to her with an attempt at the same spell made it clear that he had no right to exact vengeance. That didn't keep him from doing his best to crush Croaker's hand when it came to his turn to be introduced.

"I hope more Ministry employees managed to flee through the Floo or by Apparition. Nine survivors out all of the occupants of the Ministry is a terrible ratio," Albus mused.

"You found another? I wondered where the four of you had... but where is Remus?" Minerva asked, abruptly noticing that only three people had emerged from the lift where four had gone up.

Potter almost lost his glasses when Weasley whirled around, long limbs flailing as he expressed his surprise bodily, blurting, "Tonks survived?" If they had not been in the company of a Necromancer, Severus might have been more impressed by the correct conclusion Weasley had jumped to.

"Indeed." Albus had obviously decided not to elaborate on the circumstances, not when enough of the Order had already deserted the cause due to fear of Necromancy.

"That's great!" Potter beamed, readjusting his glasses on his nose.

Minerva glanced shrewdly at Hermione, guessing that she had something more to do with Tonks's survival than Albus was revealing. "What should our next move be?" she asked, changing the subject before anyone else less tolerant of Necromancy twigged.

"That depends on what sort of state Atropos is currently in. We cannot delay if she is ready to continue rampaging," said Albus. "Hermione?"

"If how I feel is any indication, she'll be laying low for at least a day or so."

It was on the tip of Severus's tongue to insist that he take Hermione to Poppy, but her earlier refusal made it clear that there would be no reasoning with his stubborn wife.

"Then we have time to ensure that the dead are given the respect they deserve, and somehow secure them so that Atropos cannot easily raise her own army."

The smile slipped off Potter's face. "But the sheer size... how will we find them all?"

Severus tightened his hold on Hermione as he felt her stiffen. If only Potter actually thought before he opened his mouth! It was obvious to anyone with half a brain that with a Necromancer in the search party, they would have no difficulty. Recalling the detrimental reaction Hermione sometimes had when sensing someone dying in the past, Severus resented Albus for his obvious reliance on her.

"It might make it easier to search the Ministry for the cadavers if I retrieve The Map from the 'ead's office. It's an invention of my Department, and it should be possible to modify it to show the locations of the dead," Croaker suggested.

If such a thing was possible, and if it spared Hermione the unpleasantness of sensing every death in the Ministry, past and present, Croaker was Severus's new best friend.

In the time it took for Croaker to find the map swearing up a blue streak at the chaotic state of his late superior's office the majority of the Order had returned to the Atrium to begin the grim task of retrieving the dead and arranging them in more respectful positions.

The Map of the Ministry seemed to be similar to Potter's map of Hogwarts, showing the locations of the living occupants of the building with the curious exception of Hermione. It seemed that Necromancers could not be seen, a flaw that could explain why no one had detected Atropos until it was too late.

The process of modifying The Map involved quite a bit of trial and error, together with the combined expertise of an Unspeakable, a former Death Eater and a Necromancer. However, it did not take long, as Croaker had been part of the team enchanting The Map in the first place. The spells involved were bordering on Dark, to say the least. Severus hoped that Albus would ask no questions, as stretching the truth did get a little tiresome. He also made it clear to Croaker that should The Map require returning to normal, no further assistance would be given from Hermione, who was even more unsteady on her feet due to the amount of her blood required to alter the ink.

Opening his mouth to insist that she go to Grimmauld Place to be checked over by Poppy, Severus abruptly snapped his mouth shut, teeth clicking together, when he looked at Hermione. Her eyes were gradually darkening to the point where even the whites of her eyes were obliterated by the deep blackness of an active Necromancer.

'She's making my own eyes pale in comparison!'

For a moment the daylight streaming in through the magical false window seemed to dim, accompanied by the soul freezing chill Severus associated with Necromancy. He could not help recoiling from the source, berating himself as he did so. Hermione did not stagger, and instead straightened up. The darkness passed, revealing Hermione to have regained her colour and to be steady on her feet without any support from him. Severus thought that by the revolted expression on her face, she looked as though if she could be pale, she would be.

"Hermione?" asked Severus, his voice sharp with concern.

"Remind me never to deliberately weaken myself whilst surrounded by recent deaths. It was as though I just absorbed some of the excess life force in this place like a... a... I don't know...."

"A parasite?"

"Yes. Exactly. What's more, I didn't mean to. I didn't want to." Hermione stared at her scuffed shoes. "Although, it felt...."

"It felt good," Severus stated, unsurprised.

She nodded, her lips compressed to a white line.

Stepping forward, Severus rested his hands on her shoulders, using his thumbs to tilt her chin up so that her eyes reluctantly met his. "Certain aspects of the Dark Arts are like that. It is why they are so addictive. That you were revolted by it means that you should not be overly worried."

Croaker drew their attention, clearing his throat. "This is strange," he murmured, fixated on The Map, having either completely missed or chosen to ignore Hermione's inadvertent usage of her powers. "One of these 'ere names isn't legible. It's as if The Map can't decide whose body it is." He jabbed a finger at the flickering label of a dot in the morgue attached to the Aurory.

There could be no question that The Map was functioning properly, as apart from the unmoving name-marked dots littering the plans of each floor, Hermione's name had

appeared. Apparently Necromancers were technically dead as far the magic behind The Map was concerned, despite being otherwise in the flesh.

"I thought as much," Hermione murmured, the twisted smirk on her face matching the grimly triumphant light in her eyes. That light faded as a troubled expression crossed her features. "But why?"

"Why what? I hate it when she does not elaborate on her cryptic remarks!"

Ignoring Severus and Croaker's questions, Hermione left the office. Instead of giving in to his first impulse to follow her, Severus observed her movements on The Map. As he might have guessed, she made a beeline for the mystery body. Within a minute of her arrival beside the body, the name stopped flickering, revealing it to be Voldemort's corpse.

Leaving Croaker to get The Map to Albus, Severus attempted to use his marital branding to Apparate directly to Hermione's side, but it seemed that it only worked to summon the other in dire need. Unless specific phrasing was required... another thing to ask Hermione. Grumbling to himself under his breath, Severus followed in Hermione's footsteps to the Aurory.

When he entered the morgue, the first thing Severus saw was Hermione staggering away from the side of Voldemort's body, snatching her hand back as if it had been burned. He assumed that she had used a variation of her contact Legilimency to find something out from the deceased Dark Lord.

She backed into the nearest wall, sliding down it to sit on the floor, as if her legs were no longer able to hold her up. Her newly regained healthy colouring had faded to a sickly green, sweat beading on her exposed skin. One of Hermione's arms was held to her stomach as she doubled over, the other raised to enable her to cover her mouth as she shook with suppressed retching.

"No argument this time. I'm taking you to Poppy now," Severus said sternly, reaching down to pull Hermione to her feet.

Hermione slumped against him, moaning. "Oh God, I'm going to be sick...."

"So I gathered." Severus made sure that he had a tight hold of her in preparation for Side-Along Apparition.

"Atropos put a Muggle's soul in Voldemort's body." Finally, Hermione was explaining.

Severus delayed leaving for Grimmauld Place until after he had replied. "As despicable as that is, surely you are familiar with worse?"

"She bedded him."

All in all, it was fortunate that Severus did not Splinch them.

Chapter 11

Chapter 12 of 18

Brainstorming.

Chapter 11

Disclaimer: JKR owns the wonderful world of Harry Potter.

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and LadySunflower for betaing.

Poppy Pomfrey took one look at Severus and Hermione as they entered the second room appropriated for her impromptu hospital. She immediately Conjured a bucket, just in time for Hermione to double over it, retching miserably. Severus managed to restrain himself long enough to choke down an Anti-Nausea Potion offered by the long-suffering Poppy.

Eyeing the vial in his hands ruefully, Severus regretted that it only worked to alleviate physical symptoms of sickness.

"I feel the need to Scourgify my mind. Perhaps Hermione will consent to a mutual Obliviate?" Even as he thought it, Severus knew that she was unlikely to agree, even with no risk of a copious and painful nosebleed.

"I'd rather not know what can have nauseated the pair of you. That is, provided that it was something you saw and not a curse?" With no answer, Poppy turned to Hermione, Vanishing the bucket and its contents whilst his wife forced down the potion offered to her, grimacing at the unpleasant taste of it.

"I'm going to have to ask you to brew some more Anti-Nausea Potion, Severus. While there are stocks of U-NO-SPEW at hand, they are not suitable for usage on pregnant women. Poor Fleur has been having a terrible time with morning sickness. I suspect that it is something to do with her Veela blood, but my midwifery skills are a little rusty."

"I'll see what I can do, Poppy," Severus said slowly, distracted by Hermione mouthing 'U-NO-SPEW' with an outraged look on her face. If the Weasley twins were not already dead, he suspected that they very soon would be. "But we have far bigger problems at hand to concentrate on."

"I know!" Poppy snapped. "I'm sorry, Severus, but I'm a Healer first and foremost."

She got her wand out, trailing it over Hermione almost on automatic, ignoring her patient's protestations that there was nothing else wrong with her and that she needed to return to the Ministry.

"I beg to differ, judging by that cut across your neck, young lady!" Muttering a healing spell under her breath, a puzzled frown creased Poppy's forehead when it had no effect. "Strange... how did you get the cut?"

A hoarse voice from the corner spoke up reluctantly. "Alastor attempted to decapitate Atropos, even though it would do the same to Hermione. The curse backfired."

Poppy gasped. "Against Albus's orders? Alastor Moody, you bloody fool! You say it backfired. I take it Alastor's dead, then? I see." She sighed. "Well, there's nothing I can do to heal your neck. It might heal naturally, but it may permanently scar."

Hermione shrugged as if to say that scarring was of no concern to her.

Lip curling, Severus glowered over at where Lupin sat in the corner beside Tonks's bed, where she lay, hair a lurid pink cloud around her head. It was on the tip of his tongue to call the cowardly werewolf out, to force him to admit what part he had played in Moody's murderous insubordination.

"How are you, Tonks?" Hermione asked.

Severus scowled, peeved that she had changed the subject. He cast a baleful look at Lupin, promising himself that he would never leave Hermione in Lupin's company. Hardly rational, as it was clear that any attempt to kill her would backfire on the would-be killer, and Hermione had saved Tonks's life, but Severus did not trust the werewolf.

"Fine, thanks." Tonks beamed, freeing a hand from Lupin's grip to wave. "Poppy wants to keep me here under observation for a while, or I'd be back at the Ministry. I tried telling Remus to go back, but he wanted to keep an eye on me, sparing Poppy's attention for Hagrid and Fleur."

"Speaking of which, I had better return to them. Both are more lively now and so more of a handful." Poppy left for the original room she had claimed as the hospital in Grimmauld Place.

The smile faded from Tonks's face. She looked sheepishly over at Hermione. "Erm, sorry about the way I reacted when you brought me back. I, er, thought you were Atropos." She lowered her eyes. "What's more, when Atropos burst into Scrimgeour's office, I thought she was you at first."

Hermione moved over to Tonks. To the young Auror's credit, she didn't flinch away when Hermione laid a hand on her shoulder. "I understand: apparently it's a mistake easily made. The Weasleys knew me better than you, yet they also made it."

I only hope that I would be able to spot the difference between them. I know I can do it with both of them in sight, but would I manage with just Atropos? Severus wondered uneasily.

"Hermione..." Lupin looked up, his features guilt-ridden. "My only excuse for my part in Alastor's attack was thinking that I had lost Tonks. I'm so, so, sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

To Severus's surprise, Hermione ignored Lupin, stony-faced. She squeezed Tonks's shoulder before withdrawing, turning on her heel, stalking over to the door and holding it open for Severus to follow her. A satisfied smirk spread over Severus's face as he heard Tonks begin to grill Lupin about exactly what he'd done before the door swung shut, reducing the voices to an unintelligible mumble. That smirk broke into a grin when a masculine yelp of pain penetrated the closed door.

