

Chocolate Enchantment

by Vivian B

When the Weasley twins decide Hogwarts could use a little love in times of war, Hermione Granger and Severus Snape get caught in the crossfire—finding themselves pulled together by true love chocolates. As Severus Snape is pushed to fulfill his Unbreakable Vow, the two of them must work together to help the Order and Harry prepare for the final battle. This story was completed prior to the publication of DH and is HBP compliant

1: Making Contact

Chapter 1 of 51

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Chapter 1: Making contact

Severus Snape took the stairs to the Headmaster's office at his usual brisk pace, despite the fact that he wasn't looking forward to this interview at all. In all his years as a spy, in all his time serving the Headmaster, he hadn't banked on the task that had been placed on his shoulders.

If only Narcissa could have kept her concerns to herself.

When Bellatrix Lestrange and Narcissa Malfoy had shown up at his door at Spinner's End the previous day, he had been a bit surprised, but more curious than anything. It hadn't taken long to guess the cause of Narcissa's concern...it had been on his mind as well.

Draco Malfoy might have been a right nasty bugger, but he was a child, one who had been given less cause to fight for the Dark Lord than most could boast on. His choices, as the son of Lucius, had been few, and now he was given the onerous task of killing Dumbledore. A task Severus knew the younger Malfoy would never complete.

Narcissa hadn't figured this was enough, however. She had to drag Severus into it as well. And his Unbreakable Vow . . . Well, it gave him cause for concern. That was certain. He hadn't slept the previous night. The door to the Headmaster's office swung open before Severus could lift his hand to knock, and Albus Dumbledore looked up from his paper work to search the younger man's face.

"Come in, Severus."

Severus Snape advanced into the room, shutting the door behind him, then warded it to ensure privacy despite the fact that the castle was nearly empty. "Headmaster, I have some news." He walked to the window, glanced out on the empty school grounds, then turned to face the elderly wizard before him. Dumbledore was said to be the only wizard the Dark Lord feared, and though the old man had become weaker with the destruction of one of the Dark Lord's Horcrux's, he was still a man to be reckoned with.

When several seconds passed without Severus speaking a word, the Headmaster gestured for him to sit, but Severus merely shook his head and gripped his hands on the stone windowsill at his back. Likewise when Albus nudged a plate of lemon drops forward, Severus ignored it. "What is it you have to tell me?"

Energy bounded around him as he tried to sort his disordered thoughts. How could he admit to his foolish vow? Draco would have to follow through, have to, because Severus knew he couldn't. Unfortunately, he was certain the youngest Malfoy would find his courage wanting when the time arose. Draco lacked the true viciousness of his father. He would die in this fight on one side or the other and more likely by the hand of the Dark Lord than any other. The Death Eater's insane leader didn't suffer fools gladly.

The words didn't want to come. Severus had no idea how he would answer the man who had given him a chance, given him the choice to live a different life. "I've a visit from Narcissa Malfoy." He braced himself to tell the story. He outlined the visit of the two women, the request that had been made of him, and his inability to do more than accept the Unbreakable Vow. If Draco failed, as Severus fully expected him to do, Severus had promised to kill the Headmaster in his place.

By the time he finished the story, he found himself sitting in the chair across from the Headmaster. His legs felt weak as he contemplated what lay ahead. "I didn't know what else to do. They left me no avenue. To refuse the vow was tantamount to declaring my true allegiance, in Bellatrix's eyes anyway, and she would have done everything in her power to undermine my authority in the inner circle."

Albus's thin face was serious, his lips pursed below his long, crooked nose. Silence seemed to stretch before them for eons, though it was likely only a couple of minutes. Then Albus nodded. "It seems you must fulfill your vow. You have no choice."

"But, Headmaster, we both know Draco will fail and I will have to kill you for him. He is only a boy, far weaker than his father." Severus couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"You have no choice. It is kill me or die yourself. I am an old man, and I am not the one who has to face off Voldemort in the end. Harry is. He'll need your help, but to do that, you must live. You are our eyes and ears in Riddle's inner circle. We need you. You must not be sacrificed. So it will be me." There was a long pause as Severus internalized those words, hating that such a tragedy should fall to his own hands. He couldn't stand the thought.