Just as they were about to return to the Ministry, the front door swung open. Croaker stepped inside, holding a scrap of paper in his hands.

"Albus inducted you into the Order, then."

"Yes, 'e let me into the secret of this... charming place." Croaker looked around at the grim surroundings of the Order headquarters. "Once I gave 'im The Map, 'e thought I'd be most useful 'ere. Bless 'im, 'e didn't want to put me through seeing any of my colleagues dead. I still saw those already laid out in the Atrium...." He trailed off, looking haunted.

Severus was about to make their farewells and leave when Croaker shook himself, stepping into their way.

"Dumbledore wanted you two to stay 'ere, it seems that 'e thinks that we can solve the mystery of why that Necromancer didn't go into the Death Chamber, when we know that she could've."

"We do?" Severus asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Your missus got in, didn't she?"

"I wasn't a Necromancer at the time," Hermione said. From the chilly tone of her voice, Severus guessed that she was annoyed at being excluded from the conversation.

"Ah, but that's beside the point. Our records show that Grindelwald disguised 'imself to get into the Death Chamber for some strange reason, but was discovered by Dumbledore and killed before 'e could do whatever 'e was there for."

"He was killed in the Death Chamber? That's not mentioned in any book about him," Hermione stated.

"The Department of Mysteries is top secret, so of course the Ministry spun a different story for the historians," Croaker explained.

Rather than stand in the hallway to brainstorm, Severus suggested that they moved to the kitchen to find some refreshments and sit down in relative comfort.

"All I can think of is that I found the Death Chamber rather... unpleasant to be in," Hermione reluctantly admitted, her eyes lowered to the steaming cup of tea in front of her.

"I know you saw one of the occasional runic flares, when no one but an Unspeakable should 'ave been able to, but what made it unpleasant?" Croaker asked, blowing on his own cup to avoid burning his tongue, before taking a sip.

Shaking her head, Hermione dropped her head down to rest on her forearms, her bushy hair concealing her face and muffling her voice when she spoke. "I can't remember."

"What with the Ministry gone and all, I'm glad I'm not duty-bound to fulfil my old mission to *Obliviate* you," Croaker said, eyeing where Severus was idly polishing his wand, his knuckles whitening as he gave the Unspeakable a warning look. "After all, we'll need your memories of your foray into the Department, should you remember."

"Without knowing what could 'ave put a Necromancer off going into the Death Chamber, I'm stumped." Pausing to scratch his unshaven chin, Croaker continued speaking. "Well, I tell a lie. Those runic flares might explain something." Setting his cup back down on the table, he sighed gustily. "If only those runes could be translated. Whatever they say might 'ave a clue..."

Severus blinked. From what he had read in Hermione's diary months back, what Croaker had said made little sense to him.

Hermione lifted her head up, looking perplexed. "If? You mean to say that no one in the Department of Mysteries could read those runes?"

For a long moment, Croaker just stared at Hermione. Then, as the implications of her words sunk in, he grinned widely. "You can read them? Fantastic! I'll 'ave to return to the Ministry at once to retrieve the logs my Department kept of every runic flare in the Death Chamber."

It was evening by the time the Order returned from the Ministry. Croaker had returned, Levitating a stack of scrolls within minutes of leaving Grimmauld Place, and had spent hours sorting through them and handing likely ones to Hermione for her to translate. Severus had spent the time making the potions requested by Poppy. When the matron had entered the room to collect some of the newly bottled potions, Severus had taken a malicious pleasure in seeing Croaker cringe. It was clear that the

Unspeakable had not forgotten bearing the brunt of the sharp side of Poppy's tongue after his botched attempt to *Obliviate* Hermione.

Most of the newly returned Order left for their homes, physically and emotionally exhausted. From the strained expressions and shifty looks on a few of them, Severus doubted that they would come back.

"With Croaker's map and a roster of the Ministry employees present at the time, I regret to say that approximately two thirds of them were killed. The upper echelons were particularly devastated, with none of the Heads of departments or the Minister's secretaries escaping," Albus said, accepting a cup of tea, although he looked queasy at the offer of food.

"That proves Atropos really is Hermione in some shape or form, killing Umbridge off like she did," Weasley muttered to Potter.

The quill Hermione was using to write down her translation of the current set of runes snapped in her hand. Groaning internally, Severus cursed the unthinking brat, who gave a guilty start as he looked over at Hermione's shuttered features.

Albus sighed heavily. "Atropos clearly has no mercy, for she did not even spare a clearly pregnant woman... which reminds me, Croaker, that map of yours does not indicate the presence of unborn children. The only ones who escaped Atropos either left by Floo or Apparition or were in the Death Chamber."

"Have you managed to find out why she did not or could not enter the Death Chamber?" Minerva asked, keen to hear of any progress.

"Only that she was inside it last winter solstice," Hermione managed to force out between clenched teeth. She shrugged off Severus's restraining hand, standing. Her voice shook when she spoke again. "And that she really is me. But there is confirmation in the other files concerning the Death Chamber that those who pass through the veil have never returned."

"Like Sirius... so we have to capture her and chuck her through the veil?" Potter asked, the pained tones present in his voice, presumably due to the memory of Black's fall through the veil rather than the implications that throwing Atropos through the veil would also send Hermione through.

"But won't that also chuck Hermione through, too?" Weasley, to Severus's everlasting surprise, displayed more intelligence than Potter.

"We'll cross that bridge when it comes to it. Before that, we have to capture Atropos in the first place." At Hermione's words, Severus glowered up at her. He had thought that his last reading of the riot act had sunk in, but obviously not.

Standing up, Severus wrapped an arm around Hermione's waist. "Presuming that our murderous Necromancer does not run amok before tomorrow, we shall take our leave." Pitched for Hermione's ears only, he continued. "It seems you need a reminder of your own self-worth, *dearest*."

Chapter 12

Chapter 13 of 18

Massacre at St. Mungo's.

Chapter 12

Disclaimer: JKR owns the Potterverse.

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and LadySunflower for betaing.

I awoke gasping, cold sweat running down my exposed skin and dampening my bedding. I could almost smell the acrid smoke that had been so cloying in my dream. Closing my eyes, I forced my breathing back to a more normal rate.

That hadn't been one of the usual nightmares that had plagued me for years. Unusual or not, it had been so vivid, like a memory of something that had actually happened. I shook myself. Grumbling under my breath, I flung back the bedclothes and climbed out of bed. I hated to be reminded of my parents, particularly anything associated with their deaths: even if that thing was a dream of a very different situation to my recollections.

After performing my ablutions, I glowered into the mirror. The restless sleep of the night before had left deep shadows under my eyes; I looked like death warmed up.

While dressing, I couldn't help but wonder how Granger's parents had died. There was no reason to suppose that it was the same way mine had. In fact, if they had, that would turn my perception of Granger on its head. Thinking of Granger, perhaps that unusual nightmare was connected somehow to her. After all, if not for Occlumency, our minds would be an open book to the other. During sleep, the strength of my mental shields was reduced, so it followed that hers also were. I chuckled maliciously at the thought that she had suffered my nightmares whilst I suffered hers.

It had been a fortnight since my decimation of the Ministry. I had needed some time to recover from Moody's attack. Granted, I had survived, but it had shaken me and almost drained my magical reserves to boot. After I was sufficiently improved, I had to check whether the death curse was still operating. It was as well that I did, for it had needed renewing.

The rest of the time had not been spent twiddling my thumbs. So far everything had gone according to plan... well, everything but accidentally bringing Granger back to life. I hadn't planned for my lover to be killed, either, but he was no great loss. Not when my plan concerning him had been proven to work perfectly. I wonder if I should worry about my sanity with my reaction to that news. Breaking into cackles of glee and bursting into tears at the same time can't be good. I don't really want to go the way of Morgana, but I suspect I've surpassed her. She wasn't a Necromancer, after all.

Without the Ministry, the Order is struggling to keep their precious Statute of Secrecy from unravelling. Terrorising and killing Muggles with their own dead served to divert the Order from my main targets. Still, my enemies were more intelligent than I gave them credit for. Someone had the bright idea to place trip wards to alert them of any trouble in their remaining strongholds. I suspect that one of the cowardly Unspeakables who hid from me in the Death Chamber let them in on some secret knowledge, for the wards were able to differentiate between the Dark magic emanating from my zombies and the Dark magic from me, which no previous ward I had encountered had done. I suspect Granger had something to do with it, for she was the one alerted, but she was not the one who had designed the wards. If she had been, they would have been used before the attack on the Ministry.

Everywhere I went, she seemed to follow. So I returned to laying low, sending the undead to do my dirty work. The Order was far less successful in stopping them, no

doubt due to the fact that Granger had to possess one of her friends to atomise them and risked sizzling said friend if she did. I had learned that much from controlling Ollivander.

With only Nagini for company, I was fast losing patience. Limited success, while still progress, was not enough to satisfy me. Whoever the Unspeakable aiding the Order was, he or she was as good as dead.

Lacking in quality sleep, my patience had come to an end. It was time to act. This time, the Order and their pet Necromancer would not stop me.

"Nagini!" I called. The snake slithered over to me. I hadn't been born with the ability to speak Parseltongue, but my Lord Voldemort had seen fit to bless me with it. As far as I could tell, it was either a virus or a blood disease. How it had been passed to Potter was a mystery, but was doubtless something to do with his precious scar. Nagini hissed, drawing my attention back to her.

"It's time," I said, extending a leg for her to wind around, undulating as she moved higher up to wrap herself around my body. I was just about to Disapparate when I paused, wondering which target to pick. Either would work, but which would strike more at their hearts? Which was more important to them, health or wealth?

Nagini squeezed me impatiently, but not hard enough to make me breathless. "You try to Apparate when indecisive. That's one way to guarantee Splinching."

Another way to think about it was whether or not I wanted to deal with goblins yet. "Hmm, wounded wizards or bloodthirsty goblins. Does sharing my existence with another mean sharing my brain, too?" I rolled my eyes. I could only hope that Granger was equally scatterbrained.

The Order had set up their newfangled wards at St. Mungo's, so there was no need for me to make my presence known by killing off significant numbers. That didn't stop me from doing so, of course, although I did feel worrying twinges of what passed for my conscience. I tell a lie. They were more than just twinges. I had my wand raised to kill a toddler, having killed his parents seconds before. I couldn't do it. What was wrong with me? Nagini made to make the kill in my stead, but sparks flying from my wand put her off. She hissed in annoyance, slinking off to satisfy her appetite elsewhere.

Having butchered most of the occupants of the waiting room, I began to raise some of the dead. I wouldn't need many, though... the Order hadn't been the only ones to make preparations.

Seeing Nagini about to pounce on the same sobbing toddler, I called her to heel.

Next moment, the Order had appeared out of nowhere, all clustered around an empty crisp packet. A Portkey, I presume. Upon seeing me, they scattered, wands taking aim.

"Strike!" I ordered Nagini. She obeyed, taking advantage of the dumbstruck Order to attack Potter, ignoring his attempts to tell her to stop. His attempts to communicate did slow her down enough for Weasley to kill her.

Hexes began to fly at me, all of them cutting curses of some sort, judging by the way they cut my zombie bodyguards to pieces. What they were trying to achieve by that was beyond me. They knew of the death curse, after all... unless they weren't trying to kill me.

By the look on Granger's face, she was able to sense me dipping into my Necromantic powers, but couldn't detect exactly what I was doing with them. I smirked, watching her eyes rove around, trying to spot any sign of what I was doing.