"I am dying anyway, Severus." Dumbledore lifted his withered hand to show the damage done by one of Voldemort's Horcruxes when they had released a bit of the mad man's soul a few weeks earlier. The withering had been held at bay with the aid of potions, but without them the injury would soon take over his body. As things stood, the damage was still spreading, however slowly.

Severus erupted from his seat, gesticulating wildly. "You don't know what you're saying, Headmaster. If I were to . . . complete Draco's assignment, I would become nothing more than the hunted. What good would I do for the Order if they didn't follow me, if they didn't believe me? How will I be of service if I am forced to hide away like Black did? I can't live that way."

"If it comes down to killing me or breaking your vow, you must do it. That's an order. We will find a way for you to keep assisting the Order before then."

Silence reverberated around the room while Severus tried to take it all in. A glance at Dumbledore showed him looking weary, as though all hundred and fifty two years of his age had beset him at once. This man was the only one Severus trusted, the only human to have shown him more than the most fleeting concern. And though that concern was far from perfect, it was still the best Severus had known. The man must not die by his hand. Severus would do everything in his power to ensure Draco fulfilled his task. There was no other choice. Both of his Unbreakable Vows, the one to Narcissa and the one he had made to Dumbledore all those years before, now mandated that he must follow through with killing the Headmaster if Draco failed.

Despair filled Severus's soul, what little he still claimed as his own. It would not be the first time he killed, and with the act, Severus worried it would be far from his last. He wondered how much of his soul would be left when this was all over. Looking down, he saw blood seeping from his fingertips where he had gripped the rock of the window ledge too tightly. He could smell the coppery scent, almost taste it. Still, he felt nothing.

There was no choice.

Finally, the Headmaster spoke again. "Now, if I'm going to live less than a year, we have many plans to make. Sit so we can begin."

Months had passed and Christmas was long gone. Severus had been doing his best to get Draco to tell him what his plans were, but faced a wall of opposition. There was no telling what the boy had in mind, as he refused to budge an inch to accept help. The platinum blond prat was too sure Severus wanted the glory. If only the child could see how much Severus wished he dared defy the Headmaster and kill himself instead.

Not that he had a death wish. There was little enough in this life to make it worth living, but that didn't mean Severus Snape wouldn't do his best to cling to the pathetic life he had been given. He had little property, a disturbing heritage, and no one who he felt was truly his friend. Though he called many Death Eaters by the name 'friend,' not even the Headmaster put Severus's own welfare above anyone else's. It was a hard thing to accept at times. He was little more than a pawn in the lives of two powerful men. And Severus had no one to blame for that position but himself.

Ron Weasley had been poisoned the previous day, poisoned by mead that had been intended for Dumbledore. Both he and the Headmaster knew it was Draco who was behind the incident, but there was no way to prove it. And since Draco refused to admit to his head of house that he was responsible, or whatever else he had planned, Severus couldn't stop the idiot from continuing to injure innocent students in his weak bid to kill the Headmaster. Not that he could call Ronald Weasley innocent, exactly. Severus's lip curled in a scowl at the thought. Weasley was the best friend of Harry Potter, the Chosen One. Who knew what the two of them and their know-it-all friend got up to. If they got up to even half the trouble Potter's father's crowd had gotten into, innocent didn't seem to apply at all.

At the same time, though they were a foolish group, imbecilic in some of the risks they took, they were far from the depraved idiots he encountered by the Dark Lord's side.

Severus sat at his desk in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom covering a student's scroll in red ink. Didn't the dunderheads ever listen? He was doing his best to prepare the students for the fight against the Dark Lord. There was little more he could do in his current position, and he knew he would be lucky to have the remainder of the school year to do the job. Whatever he could cram into the students' heads would be his only opportunity. With his luck Draco would fail and he would have to fulfill his contract, ensuring a new teacher the following year. That was, if the loss of the Headmaster didn't put the school out of business. He gripped his hands into fists and took a slow breath. Everything seemed to bring him back to this thought.

He glanced at the clock and realized it was nearly dinner time. He considered staying in his office to work. With everything going on, he had gotten behind on correcting papers and didn't want to take the time away from his work. However, Severus knew after eating in his office twice that day already, he was expected at the meal, so he stood and put away the papers.