Weasley shrieked in pain, clutching at his leg. That would teach him to turn his back on anything dead when around a Necromancer. My resurrected pet was now making a beeline for Potter, shrugging off his hexes effortlessly.

The smirk was wiped off my face when Snape managed to obliterate Nagini's head. Her body kept going, but without her head there was no way for her to target her prey. Potter staggered out of the way, offering a shaky thanks to Snape. The headless Nagini slithered into the nearest wall, squirming along it until she reached the legs of one of my zombies. She then proceeded to attempt to squeeze the zombie to death. Groaning, I put her out of her misery.

Feeling a strange tickle in my mind, I looked up sharply. Granger's eyes were almost as dark as mine currently were. Realising what she was doing, I had enough time to form an atomising spark to deal with the zombie grabbing me from behind. Clever of her to manage to hijack my control over one of the newly dead. Narrowing my eyes, I severed my hold over the zombies, allowing them to fall to the ground. It was time to take the gloves off. Metaphorically, I corrected myself, glancing down at my gloved hands. In order to avoid a potentially cataclysmic paradox, it was only sensible to take precautions to avoid skin contact with Granger.

Before Granger could attempt to exert her own control over the dead bodies present in the room, or before the Order managed to overwhelm my shield charm I was currently protecting myself with, I put my preparations into action.

The majority of the Order were completely taken by surprise. Granger managed to turn on her heel and almost managed to warn her friends of their danger, but was too late to keep herself from being captured the same way as the rest. Either their wands were broken or fell to the floor as their wrists went numb.

Slowly advancing, I watched with satisfaction as they found out who their captors were, twisting their heads to peer behind themselves. I mockingly reached forwards to wipe the tears from Weasley and Potter's cheeks as I passed them.

"Oh, no, Granger, you can't usurp my control over these zombies. You might as well stop trying. It won't work. I guarantee it." Producing a bit of chalk from my pocket, I crouched down to draw a pentagram around Granger. "This should keep you from interfering."

Tutting, I looked over my captives, each held by a zombie Weasley. Oh, and a zombie Malfoy, but from what I gathered, she would have been a Weasley had she lived. They should have come in greater numbers, or brought Hagrid. It would have taken several zombies to restrain him... but my earlier attack must have taken him out of the equation.

Doing a double take, I blinked. One of my captives was someone I'd dealt with at the Ministry... Stepping back to Granger, I felt a grudging respect towards her that she had managed to save Tonks.

That grudging respect didn't change anything. "On second thought, I want to make sure you see this, Granger." Pacing around the pentagram, I thought rapidly... yes, it should work without affecting me.

Exerting a little more control over Narcissa Malfoy, who was restraining Granger within the Pentagram, I had her draw her own wand and cast an elementary spell. Simple, yet effective...

"*Petrificus Totalus*." Her voice was hollow, as could be expected for a zombie.

As could be expected, using magic within a pentagram cancelled it out. If I had drawn the pentagram in blood, then there would have been no way to use magic within it at all. Seeing Granger unable to move other than breathe, I grinned, barely fighting back the impulse to rub my hands together. I would have time to gloat later. I would have to move fast; the Full Body Bind wouldn't restrain an enraged Necromancer for long.

I stalked closer to Granger's frozen body with impunity. No one else could stop me and they knew it. I could see that Snape wanted to try to stop me, but his struggles were futile against the restrictive hold of what had once been Percy Weasley. With mock tenderness I stroked a hand over Granger's cheek in a gentle caress. Even through the glove I could feel the heat given off in her anger.

"I wouldn't want you to miss this," I whispered, my breath ghosting over where my hand had been. I drew away, my gaze meeting hers. I had specifically chosen a Full

Body Bind for another reason: the eyes of the afflicted couldn't move, other than to focus. Her eyes were darkening with fury, but fear was also present. Granger wasn't stupid. She knew what I could do with her restrained like this.

I turned back to my prey, the assembled guardians of the Light. "Who shall it be?" I asked, glancing at all of them. "I only have time for one or two." They all held their collective breath, eyeing me apprehensively. Without their wands, they could do nothing.

I summoned the spark necessary to trigger atomisation. All I had to do was flick it at one of these helpless fools and that would be it. I turned my head, smirking at Granger. I was well aware exactly of whom killing would hurt her the most. The fury in her glare had been overpowered by sheer terror. I could feel her attempting to break the curse, not that she had any hope whatsoever of success.

Turning back to my chosen victim, I launched the spark by blowing a highly sarcastic kiss. It floated inexorably towards Snape, who couldn't even dodge if he'd tried. Not that it would have done any good, as the spark would have followed him no matter what he did. It was inevitable. Or at least, I thought it was.

Dumbledore used wandless magic to blast away his restraining zombie, the late Arthur Weasley, and snatched the spark into his own clenched fist before it could touch Snape. The greatest wizard alive had natural resistance to the scattering of his atoms. But then, so had Voldemort. All it meant was that it would take longer.

When ice began to form on Dumbledore's disintegrating hand, slowing the process even further, I was unsurprised to see the Necromantic darkness in Granger's eyes. I extended one hand towards her, delving deep into my Necromantic knowledge to 'borrow' some of her power to speed up the atomising process. There had been times when more than one Necromancer existed in history as I knew it. As I was more powerful, I could claim her power to use as my own. At least, that was the theory. I should have known that it wasn't so simple with someone who shared the same magical signature as myself.

The atomisation of Dumbledore had reached his right upper arm when I had a gut feeling that something had gone wrong. I was in the act of turning back to face Granger when I was blindsided with agony. My hold over my Necromantic powers broke, the atomising spark dying and the zombies dropped to the floor.

My vision was gradually returning from the whiteout that had overcome me. I briefly saw Granger on her knees, blood streaming from her nose much as I was, I realised before I activated my emergency Portkey to take me to safety. Just in time, for as soon as I landed inside my refuge, I could feel my hold on consciousness failing.

Chapter 13

Chapter 14 of 18

Converging and diverging.

Chapter 13

Disclaimer: JKR owns Harry Potter.

AN: Thanks to septentrion and LadySunflower for betaing.

This was no normal unconsciousness. I'm very familiar with the darkness caused by natural oblivion, but this was something else entirely. Then again, what can I expect from punching my future self? In my anger, I had forgotten about the paradox danger. Still, as far as I knew, the universe hadn't imploded. *It just felt like I had.*

A shudder ran through me. That last thought hadn't been mine, yet I had experienced it as clearly as if it had been.

Just like every one of your thoughts feels like one of mine, Granger.

Get out of my head!

Believe me, I would if I could. But as it happens, I might as well ask you to get out of mine with the same success rate.

Ever since you began tearing my world apart, nothing has gone right. I would tell you to get out of my world, but I suspect that would be about as effective as telling you to get out of my mind.

Nothing has gone right since then? Granger, you'd have to delve back far further to reach the root of this whole mess.

To that fatal car crash, you mean? You're pathetic if you use that as your excuse for your murderous nature.

Car crash? So it wasn't just a dream....

Just a dream? Oh, I see... so that's where my more usual nightmares went. In exchange I suffered your nightmarish memories. But that must mean...

That I'm not from your future. No, Granger, the fact that I have alternate memories should tell you that it's impossible for me to be a time traveller.

What are you?

I'm a dimensional traveller. I didn't want to reveal that! It seems that there is no way to keep secrets from you.

Coming from an alternate dimension would explain a lot. But how had Atropos skipped dimensions in the first place?

It's hardly polite to refer to me as if I'm not here, you know.

Come to that, where had our paths differed in the first place?

What are you...

It's as if a flood gate just opened, pouring a stream of her memories out. I get the feeling that she's seeing mine just as I see hers. At least I can differentiate between what is my memory and what is hers, but it hurts so much...

'What did Ronald Weasley know, anyway? But... he's right. I don't have any friends. I never have. They must all think I'm a nightmare....'

Pushing open the lavatory door, I walked out, sniffing as I brushed tears away from my face. Pausing, I wrinkled my nose. Something smelled horrible. A grunt from overhead made me look up.

Crying out, I made use of the monster's slow thoughts to run around it. But the door was locked!

Fear froze my limbs, my wand remaining uselessly in my pocket. There was just time for an absurdly detached part of my mind to identify the monster as a fully grown mountain troll before it swung its club at me.

That could so easily have happened to me, if not for Harry and Ron....

That should have been the end of me. Instead, I returned to life, my body broken and bleeding on the floor. Puzzled, the troll was raising its club to strike again. Acting on instinct, a blindingly bright spark shot from my outstretched trembling hand. The troll was soon nothing more than a heap of ash, the club distorted by the heat.

Seconds afterwards, Professors McGonagall, Snape and Quirrel had burst in. I blacked out just as Dumbledore arrived.

I awoke days later in the hospital wing. Dumbledore had sworn the teachers to secrecy on the pain of losing their magic, and the Ministry knew nothing of my being a Necromancer. It seemed that Dumbledore wanted to see if Necromancers (for that was what I was) could be anything other than evil.

Perhaps I should have been grateful, but that was difficult when it was clear to me that I was nothing more than an experiment to him. Nor did it help that I had no friends... even the teachers that had liked me before all but ignored me, fear in their eyes whenever they looked at me.

I learned through eavesdropping in the common room that Potter and Weasley had locked me into the girl's toilets, not knowing that I was there. Looking at them, I was willing to bet that even if they had known, they would still have done it. McGonagall had the nerve to award house points to them for cornering the troll, although she did lecture them about not making sure that no one else was trapped inside, too. Not that Weasley took any notice, guffawing, 'Pity the troll didn't kill Granger!' as soon as McGonagall had gone. She overheard, I'm sure, but it's clear that I could no longer count on my own Head of house.

The only teacher who treated me as he had before was Snape, and that wasn't a good thing. It only encouraged me to withdraw further, no longer volunteering answers.

Oh, Severus... What would have become of me if you'd been like that?

Being around Quirrel was almost like my occasional meetings with Dumbledore. He seemed to watch me with an almost hungry expression when he thought I wasn't watching. I could sense his pulse change when he did, almost as if his heart was beating twice with every beat.

No wonder, considering Voldemort was living off him like a parasite at the time!

When I saw my parents in the Christmas holidays, it was obvious that home was no longer a refuge. We had been worlds apart when it became clear that I was a witch, but now the rift was virtually impassable. They couldn't understand the changes in me, and I couldn't find the words to tell them. It's not as if they would have understood, anyway.

At the end of the year, it was sheer dumb luck that Potter and Weasley survived their escapade keeping the Philosopher's Stone safe. I was the only Gryffindor who didn't toss my hat in the air at the end, instead just dropping it on the floor.

My life was hellish enough without a dirty great snake trying to kill me, so I took advantage of my year-old powers to kill it before it could set eyes on me. I found an old diary in Moaning Myrtle's toilet, not that the whining ghost bothered me, too afraid of a Necromancer to do so. The diary felt... odd. Almost as if it was alive. I mentioned it to Dumbledore when I next saw him, and he confiscated it. I presume he destroyed it, but he didn't see fit to explain anything to his pet Necromancer.

The next academic year, I was granted permission to use a Time-Turner for my studies. I just didn't mention that I was using it to explore the castle, too, finding a strange room that appeared when it was required. I was able to persuade it that I required a veritable library about Necromancy, allowing me to perfect my control over my powers by the time my third year was at an end.

Having suffered at Potter and Weasley's hands over the years, forbidden to use my powers against them, it was most satisfying to see both of them taken down a notch when Dementors sucked the soul out of Sirius Black. I could have done without seeing Snape strutting about with an Order of Merlin, Second Class pinned to his robes. The temptation to atomise his precious medal...

Fourth year was a turning point in my fortunes. The satisfaction of seeing Potter floundering to keep from being toasted by a dragon, to the worry on the professors' faces when Potter came back with Diggory's body, proclaiming that Voldemort was back. As a Muggle-born, perhaps I should have felt equally afraid. But like calls to like. Whatever Dumbledore hoped, his experiment was failing. I knew it, deep down.

It was the summer after Voldemort returned that Hermione Granger truly was no more. As usual, I was spending my holiday with my parents. We were arguing about my return to Hogwarts, as my parents thought the undesired changes in me were due to my magical education. They were right, but it was my Necromantic self-education that was most to blame. Much as I hated the people in it, I loved the castle and the learning. When Dad put his foot down, I just lost it. My control over my powers was shattered, and they saw me for what I truly was. Seeing how badly I was scaring Mum and shaking in fear himself Dad ordered me to leave and never return: 'You are no daughter of mine!' I saw red. By the time I regained my senses, my parents were dead, their blood dripping from my hands. I didn't mean to do it....

Compared to that, a car crash was a mercy...

I lost track of time, keening on my knees beside the butchered corpses of my parents. Overwhelmed with grief and guilt, I didn't sense the intruder until he spoke to me. Voldemort had come in person to recruit me. Hermione Granger died with her parents... Atropos was born.

Exposed as a spy by my information, unwisely slipped by Potter within earshot of me at the end of our fourth year, Snape suffered a slow, painful death. All that was left after Nagini ate him was his precious Order of Merlin.

Oh, God....

The Ministry had detected the Dark magic responsible for my parents' deaths, and Dumbledore joined them in their hunt for me. Voldemort sheltered me when no one else would, overseeing the rest of my education personally. Using his contacts in the Ministry, my lord and master made it possible for me to sit my exams. I passed every O.W.L and N.E.W.T with flying colours, while my former classmates at Hogwarts reportedly struggled, sabotaged by sub-standard teaching... and an overall lack of intelligence.

His plans ripened, Voldemort was ready to take his place as overlord of Wizarding Britain. It didn't take much to make the Ministry fall. Half of the officials were Death Eaters or sympathisers. Hogwarts was another matter. It was simple enough to cause the wards to fall; they were nothing against the overwhelming Dark magic of Necromancy. But the occupants put up a fair fight. Not all of the Slytherins were from Death Eater families, and not all of those held with Voldemort's cause, so the majority

of the students fought on the side of the Light. But they could not win, not against an army of the undead raised with the aid of a Strengthening Elixir.

Dumbledore distracted me long enough so that Potter could duel Voldemort. Whilst I was finishing the old fool off, Voldemort fell, his body somehow vanishing like mist in direct sunlight. There was no way for me to bring him back....

Potter didn't survive long enough to take so much as a victorious breath. His glasses, cracked from the heat of his atomisation, dropped into the pile of his ashes. The rest of the Light was fast extinguished.

It could have ended there, if the Death Eaters hadn't tried to overthrow me. Not an advisable thing to do when surrounded by the undead... I went berserk, and I was empowered by a Strengthening Elixir. By the time the red rage had left me, it wasn't just Wizarding Britain in ruins.

Pondering what to do next, something from my Necromantic readings rose to prominence in my thoughts. My life had little meaning without Voldemort, so rather than moving on to the next country, why not the next world? The information was incomplete, and so untested, but in theory it was possible to travel to a parallel universe... where Voldemort would possibly still be alive. I slept on my decision, but I had no uncertainties. My greatest danger would be from myself in my new playground, and from the method of transport itself. The veil probably would strip me of my powers for several months, less if I took another Strengthening Elixir. Unfortunately, I would only be able to take my clothes and wand with me, although my robe was a cousin to an Invisibility Cloak, a gift from Voldemort allowing me to slip between the shadows.

My plan worked perfectly, up until my powers returned and I attempted to bring Voldemort back from the dead. But all was not lost. Depositing the soulless body at my refuge, I sneaked into St. Mungo's to steal a fertility potion. On the way back 'home', I captured a Muggle boasting to his friends of his sexual prowess. Turns out that he wasn't lying....

I may vomit. Voldemort doing *that* with me is nightmare material. It was bad enough without seeing it from her perspective!

Ditto! I knew Snape was your lover, now husband, but I could have done without seeing you shag him.

Should I be relieved that seems to be the end of the submersion in her memories? I suppose it is a relief...

that...

is...

not...

who...

I...

am...

but... it would have been so much better if it was. Is a monster like me capable of being a mother?

She's pregnant? Of course. She stole a fertility potion, then shagged... er, I'm not going to go there again! Come to think of it, I *cafeel* another life within her if I concentrate.

She's insane. How will destroying this world make it a place to raise a child? I wonder what the Ministry regulations were concerning pregnant enemies. No doubt the possibility of Necromancy being hereditary would mean that it would have made no difference to their intolerance. What would I do if my own child were to become like me? It would be reason enough not to have children; I don't have enough confidence in my mothering instinct, or lack thereof, to risk raising a Necromancer. But what if Severus wants to have children? Hold on. It's not just Atropos and her child I can sense. Oh, f...

Chapter 14

Chapter 15 of 18

Council of war.

Chapter 14

Disclaimer: JKR owns Harry Potter. All I get from this are reviews and the enjoyment of writing it.

AN: Many thanks to my speedy betas, septentrion and LadySunflower.

"Hermione!" Severus broke free of the zombie Weasley restraining him, dashing over to his wife's side as she fell to her knees. He reached her in time to cushion her fall as she slumped to the floor, kneeling down and pulling her onto his lap.

Blood trickled from her nose: self-inflicted damage. Hermione had technically punched herself, after all. Grabbing a handkerchief from his pocket, Severus wiped the blood away, doing what he could to stem the bleeding without his wand. Fortunately for her, it did not feel as though she had broken her nose.

"Here." Tonks, judging by the voice, approached from behind, offering him his wand. His wrist still ached from where the zombie had forced him to drop it.

While no Healer, Severus was well acquainted with such first aid spells as magically staunching bleeding. The next thing he tried was to revive Hermione, with no effect.

"Will Hermione wake up?" Potter asked, his voice quavering. He sounded as though he was on the floor. Severus looked over his shoulder, seeing that Potter was crouched down, trying to stop the blood streaming from Weasley's leg. Weasley's undead brother had clearly been the only thing holding him up.

"The perti...nent question... is not will she... wake up, but... *who* will... wake up," Albus wheezed, his breathing laboured.

Severus twisted around, pulling Hermione with him. He looked over at Albus, alarmed by the old man's pallid skin and hunched posture. Most of Albus's right arm had been atomised, taking the overlying clothing with it. A cauterised stump was left, removing the danger of bleeding to death, but from the way Albus was currently hyperventilating, it was clear that he was in great danger of going into shock.

"Albus, we must get you to a Healer..." Minerva said, also clearly alarmed.

"Not yet...think! The paradox, she touched... herself. Likely not just physically, but... mentally, too. Severus, you know..." Albus trailed off, doubling over and gasping. Minerva beckoned Lupin over, instructing him to take Albus further into St. Mungo's to get him treatment. Half carrying Albus, Lupin picked his way through the bodies strewn across waiting room.

"Atropos tried to twist Hermione into being like her the last time they both made mental contact," Severus mused aloud.

"Snape, do you mean that when Hermione wakes up, she might be just as evil as Atropos?" Potter demanded.

"That is a possibility," Severus reluctantly admitted.

An exclamation from Lupin drew Severus's attention to the far side of the waiting room. Tonks ran over to him. After a brief exchange, Lupin continued on his mission. Tonks returned, a whimpering child in her arms.

"Beats me how Atropos missed this one. Poor thing was curled up next to a pair of bodies: his parents, I guess."

Severus could not resist satisfying his curiosity by making a brief foray into the confused, fearful jumble that was the child's mind. After finding what he sought, he was uncomfortably aware of Minerva glowering at him. Cringing slightly, he hastily offered the puzzling tidbit he had discovered.

"Atropos did not miss him. She had him at wand point, but spared him. Nagini tried twice to kill the child, but Atropos stopped her."

"But she killed everyone else! His parents, even. Why spare one toddler? It's not as if she didn't kill the other children in here," Tonks said, her raised voice startling the child into wailing.

Tutting, Minerva plucked the boy from Tonks's arms, rocking him as she sang a lullaby. Blinking in surprise, Severus wondered where she had learned to do that, as the child calmed down, slowly dropping off into an exhausting sleep. He was not aware of her having had a family, but he supposed it was possible that she had. It was not as if he had paid any attention to conversations about family life in the staff room.

"Potter, you'd better get Weasley to a Healer. That bite looks nasty," Minerva ordered, taking charge in Albus's absence. "Tonks, send a Patronus message to Grimmauld Place to get any available help. These bodies need to be dealt with."

"Righto," Tonks said, no enthusiasm for her grim task in her tone. Nonetheless, she sent her silver wolf on its way and began to lay the dead out.

Turning back to Hermione, Severus tried again to revive her. Despite having explained it to Potter himself, it hadn't fully sunk in that when she awoke, Hermione might have irrevocably changed for the worst.

"Severus, might it be an idea to restrain Hermione?" Minerva murmured, sounding as though she was afraid of his reaction. "Just in case."

Eyes widening as he fully realised the danger of holding an unrestrained, possibly hostile Necromancer in his arms, Severus raised his wand. Minerva had her hands full with her sleeping burden, unable to do anything other than watch as Hermione stirred.

"Oh, fuck!" Severus narrowly avoiding knocking heads with Hermione as she sat bolt upright, her swearing his only warning. Her eyes were wide as they met his.

Through the corner of his eye, Severus observed Minerva shifting her grip on the boy to cover his ears, shielding tender ears from the stream of invective passing Hermione's lips.

Taking advantage of Hermione's distraction, a muttered *Legilimens* allowed Severus to ascertain what her mental state was. He breathed a sigh of relief when he found that she was still the Hermione he loved, albeit in some distress, only to choke as the reason for her distress became clear. In his shock, he lost mental contact.

'Pregnant?!'

Looking apprehensively up at him, it seemed that Hermione had felt him prying inside her mind, and knew what he had discovered... and was afraid of his reaction. He knew better than to attempt to smile reassuringly when it would doubtless emerge as a grimace.

"I take it that she is herself?" Minerva asked.

His mouth working, Severus swallowed hard. "Yes," he finally managed to say, unable to keep from sounding strained.

"What is wrong, then?" Hearing Minerva step closer, Severus saw Hermione school her features into a more normal expression, if a little tense.

Croaker and Poppy arrived, giving Hermione time to come up with a convincing story. Or at least, Severus hoped that she would not tell the truth without first discussing the situation with him. It was a private matter, after all, at least at this early stage.

"Severus came across something a little disturbing when checking that it was really me," Hermione explained. "Something that has implications for our plan of dealing with Atropos. I need to check something urgently."

"Very well. We shall rendezvous at Grimmauld Place in an hour." Minerva did not look surprised to see that Severus intended to accompany Hermione.

After Side-Along Apparating them to Spinner's End, Severus waited until he had eliminated any possibility of being overheard, casting his own speciality silencing charm *Muffliato*.

"I do not wish to risk any eavesdroppers. It may be paranoid of me, but I take your safety very seriously," Severus explained, feeling the need to justify himself due to the look Hermione was giving him.

She flashed a small, discomfited smile at him. "I know. But I really do need to check something." She attempted to slip past him, making for the Pensieve standing in the corner.

"We need to talk..." Severus growled, grabbing hold of her shoulders.

"*I know!*" Hermione snapped, wrenching herself free from his grasp. "I'm well aware of what we need to talk about, Severus, and scared shitless about it to be perfectly blunt. But it's vital that I check something first: I was telling Minerva the truth."