He had a book he needed to pick up from the library while he was up anyway. His research never seemed to end, if only to keep him ahead of a certain know-it-all student. She was the only student who even remotely kept up with the classes he set. If she didn't have such unfortunate friends, if she weren't always thrusting her eager hand into the air and flailing it around. If only she had been a Slytherin.

Dinner was loud and distracting as usual. Snape sneered as he saw the Weasley twins heading out of the castle as he entered the great hall. They must have been around to visit their brother in the hospital wing, though that wasn't the part of the castle they were walking from. Even after leaving the school, it seemed the twins couldn't help but knick food from the kitchens.

Severus knew the twins were now members of the Order, a big mess of trouble, if you asked him, but Dumbledore seemed to think they had their uses. If it hadn't been for the havoc they caused in his classroom over the years they had been his students, he might have appreciated their inventive spirit himself. Or at least have disdained it a trifle less. However, he had been grateful when they hadn't slid by with decent owls in potions. How they could have failed was beyond him though. Based on what he had

heard and seen of their potions experiments, and the things they had developed, they should have done much better.

He passed that thought over and focused on the other Weasleys at the Gryffindor tables as the Headmaster sat down a few seats beyond him. The bloody boy who lived sat talking furtively with the know-it-all and the youngest Weasley, Ginny. Severus was aware of the things Dumbledore was trying to accomplish with Potter. Severus doubted the boy could accomplish the goals by himself if things transpired as they were expected to. Certainly destroying the lot of Horcruxes when Dumbledore had been so damaged by the one encounter . . . And the Headmaster still needed strengthening potions made for him so he could continue from day to day. At the rate the Headmaster was losing strength, Draco would be able to toss his wand at the old man to kill him come spring. It caused Severus more worry than he would admit to.

While Severus worked his way through a plate of mashed potatoes and roast venison, he considered again how long the Headmaster would last without the potions the younger man made for him each week. Not that Dumbledore wasn't capable of brewing them himself, if he only had time for it. With a sigh, Severus finished his food, then reached for the plate of chocolate chunk biscuits before him. Always a Hogwarts favorite, he mused as he took a bite.

The biscuits were even better than usual, he decided when the first crunchy, gooey, chocolaty mouthful hit his taste buds. He would definitely have a second.

"How many Shielding Hats have they sold now?" Hermione asked Ginny as they sat at the dinner table. She had finished her meal but after a moment's consideration, decided she needed one more chocolate chunk biscuit if she was going to finish her research that evening in the library. The house-elves always cooked amazing meals, but these biscuits were unbelievable, even by Hogwarts standards.

"Thousands now, Fred said they were getting orders from around the globe." Harry shook his head in amazement. "And you wouldn't believe some of the things they have worked up. Dementor Detractors are selling like Rosmerta's butterbeers on Hogsmeade weekends."

"New, improved love potioned chocolates," Ginny added. "They only work with your true love, the one you are meant to be with. Their power lasts a full week, and if you come into contact with your true love during that week, you'll know right away. Unfortunately, they have to have one of the chocolates too if they are to know as well. And it has to be touch. The potion they found in some text only works with skin-to-skin contact. Unlike the other ones Ron got dosed with."

Seamus Finnigan sat nearby listening in. His grin widened at the words skin-to-skin. Hermione gave him a withering glare. If he had been Ron, and if she were more given to physical expressions of disgust, she would have hit him upside the head for sure. "That sounds dangerous. But if you have to touch their hand or arm or something, it would probably cut down on people finding their true love. After all, who's going to walk around touching everyone they see? Besides, who wants to walk around like a blithering idiot when they find their true love?"

"It's not supposed to be like a normal love potion," Harry said, reaching for another cookie. "Not so overpowering, and the effect is permanent. Once you find the true love, you won't want anyone else as long as you live."

"I guess it would help you eliminate the creeps though. If you want to know if he's the one, just eat some chocolate and you'll soon have your answer." Ginny popped the last bit of biscuit into her mouth. "George said they figured people can use a bit of love about now. If you ask me, Fred was hoping to find some with their employee Verity, but it didn't work out." She snorted, then finished off her glass of milk.