Stalking over to the Pensieve, she drew her wand, holding it to the side of her head to extract a strand of silvery memory, shaking it into the enchanted stone bowl. Severus moved to join her in observing the memory, only to come to a sudden halt as he caught sight of a horribly familiar book in the hands of her past self. Even the memory of that accursed book was likely to be lethal to him.

"While I do this, it might help if you could sort through your feelings on... on..." Hermione couldn't seem to get the words out, highly unusual for such a verbose person.

"Impending fatherhood?" Severus suggested, bemused.

She nodded, looking as though she might be sick if she spoke. Touching her fingers to the memory, she was soon visible standing behind her past self within the Pensieve.

Walking over to his favourite armchair, Severus sank down into it, letting his head slump back against the cushions.

"This is hardly the best time for this to happen... She's still a teenager, even if she rarely acts like one... We never talked about having children... Any liking for children left me over my years at Hogwarts... But this is my child... I had atrocious father figures, surely I am not father material... then again, Hermione is too strong to allow any abuse, unlike my mother... But Hermione is clearly afraid, and not only of my reaction...."

After a futile attempt to sort through his turbulent thoughts, he ran a hand over his face, exasperated. "I could do with using that Pensieve to sort through this," he muttered to himself, kneading the bridge of his nose in an attempt to focus his thoughts.

"This is hopeless! All I know for sure is that I would do anything for her, including being a father." He snorted, disgusted. "Merlin! I sound like a Hufflepuff."

Moments later, Hermione had emerged from the Pensieve. Tight-lipped, she flicked the memory back into her head. White knuckled, she looked to be in danger of snapping her wand. Moving stiffly, she thrust the length of wood into a pocket and stared fixedly at the empty Pensieve, jaw tight with tension.

"Can I really be contemplating this?" Hermione's voice was almost too soft for Severus to hear. At his inquiring hum, she looked over at him. She shook her head; it seemed that she was not going to share whatever the problem was. The thought that she felt the need to keep anything secret from him was a stab in the heart.

"During my mental contact with Atropos, I learned more than just the fact that I'm," she gulped, "pregnant. She is, too...."

Severus was vaguely aware of his jaw dropping. "With Voldemort's spawn?" He shook himself, realising the implications of this. "But the Order will never send a pregnant enemy to their doom. Come to that, I'm not entirely sure I could."

"That's not the problem at hand. No, another thing I picked up from her mind is that she doesn't come from the future..."

"What is she? Your Boggart gone wrong?"

"If you would let me finish," Hermione growled, irritated. "According to The Book, passing through the veil kills everyone but a Necromancer. It turns out that to the latter, the veil is a portal into a hall of infinite identical veils, each a doorway into another world. These worlds are connected to each other, but differ in some way."

"Like in one world, you become the stereotypically evil Necromancer, and the other you do not?" Severus asked, guessing where she was going with her explanation.

"Precisely. In one world, Hermione Granger was killed by a troll, left to die by the boys who saved her and befriended her in our world."

"I knew it had to be Potter's fault," Severus muttered darkly. "So Atropos presumably destroyed her own world, coming through to this one to do the same?"

"Pretty much. She couldn't resurrect Voldemort in her own world, so came here in the hopes that either he was still around, or that she could bring him back."

"I see. When she can't, she takes the chance to perpetuate his legacy." Severus beckoned Hermione over to him, tugging her down to sit across the chair and his lap. "Then the Order's plan is doomed to failure," he murmured into her hair.

"Not exactly. Information on the veil in The Book is only theoretical, but Atropos is living proof of it. She came through the veil last winter solstice, but only put her schemes into action on the Ides of March."

"You said the veil does not kill Necromancers. What does it do?"

Hermione pulled away enough to meet his eyes, looking perplexed. "Bloody Book. I forgot about most of the contents even when I had an eidetic memory." She bit down on her lower lip, deep in thought. Severus gently freed it from her teeth before she could draw blood.

Snapping her fingers, she smiled grimly. "Atropos lost her powers, albeit temporarily. If we send her through the veil, it's virtually impossible for her to come back..."

"How so?"

"Apparently passing through it is very disorientating, and there are uncountable identical veils in that single hall. Anyway, I was saying that if we sent her through, she'd go through into another world, powerless. A world that at least has a chance of dealing with her before it's too late," Hermione said brightly, at odds with the deadened look in her eyes.

"As members of the Order, we cannot land our problems on others," Severus stated, picturing the outraged reaction of Albus or Minerva.

Jumping to her feet, arms akimbo, Hermione glowered down at him. "It's either that or she kills the rest of you one by one. What do you think will happen if she kills you? There'd be two Necromancers tearing the world apart, that's what!" She turned away, crossing her arms, almost hugging herself.

There was an uncomfortable silence, Severus searching for something to say. He stood up, hands curling into fists at his sides. "You do have a ruthless streak," he paused, wincing as she stiffened. "But so do I. We do what must be done, with not a word to the rest of the Order beyond the bare minimum. What Albus Minerva, now, I suppose does not know will not hurt them."

Hermione turned to face him. "Is that a Slytherin motto?" she asked. "If so, one of these days, it's going to turn around and bite you in the arse." A lone tear trickled down her cheek. "We will do what we must," she whispered.

Frowning, Severus wondered at the misgivings he felt, but Hermione's next words put every other thought out of his mind.

"We have a while before we have to meet with the others; you wanted to talk."

"Yes," he hissed. "Firstly, how did this happen? We were either within anti-conception warding or used contraceptive spells."

"I don't know! I remember...the anti-conception warding at Hogwarts doesn't work for married couples."

Severus had to fight back the urge to swear. "Of course... and we consummated our marriage there. So you will be a month along next Monday."

She nodded. "What are we going to do?" Hermione whispered, miserably. She was avoiding his gaze.

"I have no right to tell you what to do. It's your body," Severus murmured. He sighed, shaking his head. "But I want you to know that I will support you in whatever you choose to do. In such a small community as Wizarding Britain, abortion is illegal, but you did marry a Potions master."

"Come to that, it's within my abilities to cut off the blood supply myself..." Hermione choked on a sob, swiping at the tears trickling down her cheeks. "I don't want to, not when I can feel the life within me. Not when it's a part of you and I can somehow sense that."

Groaning internally, Severus pulled her into his arms. He hated it when she cried: it made him feel so helpless. "If you do not want to terminate it, you do not have to..."

"Wh-what about the risk of Necromancy being hereditary?"

"Necromancers are almost always Muggle-born. I would say that the risk is negligible." There was also a possible resolution offered in a secret conversation with Croaker a few days earlier, but Severus did not want to raise false hopes. "Shall we give this child a chance?"

She nuzzled her head into his shoulder. It took him a moment to realise that she was nodding. Drawing away, she sniffed, wiping her eyes. A fairly simple charm removed all traces of her tears. She looked down at her watch. "It's time we left. The others will be waiting."

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Minerva demanded as soon as they set foot into the kitchen.

Hermione did not answer until she had sat down, Severus standing behind her like a sentinel. "Yes. It turns out that Atropos came through the veil in the first place from another world, a world where Hermione Granger became a Necromancer at the age of twelve."

"The Basilisk got her?" Potter asked, jumping to conclusions as usual. His usual partner in crime, Weasley, was obviously still at St. Mungo's. It would take some time for a bite from Nagini to heal.

"No, Harry, I was thirteen when Petrified by the Basilisk. The troll killed this otherworld Hermione."

Potter looked guilty. Severus suspected that he had something to do with the reason why Hermione had been in the same bathroom as the troll.

"But this is terrible! If she came through the veil, she'll be able to come back," Croaker moaned.

"It will send her back where she came from," Hermione said, a half truth if Severus had ever heard one. "Even if she tries to return here, we'll be ready for her. And we'll have an advantage: the veil is perilous. While it kills everyone else, it temporarily strips Necromancers of their powers."

"What will this do to you, Hermione?" Lupin asked. "If hurting her hurts you, then surely you will have a price to pay." The werewolf had obviously rethought the value of Hermione's life.

"So be it," Hermione spat. She sounded bitter, something that Severus wondered at. Surely she would jump at the chance to be rid of her Necromantic powers for a while? He felt those misgivings begin to stir once more.

"Before we get too ahead of ourselves, we still need to find Atropos and subdue her long enough to take her to the Death Chamber," Minerva reminded them.

"Quite so," Albus said from the doorway.

"Oh, for the love of..." Minerva exploded. "Albus, surely you are not fit to be here? You lost your arm only an hour ago!"

"I promise to stay out of the fighting, Minerva. I couldn't stay away." Albus moved to the closest chair, sitting down across from Hermione and Severus.

Severus exchanged a glance with Hermione. It was just as well that Albus had not returned sooner, or he might have realised that Hermione was not telling the whole truth.

"Now, I realise that this is a touchy topic, but am I right in presuming that you had mental contact with Atropos? Right. Then you know better than anyone what her next move is."

"I don't know," Hermione said, avoiding the gaze of her interrogator.

Albus sighed. "You are closer than twins, Hermione. You do not just look alike, but also think in the same way. If anyone has any idea of Atropos's next move, it is you."

Shaking her head, Hermione silently denied it. Severus forgot his misgivings when he saw her eyes slip closed as she mouthed 'no'. Albus did not seem to realise the effects on Hermione of what he was asking.

Under Albus's continuing badgering, Severus had to keep himself from lashing out at the interfering old bastard in his increasing concern for his wife as she denied the connection between herself and Atropos again and again, sinking down in her chair.

"Stop it," Severus hissed at Albus, only to be ignored.

"I DON'T KNOW!" she finally screamed, jerking to her feet. There was an unhinged look in her eyes as she stared around at the shocked members of the Order, dashing angry tears away. "Atropos has been a Necromancer for longer than me, without the support of *friends* like you. Over time, she became twisted and evil."

It did not take much for Severus to see that they were all wondering whether her sanity had snapped, Albus included.

The temperature in the room plummeted, as well it might with a furious Necromancer around. There was just time for those leaning on the table to jolt away before it iced over. With a strangled creak, the aged table gave way, falling to the floor with a crash, sending mingled splinters and shards of ice flying. Those still possessing wands shielded themselves and their neighbours.

Reaching for her in an attempt to calm her down, Severus was shrugged off.

"I am *nothing* like her," Hermione ground out from between clenched teeth. "Do you have any idea what she did to those in her own world?" She pointed an accusing finger at Albus, who was speechless. "She killed them. Her parents. Ministry officials. Her teachers. Her fellow students. The Death Eaters. Muggles." She counted each one on her fingers.

"Can you honestly tell me that I think like her?" Hermione growled, her hands clenching into fists.

"No," Potter said, his voice trembling. "You don't. You're not like her. You've got us. It's not much, I know, but we won't let you become like her."

"That's a relief," Hermione said flatly, but Severus could tell that she was touched by Potter's sentiments. The ice melted as the ambience returned to normal.

"So, we must wait for Atropos to surface again." Minerva glowered at Albus. It seemed that she had not approved of his interrogation techniques anymore than Severus had.

"It's a pity there's no way to track her," Potter muttered. "Unless... I can't believe I didn't think of it before! Thestrals have an uncanny ability to find things. If they can find Atropos, we could ride them at night, sneaking up on her. They're invisible against the night sky."

"Not to a Necromancer. They may be black to you, but to me they look white. They'd all but glow in the dark," Hermione reluctantly explained.

"I'd see them from a mile off."

Severus wondered for a moment why Hermione's voice had come from behind him when she was standing in front of him. Then he spun around, shock making him fumble for his wand.

'How the hell did she get into a Secret Kept place?!?'

Atropos darted around him, grabbing hold of Hermione's shoulder. "Excuse us, private conversation," she called over her shoulder.

He saw Hermione try to drive her elbow back into Atropos, only to be foiled. It seemed that both had been trained in the same method of self-defence. By the time Severus had his wand trained on Atropos's back, she had Disapparated virtually silently, and taken Hermione with her.

Chapter 15

Chapter 16 of 18

Crescendo.

Chapter 15

Disclaimer: JKR owns the Potterverse.

AN: Thanks to septentrion and LadySunflower for betaing.

The moment it was safe to do so, I resumed my attempts to escape from Atropos. I hadn't wanted to risk getting Splinched by trying to break free whilst she was Apparating.

Kicking back at her, I felt my own shin threaten to give way beneath me.

"Stop it!" Atropos shoved me away from her, sending me sprawling onto the double bed occupying the room. "I only want to talk to you."

Rolling over, I sat up, shaking my hair out of my face. Absently rubbing at my shin, I noticed Atropos bending down to do the same thing. Her robes had partially opened, revealing more cleavage than I was aware of possessing. Perhaps that was how Severus saw me?

Her words abruptly sank in. "Talk? After everything, you want to talk?" I couldn't believe my ears. "You think that after killing my friends trying to kill my husband! that I'm going to just sit here?"

I made to get up. Atropos pounced, pushing me to lie flat on my back, straddling me. "Shut up and listen!" Her lips almost touched mine as she spoke, her unsteady breaths raising the hairs on the back of my neck. "You are the only one who can possibly understand."

"What?" I asked. Even to myself, I sounded cold and suspicious.

Atropos pulled her head back, grabbing hold of my wrists with her gloved hands, restraining me before I could try to get free. "All I want is to create a world fit for myself and my child. Surely you want the same thing?"

My jaw dropped. She couldn't be serious....

"I've been inside your head, much as you've been inside mine, Granger," Atropos breathed. I turned my head to the side, uncomfortable with the intensity of her gaze and the way her breath kept giving me the feeling of ghostly kisses. Freeing one of my wrists, she took hold of my jaw, forcibly turning my head back. She smirked, stroking her leather-coated fingers against me in a mocking caress.

Her voice dropped to a seductive alto. "We are much alike, however much you want to deny it. Join me. Together we can..."

"Join you?" I laughed bitterly. "You're insane. We may be the genetically identical, but we haven't been the same mentally since the start of puberty. I don't kill for the sake of it. I have *control*, something you seem incapable of understanding."

"That is not true," she spat. I closed my eyes, grimacing, raising my free hand to wipe the spittle from my face, careful not to touch her. "I have been known to exercise mercy. Before you initiated our mental contact in St. Mungo's, I spared the same toddler no less than three times."

"Yet you killed a pregnant woman at the Ministry," I said flatly, revealing only the slightest hint of the outrage I felt.

Looking stricken, she drew her head back, her face paling. "I did? It must have been when I let the dark rage take me... I admit that I do lack control in those circumstances." Her voice gained a wheedling tone. "If you joined me, you could keep me under control."

"The fact remains that you have killed far too many for me to entertain the thought of forgiving you, let alone joining you," I murmured, watching as her eyes narrowed and her jaw clenched.

"How can you refuse me?" She struggled to contain her rising anger, voice trembling. Her grip tightened to a bruising pressure, which she ignored even as it was inflicted upon herself. "You hold the fate of your *precious* world in your hands. The fate of your friends, of your beloved husband, depends on you. There's nothing to stop me from murdering them in their beds now that I have the knowledge of your headquarters."

Brilliant. She'd acquired the means to get into Grimmauld Place from me whilst I learned of what had twisted her into this monster. My blood ran cold as my options were fast running out. I could only see one way ahead, and could I really do that?

She took my lack of answer as confirmation of my rejection. "So be it. You will regret this, I promise. I think restraining you within a pentagram would get you out of my way." She bared her teeth in a nasty grin. "If you're lucky, I'll bring Snape here for you to say your goodbyes before I kill him."

It was clearly a necessity rather than a choice now....

With a wrenching twist, I threw her off me. Our positions were reversed within seconds. I grabbed her wrists, careful not to touch her skin. She glared up at me, eyes bright with tears of fury as she fought to escape me. While we were equally matched in terms of physical strength, it wasn't easy to keep hold of her.

It was doubly hard to focus on Apparition, particularly taking my captive without Splinching. Rather than risk going to Grimmauld Place first, I targeted my ultimate destination: the Death Chamber.

I had no attention to spare to look around the large, dimly lit room. Still on top of Atropos, I had materialised at the edge of the dais holding the veil. Bucking her hips, she flung me off her.

As she scrambled to her feet, I drew my wand, grasping the opportunity to conjure my Patronus. My first attempt failed; I was hardly in the right frame of mind to easily do so. Severus was really going to regret teaching me how to send a message using the silver beasties in the time Atropos had laid low. When I managed to summon my ghostly Thestral, it promptly unfurled its wings, flying straight through the ceiling on its quest. Just in time, for Atropos was raising her wand even as I pronounced the spell.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Atropos cried, causing both of our wands to fly out of our hands. Her voice sounded oddly muffled by the unsettling silence permeating the chamber. "Who did you send that to?" she demanded.

"Guess," I hissed, blocking her as she attempted to move to the edge of the dais.

Her lips were bloodless. Breathing raggedly, she looked distinctly unwell as she nervously glanced back at the veil. "You'd inflict me on another world?" Her lip curled. "I knew that was your initial plan, but after learning that it would endanger others, I thought you would never do it. I guess you're not so different from me after all," she scoffed, the effect spoiled by her breathlessness.

"You'd be surprised," I attempted to sneer back, to find that whatever was afflicting her affected me equally. Through my peripheral vision, I noted that the blood red runes now completed coated every single surface in the room, barring the veil itself.

With a multiple cracks of Apparition, the cavalry arrived. Looking around, I saw that only those with wands had come: Minerva, Lupin, Harry, Croaker and Severus. I was barely able to keep myself from flinching as I briefly met my husband's eyes.

"Bloody 'ell!" Croaker exclaimed, staring at the rune-coated room in surprise. The others also looked shocked; it seemed that the presence of two Necromancers enabled anyone to see the runes, although not to translate them. Thank God. It would be a disaster if Severus could actually tell what the message was....

Taking advantage of my distraction, Atropos lunged past me, moving as fast as she could towards the exit. My backup performed their duty admirably, capturing her with a combined *Incarcerous*.

My earlier struggle with Atropos had convinced me that I couldn't throw her through the veil myself, as any physical fight between us would be akin to an irresistible force meeting an immovable object.

I could feel it when Atropos tried to tap into her Necromantic powers to free herself; felt them threaten to be torn asunder prematurely by the proximity to the veil.

Lupin and Severus manually dragged the bound Atropos over to the crumbling archway on the dais. As she passed me, she smirked at me, a hesitant expression through her pain and unease at her earlier words. Making no attempt to plead or make threats, she maintained a dignified silence as she was frogmarched to her exile.

Forcing myself to move, I staggered around to the other side of the veil. I could see Severus, Atropos and Lupin's feet under the ragged black cloth. At least this way I couldn't see Severus's face, a thought that filled me with mingled relief and regret.

'If I could look at him, I won't be able to do this.' I inhaled a shaky breath, ignoring the stinging of my dry eyes. *'I'm sorry, Severus. I have to do this. I will do what must be done.'*

I waited until Atropos was being hurled through the veil before allowing myself to respond to the runic summoning.

"Don't follow me, Sev..." My words were cut off by a silent scream of agony as I passed through into blackness. It felt like I was being torn asunder, heart and soul. Yet in that pain and darkness, I wasn't alone.

Chapter 16

Chapter 17 of 18

If you go there, you're gone forever. If I go there, I'll lose my way.

Chapter 16

Disclaimer: JKR owns Harry Potter.

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and LadySunflower for betaing.

The summary comes from the song 'Anywhere Is' by Enya.

Dragging Atropos over to the veil with Lupin's help, Severus had noticed Hermione walking around to the other side of the ragged black cloth. He had assumed that she wanted to make sure that Atropos really left their world rather than just coming out on her side. Then he had seen Hermione's feet move towards the veil even as they shoved Atropos through. It almost looked as though she had overbalanced... but he couldn't delude himself that it was an accident, not with her last words.

"Don't follow me, Sev..."

For a moment, Severus was only aware of the ringing in his ears and the growing ache within his chest... and the absurd hope that Hermione would reappear in front of him. The gently billowing veil seemed to blur as it came closer, only to jerk away with a jarring tug, snapping Severus out of his detached state.

"Severus, no, there's nothing you can do."

Lupin had grabbed him, holding him back. Severus noticed that his throat felt raw: it seemed that he had been expressing his feelings very vocally... alternatively, he had been holding back any vocal expression. He had no idea which it was.

"No," Severus gasped. Struggling madly against Lupin's hold, he managed to inch closer to the veil, only to fall to the ground as Potter helped Lupin pin him down.

"Let me go! That's my wife through there..." Tears stung his eyes as the realisation struck him that it wasn't just Hermione that was gone. *'My child....'*

"And I thought that you had all the luck, Snape," Potter's voice rasped in his ear, obviously grieved by his friend's lunacy to go beyond the veil.

Severus inched still closer to the veil, his arms feeling close to being dislocated by Lupin and Potter's grip on them.

"Hermione... come back," Severus yelled, his voice hoarse, cracking on the words. *'Hermione!'*

She was gone. It was impossible for her to return: she'd said as much. There would be no reunion this time....

Even with that terrible knowledge, Severus didn't stop struggling. Bitter tears traced burning trails down his sallow cheeks. He should have paid more attention to his earlier unease; should have realised that Hermione was not ruthless enough to inflict Atropos on an unsuspecting world; conversely, she was more than ruthless enough to do what must be done, whatever the personal cost.

'Gryffindor,' he thought savagely. *'When I get my hands on her, I'll give her such a strong reminder of her worth to me that she won't be able to..'* A mental howl of anguish cut him off. There would be no opportunity to get his hands on her again. Ever.

"Please, Severus, come away from there. Hermione would never forgive us if we let you throw yourself through the veil," Minerva pleaded from behind him. She sounded as though she was crying.

"It's not really as bad as all that, is it?" Croaker asked.

Severus stiffened at the Unspeakable's words. In his anger at the unfeeling man, he reversed the direction of his struggles against Lupin and Potter's grip.

"Croaker!" Minerva almost screeched, apparently sharing Severus's outrage.

Talking fast, Croaker hurried to explain himself before he could be hexed. "What I mean to say is that 'Ermione' 'ad to go through to stop Atropos from wreaking 'avoc in 'er original world or from coming back 'ere. I seem to remember that 'Ermione implied that there was a way back."

"She did," Minerva muttered thoughtfully. "So Hermione may yet return after she has alerted those who survived Atropos's onslaught on her own world. It would be simple enough to deal with a powerless Necromancer."

Closing his eyes, Severus stopped struggling. He felt Potter and Lupin release him, perhaps assuming that he would make no further attempts to follow Hermione to his doom.

Thinking back to what Hermione had said, Severus felt faint stirrings of hope. She had said that it was virtually impossible for a Necromancer to return, which meant that there was still a chance, however slight. But he shuddered at the thought of the uncountable identical veils in that hall between worlds described by Hermione. If only there was some way to mark the way home for her!

'Wait. Surely it would not kill me to simply reach through the veil? Granted, I have no idea what will happen to my arm when I do....'

"It's not that simple. There is a room of sorts between the worlds," Severus said, his mind working overtime. Minerva did not know of the danger Atropos had posed to innocent people in those other worlds. She would kill him if he revealed the truth... "I had no idea Hermione was going to go through, but she can't return without help."

"I see," Minerva sounded exasperated. "You infernal man! You should have told us what you were trying to do; it would have saved us and yourself a lot of heartache." She sighed. "Try not to panic in future."

'Easy enough for you to say!' Severus bit back a sarcastic retort, satisfying himself with a few uncharitable thoughts.

Croaker cleared his throat. "Enough time should 'ave passed by now to try to get 'Ermione back through 'ere."

Climbing to his feet on order to step towards the veil, Severus glowered at Lupin over his shoulder when the werewolf took a firm hold of his robes.

"There is no sense in getting yourself accidentally pulled through," Lupin admonished him.

Reaching through with his left arm (there was no sense in risking his wand arm), it went numb when he reached through, but it wasn't any more painful than pins and needles. For a tense minute nothing happened. Then something grabbed his hand, almost causing him to fall through in his surprise. Steadying himself with Lupin's help, Severus pulled his arm back through, bringing whatever was holding onto him through.

Sucking in what felt like his first breath of air for a lifetime, Severus mentally thanked whatever deity had answered his prayers for Hermione's return. His relief turned to concern when Hermione dropped to her knees, her grip on him slack. Crouching down, he touched his fingers to her clammy face, alarmed by her sickly greenish pallor.

"Hermione, what's..."

She groaned, turning aside, but too late to keep from vomiting partly on him.

Grimacing, Severus brandished his wand, casting a *Scourgify* as she finished emptying her stomach. "Better now?"

Hermione shook her head weakly, her face grey. She closed her eyes, shuddering. Severus caught her before she slumped to the rough stone floor, currently unblemished by the blood red runes that had stained the whole room before the Necromancers had passed through the veil.

"*Expecto Patronum*," Minerva murmured, summoning her feline Patronus. "Fetch Poppy," she ordered it.

"I'll 'ave to see if I can translate those runes, not that any of you can see them. Just in case the wrong Necromancer came back," Croaker said, producing a scroll of parchment and a quill.

"That will not be necessary," Severus stated. He was examining one of Hermione's wrists. "She's the one married to me." He frowned down at the marital branding. It seemed to have faded slightly, but was still legible. An effect of passing through the veil, perhaps?

"Who has been injured this time?" Poppy asked as soon as she had arrived, eyes roving around the room. "You again!" she groaned when she spotted Hermione, drawing her wand as she swept over to her recurring patient in a rush of white robes.

Poppy's lips thinned as she ran her wand above Hermione's prone form. The colour drained from the nurse's already pale face. She jerked her head up, fear showing in her eyes. "We have to get her to St. Mungo's. *Now.*"

It was after a tense hour of pacing outside Hermione's hospital room that Severus managed to pull Poppy aside after she emerged.

"What is wrong with my wife?" he asked, worry causing him to bite the words out.

"First and foremost, she has lost her powers."

"I know she's not Necromancer anymore! She followed Atropos through the veil, stripping herself of her powers."

Poppy gave him a pitying look. "She's not a witch anymore, either. Her body is reacting badly to the change."

Severus was dimly aware of Minerva inhaling sharply from behind him. The other occupants of the Death Chamber had joined him in his vigil, only to be ignored when they tried to offer any comfort.

"She knew. That's what she meant by 'so be it'," Lupin murmured. Severus felt a flash of irritation at him for stating the obvious.

"Do you want to hear the rest in private?" Poppy asked, suddenly noticing that they had an audience. "It is of a rather personal nature."

Momentarily, Severus was tempted to insist that she did. But Minerva and Potter at least deserved to know what Hermione's condition was. "Let them hear it. I would only have to relay whatever it is later."

"Very well. What is more worrying than her loss of magic is the effect it is having on her pregnancy."

Severus could almost hear his moral supporters' jaws dropping.

"I'm sorry, Severus, but unless we acquire a very complex potion, she's going to miscarry." Poppy sniffed, wiping at her eyes. "If that happens, there is a greater than fifty percent chance that she will die in the process."

"Why?" Severus rasped, feeling as though he had been punched by a troll.

"I don't fully understand it myself, but it's often seen in premature births of magical babies to non-magical mothers."

"What is this potion?" he demanded. It was clear to him that there was no way he would risk Hermione's life in a dangerous miscarriage, certainly not when they had decided to keep the child.

"One not kept in stock due to the very short shelf life. What is more, the only Potions master known to be capable of making it died in Atropos's attack on the Ministry. He was apparently waiting to meet with the Head of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes."

"I can make any potion," Severus growled, taking Poppy's comment as an affront to his abilities.

"I hoped you would say that," Poppy said, grimly satisfied. "St. Mungo's doesn't have the recipe, but it should be *irEven More Potente Potions..*"

Severus interrupted her. "I have that at Spinner's End. Thankfully it contained too many obscure potions to keep it at Hogwarts." He made for the door at the end of the corridor, only to be halted by Poppy calling after him.

"You need the name of the potion, Severus! It's the Anti-Abortifacient Draught."

Nodding curtly, Severus stalked off, turning at the door as something else occurred to him. "How much time does she have?"

"The Healer's have managed to put her in a modified Body-Bind. You should have enough time to brew one dose of the potion, but if anything goes wrong...."

"It won't." *I hope!*

As he left, Severus was conscious of Potter asking Minerva if she thought Severus had known about Hermione being pregnant.

"It would explain his earlier panic in the Death Chamber," Minerva answered.

Thirteen hours later, Severus stirred the dented cauldron one last time. All of his best cauldrons had been at Hogwarts, together with the majority of his ingredient supplies. After getting the base underway and leaving it simmering, he'd made an emergency visit to several apothecaries, sparing no expense to get the ingredients he needed. For one heart stopping moment, it seemed that one of the most vital items could not be found anywhere, when he remembered that he had stored his own personal supply of it in an unbreakable vial at Hogwarts.

The ruin of Hogwarts had been an unrecognisable pile of rubble in harrowingly familiar surrounds, but Severus had no time to spare for exploring the wreckage of the school he had occupied for most of his life. Three Summoning Charms had been required to unearth the precious vial, and another to bring it to Severus's outstretched hand. Finally he had more than enough virgin's blood.

With the potion now complete, Severus looked dubiously down at it. For once in his life, he had made an off-colour potion. Instead of being a rich blue, it was almost purple. Perhaps the virgin's blood was meant to have been fresh instead of well over a year old... Severus could only hope that the potion would fulfil its purpose. Bottling it in another unbreakable vial, he Apparated back to St. Mungo's, handing it to Poppy.

He had barely resumed his pacing outside Hermione's room, the others long gone, when Poppy opened the door.

"We have a problem. Hermione's awake and unrestrained; we can't risk subduing her. She's refusing to take the potion, paranoid that it's an Abortifacient. We can't reason with her... perhaps she would take it if you gave it to her?"

Walking into the room, Severus got the impression that it would be in complete disarray if Hermione still had her powers. There must have been a Silencing Charm in place, for the moment he passed the door, he could hear her yelling at the Healers and calling for him. Wild-eyed, cowering away from exasperated men and women, she only began to calm down when she spotted him.

"Severus?" she all but whimpered.

Plucking the vial of Anti-Abortifacient Draught from the mediwizards closest to his wife, Severus uncorked it with a flick of his wand.

"You have to take this." He reached down to take Hermione's hand reassuringly, only to feel his own concern rocket when he felt the clamminess of her skin and erratic pulse at her wrist.

"No! It's a trick, you're not really..."

"Hermione!" Severus cut off her fevered protest. "It is me. See?" He unbuttoned his sleeve, tugging it up to reveal their intertwined initials coiling around his wrist. "I made this potion myself. If you don't take it, you are going to miscarry."

Severus had to repeat himself before Hermione would let him lift the vial to her lips. She had managed to swallow half of the dose before her eyes rolled back in her head and she flopped back down on the bed, unconscious.

The professionals moved in, snatching the vial from him to tip the rest of it down Hermione's throat.

To his emphatic objections, Severus found himself escorted to wait outside.

"If there is any chance that she will die, I want to be with her!"

"Sorry, Mr. Snape, but we cannot allow that. This is the crisis point. Any interference may be fatal for her."

"Severus? You can come in, now." Poppy beckoned him inside. All of the other medical professionals were making their way out.

Staggering over to the bed, Severus reached down to take Hermione's hand. He breathed a shuddering sigh of relief when he noted that both her skin and pulse felt more normal. She seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

"Hermione will be fine, although this pregnancy will be difficult for her. With proper medical care, your children will also be fine."

"Children?" he blurted, unable to contain his surprise. He stared, wide-eyed, at Hermione's flat stomach, although it would be a while yet before she started showing.

"You didn't know? Hermione is carrying twins. Congratulations!" Poppy beamed.

"Twins?!" he exclaimed weakly, gibbering mentally. He sat down heavily on the chair provided next to Hermione's bed. It was quite a while before anything remotely resembling intelligent thought resumed in his mind. *'But... she was only carrying one child before the veil....'*

Epilogue

Chapter 18 of 18

Darkness never dies...

Epilogue

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and all associated characters belong to JKR. I'm not making so much as a Knut from this story.

AN: Many thanks to septentrion and LadySunflower for betaing.

Daily Prophet, 9.4.99

Necromancer Defeated!

Wizards Britain can breathe again, as the destroyer of Hogwarts and decimator of the Ministry departed beyond the veil two days ago. Atropos, physically appearing to be the slayer of Voldemort, Hermione Granger, was soundly defeated by the famous Order of the Phoenix. Among the Order was the real Granger, reportedly now married to Severus Snape, the Order's spy among the Death Eaters.

Readers may remember that Granger was a Necromancer. The Order spokesman, Albus Dumbledore, now tragically lacking his wand arm, assured the Prophet reporters that in the process of sending Atropos through the veil, Granger lost her Necromantic powers. For more on this story, turn to page....

*

Daily Prophet, 15.5.99

Albus Dumbledore Interim Minister!

Whilst the Ministry of Magic is reformed, Dumbledore will head it, but refuses to contemplate remaining so in the long term. Is his loss of limb causing him more trouble than previously reported?

*

Daily Prophet, 16.9.99

It's a Wizard!

Roy William Weasley was born to Fleur Delacour Weasley and William Arthur Weasley (deceased). Both mother and child are healthy. New Uncle Ronald Weasley was there to welcome the baby into the world and was named godfather.

*

Daily Prophet, 3.3.00

Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks, Order of the Phoenix members, revealed that they have been secretly married since shortly after the defeat of Voldemort. Nymphadora Tonks's rumoured pregnancy may have spurred them to disclose the truth.

*

Daily Prophet, 29.7.00

It's a Witch!

Ursula Lily Lupin was born to Nymphadora Tonks Lupin and Remus John Lupin. Mother and child are healthy with the father in attendance. Harry Potter is rumoured to be named godfather.

*

Daily Prophet, 24.12.00

Yule Wedding for Boy-Who-Lived!

Today Harry Potter married Luna Lovegood, daughter of the eccentric editor of the Quibbler. The wedding was held in a secret location with only friends of the couple in attendance. No details of the wedding dress have been released yet.

*

Daily Prophet, 1.1.01

Selfless Sacrifices Renew Hogwarts.

Albus Dumbledore gave his life at the cusp of the new year to reset the wards on the foundations of the soon-to-be rebuilt Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Dumbledore had been experiencing failing health ever since he lost his wand arm to the infamous Atropos, and reportedly wanted his death to be for the greater good. His phoenix, Fawkes, joined him in his endeavour, ensuring the wards would never fail again. For the full obituary, turn to page....

*

Daily Prophet, 1.9.01

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Reopens!

Albus Dumbledore's tragic sacrifice was not in vain, as the school reopened today. For the full story, turn to page....

*

Daily Prophet, 2.10.01

It's a Wizard!

James Albus Potter was born to Luna Lovegood Potter and Harry James Potter. Mother and child are fit as fiddles, the proud father buying a drink for every wizard in Britain.

*

Daily Prophet, 1.3.09

Ron Weasley Does It Again!

Readers of the Prophet may recall the famous Chudley Cannons Keeper cannot resist a pretty girl, to the downfall of his two marriages, to Lavender Brown and Padma Patil respectively. In an exclusive interview, Ron Weasley has denied Patil's claim that 'he couldn't get it up' on their wedding night, but admitted that they were both 'very, very, very drunk'. The mismatched pair got an annulment the very next day.

Ron Weasley has promised to try to be more discrete and to clean up his act, knowing that he is a role model to his fans and also to his nephew Roy, who starts his schooling at Hogwarts this September after having refused his mother's demands that he be schooled at Beauxbatons.

Hogwarts, Defence Master's quarters, 15.3.2019.

Flicking the scrapbook shut, Severus wondered where his children's birth announcements were. He had a sneaking suspicion Minerva, their godmother, had them framed in her office. Hermione would not be pleased to find them gone, not when she had gone to the trouble of putting the newspaper cuttings together for their tenth anniversary. Perhaps Minerva would not mind if he 'borrowed' hers?

The wizarding photo on his desk of his wife and children caught his attention. They were glowering up at him, in an unspoken message that they would mind.

A belated wedding present from Weasley and Potter chimed from the wall. It was a clock based on Molly Weasley's, with the hands showing the locations of the family. His son had just returned home.

Stretching, Severus pushed back his chair and stood, moving to stand in the doorway to the sitting room from his study and he watched his son saunter in from the hall. He frowned. While still undeniably moving around with his habitual strut, Silas looked downcast.

"What's wrong? Didn't you get the job?" Imogen sprang up from her seat, also noticing her brother's unusual mood.

Silas looked irritably over at his sister. "Of course I got it! But the Head of the department is a tough nut to crack. She didn't respond to me at all!" He sighed miserably. "Other than laughing, anyway."

"Seriously? That's a first. Who is she?" Blinking, Imogen looked baffled - something that Severus understood to a certain extent, as Silas possessed better looks than the youthful Tom Riddle, and equal charisma. But his son was also just as arrogant, something that would put some of his would-be admirers off.

"I don't know. She wasn't introduced to me; it was just an encounter in passing."

Imogen made an inquiring noise at the back of her throat.

"You see, Unspeakables are so secretive that they wear robes disguising their identities. These robes change the pitch of their voices, even change the way they look," Silas explained.

"I see." Imogen couldn't restrain herself from sniggering, earning herself a filthy look from Silas. "You poor thing! Slighted because the Head found your charm laughable."

"I am not surprised." At Severus's words, both of his fully-grown offspring looked over at him with a start. They hadn't noticed him... he had hoped that their observational skills were better than that. He walked over to his favourite chair, the worn leather moulding to his body.

"Father," they murmured in greeting, waiting until he had seated himself before continuing to speak.

"What do you mean?" Silas asked him, raising an eyebrow, mirroring Severus's expression.

"You seem to flirt with any woman with a pulse, so it was inevitable that you would encounter one that cannot be charmed by your looks or charisma," Severus said reprovingly.

Opening his mouth to object, Silas was interrupted by the entrance of his mother from the fireplace with a flash of green.

Imogen instantly jumped at the opportunity to indulge in a bit of sisterly love. "Mum! Silas was..."

"Laughed off, I know," Hermione said, a hint of mirth in her voice as she shook the soot off her robes and tucked the amulet powering the disguise into her pocket, having removed it before travelling.

"The Unspeakables gossip?" Imogen blinked in surprise.

"Not as much as other departments, but I was there when it happened."

"Why didn't you give me a bit of support, Mum?" Silas complained. "Do you really need to keep your identity from me when we both work in the same department now?"

"To tell the truth, I was too busy laughing at the time. That, and you did need taking down a peg."

"Mum!" Silas moaned, glowering at his sister as she erupted into muffled giggles. "Think what this has done to my fragile ego! I'm losing my touch."

"Silas, there were three reasons why your flirtations failed: she's your boss," Hermione held her hand up, extending a finger.

"She's happily married." Another finger.

"...and she's your mother." As the third finger was raised, Severus saw her lips twitch.

He himself had been well prepared, knowing exactly who the Head of the Department of Mysteries was. The only giveaway of the amusement he felt was the crinkling of his eyes.

As Silas flushed crimson, mortified, Imogen laughed uproariously. "That'll teach you to hit on someone when you have no way of knowing who they are!"

From the way Silas was hunching his shoulders up and eyeing the floor, Severus guessed that the young man was wishing that the floor would swallow him.

The front door banged open, slamming shut with the same amount of force.

"Ysabel?" Severus called, rising to his feet. No answer came from the hall.

Forgetting his embarrassment, Silas walked into the hall. He returned moments later, leading his oldest sister into the sitting room. To Severus's increasing distress, her face was tear-streaked.

"What's Roy done this time?" Imogen asked, sounding resigned.

"I c-caught him wi-with Ursula Lu-lupin. It's over!" Ysabel buried her head in Silas's chest.

Patting his sister uncertainly on her back, Silas looked relieved to hand her over to her twin.

Growling under his breath, Silas stalked towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked, distracted from her attempt to join Imogen in consoling Ysabel.

"To have a few *words* with Roy Weasley. This is the last time he's screwing my sister over."

Severus wouldn't be surprised if those words were the incantations of curses. He was left staring after his son, feeling more than a little lost. It was as if his role as the protector of his daughters had been usurped.

"Come on, let's get you tidied up," Imogen murmured, tracing her wand over Ysabel's puffy eyes. "You need a drink."

After Imogen had dragged Ysabel off, Hermione met Severus's eyes. She also looked more than a little lost. "They really have grown up," she said softly.

Moving over to her, Severus tugged her into his arms. "And grown up well, even if Silas is a womaniser in the making and Ysabel has terrible taste in boys."

'Do they need us anymore?' was the unspoken thought that Severus felt they both shared.

"I daresay that they'll still need us from time to time," Hermione muttered, making Severus wonder if he'd spoken that thought aloud. "Although hopefully not in taking care of grandchildren for a while yet."

Choking in his alarm at the thought, Severus drew back to glare at his wife when she chuckled at his reaction. His glare faltered when he looked beyond the too-bright smile on her face.

"How was your day?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject to follow up on his concerns.

Her smile faded. "The Ides of March is never an easy day for either of us, is it?"

"It would be so much worse for me if you had never returned." Severus pulled her closer, tightening his arms around her as he crushed her to his chest. Hermione did not complain about the rougher treatment, squeezing back as hard as she could. Tipping her head back, she accepted his fervent kiss.

Some time later, entangled on the sofa, Severus had only just Summoned a blanket to cover them when Silas blundered in. His usually jet black hair was fluorescent pink, and one eye was swollen shut.

"Mum, could you turn my hair back to normal? I can't figure out the counter... for the love of Merlin! Can't you save it for your bedroom?"

"Perhaps this will persuade you to fly the nest, now that you have acquired a job," Severus said, calmly tucking the blanket around their cooling bodies and handing Hermione her wand.

After healing his eye, Hermione looked over Silas's hair with a practiced eye. "You'll have to wait for it to wear off. It shouldn't be anymore than a week," she said, shaking her head, the movement mussing her hair even more.

"Does this mean that Ysabel's honour has not been adequately defended?" Severus growled.

"You should see Roy Weasley now. I knew better than to go alone to pick a fight with an older wizard. I got Jamie Potter to come with me; one advantage of having a friend fancy your sister."

"James Potter is attracted to Ysabel?" Severus asked, feeling his blood boil at the thought of a Potter wooing his daughter.

Silas smirked. "Yes, but I think he might realise that Imogen fancies him... and that he's been chasing after the wrong sister."

"*Imogen and James Potter?*" The only thing stopping Severus from leaping to his feet to hunt the unfortunate Potter boy down was Hermione shifting her hand beneath the blanket and shaking her head warningly at him.

"Surely Jamie's better than Uncle Ron? I saw the way he looked at Imogen and Ysabel the last time he was here."

"*Weasley?*" Severus roared, grabbing for his wand. Hermione was too shocked to stop him.

"Just kidding!" Silas dashed out of the room before he could be hexed.

"He'd better be," Hermione growled. Severus frowned, feeling a little chilly even when curled up beside her under their warmest blanket. He turned to look at her, taking hold of her jaw so that her eyes met his.

"Hermione," he murmured warningly.

"What?" she snapped.

In answer, he reached down to bring her right hand into view. The ring on her forefinger was cracking before their eyes.

"Fuck," Hermione breathed. She sprang off the sofa, throwing her robes on. "I knew it was too much to hope that the latest improvements would hold! At this rate my job will be on the line. They can't have a Necromancer as Head of a Ministerial Department." She hurled a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace, waiting until the flames had turned green before dropping to her knees before it and put her head through, calling out the destination of her Floo call at the same time.

Within a minute, Croaker was stepping through. Severus had taken the time before his arrival to get dressed. It was bad enough having their son walk in on them without having Croaker do the same.

"Right, we're ready for it," Croaker said, pulling an identical brand new ring from a pocket. "At least you won't reduce anything to ash this time."

Hermione grimaced. From what Severus had heard of the last incident, she had almost atomised her secretary, only just managing to make the sparks hit the desk instead.

As the ring split apart and fell off, Croaker handed the new one to Hermione. Her breath hissed between her teeth as she slid it onto her finger. Severus watched the Necromantic darkness instantly vanish from her eyes as the ring cut her off from those dark powers.

Dampening rings had been in development when Atropos decimated the Ministry, but the first had only been completed when Hermione's powers had eventually returned a year after she had been stripped of them. Even if there had been one available, it would not have been possible to deal with Atropos using it, for the simple reason that the wearer had to willingly put it on. The wearer also determined exactly what the ring 'dampened'. In Hermione's case it was just her Necromantic powers, leaving her magic otherwise intact.

"We'll get them perfected one day, 'Ermione. Perhaps your son could put 'is mind to that, now that 'e 'as joined the department?"

"Perhaps," Hermione said flatly, sitting down. "Goodnight, Croaker. I'll see you after the weekend."

After handing Croaker some Floo powder, Severus turned to his wife. She was slumped on the sofa, pale-faced. Gaining her Necromantic powers back and losing them within a second took a lot out of her.

Sitting beside her, he took her hand. "Silas is certainly more than intelligent enough to help."

Hermione cleared her throat, smiling half-heartedly. "I know. But it would mean telling him more than I wanted any of our children to know."

"It may be difficult for him to know that..." Severus paused, giving the partly closed door a suspicious look. He cast *Muffliato* just to be sure that Silas could not eavesdrop. If the boy was to know, he would find out in a more controlled situation. "To know that you, for lack of a better word, merged with the infamous Atropos beyond the veil. It was hard enough for me to deal with it."

An awkward silence descended. Neither of them liked to discuss the first year of their marriage. While Hogwarts was being rebuilt and the Ministry rekindled, their marriage had come perilously close to failing. It was only saved when Atropos offered to stay within Hermione's subconscious on the condition that they raised her child as their own.

Severus had devised a potion to ensure that the parentage of the twins could not be discovered by magical or Muggle means. Neither he nor Hermione knew whether Ysabel or Imogen was the cuckoo in the nest, as both favoured their mother in looks.

"I'm never going to be completely free from her, am I?" Hermione broke the silence, staring moodily at the fireplace.

"That would be akin to running from your own shadow," Severus murmured, pulling her into his arms. "It is true that darkness never dies. But you are living proof that it can be held in check."

Nox.