"Not that I usually agree with their sales practices, but it still sounds dangerous to me." Hermione stood with Ginny, finished with her own meal and anxious to get back to her research for her DADA paper. "I'll be in the library, if either of you care to work on your assignments." She glanced at the boys and noticed they were already back on the subject of Quiddich. She shrugged and made her way to the library.

Severus growled under his breath as he searched the shelves for the book he needed. Where was it? Madam Pince was usually so good about making sure everything was placed where it belonged. How could a book just go missing? She said it wasn't checked out right now.

He pushed his lank black hair back from his face and continued to scan the titles. Maybe he would have to see if the information was available in another book. He heard the buzz of student voices coming from the table on the other side of the shelf he was perusing and caught bits of the conversation. Second-years, it sounded like, struggling with transfiguration homework. He smirked and stopped at a title that looked promising, then pulled it from the shelf.

Usually he came to the library later when most of the students had adjourned to their common rooms, less noise, less hassle. Less likelihood of running into the Gryffindor trio or Longbottom while he was going about his business. Other teachers had trouble with students stopping them in the evenings to ask questions about the homework. Severus wasn't troubled with this affliction since his general nastiness discouraged all but the most fool hardy from approaching him. There were compensations for the role he played, he supposed.

He frowned as he looked at the table of contents in the book, then flipped through to the relevant section. A few minutes' perusal told him it didn't contain what he needed. Blast. He stuck the book back in the gap in the wall of books and continued looking.

A bushy-haired student walked around the corner of the shelves and stopped inches from running into him. Hermione Granger, the fussy little brat, nearly fell backward trying not to touch him. Out of reflex, Severus reached out and grabbed her upper arm by the sleeve and stopped her fall. "What do you mean by this? Can't you watch where you are going?"

"S... sorry, sir. I didn't see, I mean, I didn't know." She paused to take a calming breath. "I apologize, sir. I should have been watching what I was doing."

"Indeed. What are you doing here anyway? Shouldn't you already have your nose deeply buried in a book by now, or maybe you're doing research to brew another illicit potion?" He sneered at the way her face lost some of its color, then turned his back on her. "Move along. I have work to do."

"But, sir, I just needed to return this book to the shelf." She lifted it and indicated the shelf he was looking at.

Severus glanced at the book's title, then realized it was the tome for which he had been searching. "You're the one who has been taking off with my reading material." He stretched out his arm to snatch it from her and bumped into her hand as she stretched out to offer it to him. His hand grazed over hers, and he grasped the book above her hand. Then froze as feelings rushed into him. Warmth, love, compassion, need, they all hit him with the force of a hurricane, setting him off balance. He fumbled the book and dropped it, thoroughly overwhelmed. It had been years since he felt anything that even remotely approximated this rush of longing. A glance at her showed she was feeling something similar, or at least she appeared as shocked as he was.

With few exceptions, Severus Snape had never been one much inclined toward affection. Hate came easily to him, distain, irritation, dislike, mistrust, certainly, but not affection. It took a long moment before he could be sure what he was feeling as he looked into her wide cinnamon eyes.

"Sir?" She searched his face, and he realized that though he had never considered her a great beauty, he now saw how pleasing her eyes were. The slight upturn of her nose was lovely, and she had such soft, kissable lips. He couldn't help wondering what they would taste like.

When that thought crossed his mind, he pulled back, recoiling from her as if it would stop the madness in his head. "What's going on here? What have you been playing with?" He saw the book shake in her hand and watched all the color drain from her face until she looked almost gray.

Despite her pallor, which he thought irrelevantly, probably matched his own, he had a strong urge to reach out and pull her close, to kiss her and never let go. He stepped back in surprise and horror. He knew the effects of a love potion when he saw one, or rather, felt one. There was no other explanation for the rapidly rising feelings in his chest. The fact that it hadn't taken effect until they touched, well, he could find out how to reverse that if he could keep his head on straight that long. "Go to your common room, Miss Granger, and don't come out again tonight. Go!"

Though she had been stepping nearer to him, at his yelled command, she took a step backward. He saw the desire to step closer again warring with her usual innate sense to obey a teacher's command. A shocked disgust also warred with her features. It was all over her face as she swayed closer to him again. He screwed up his face to its most hateful, willing himself to push her away before he pulled her closer and did something unpardonable. "Go now." Her eyes widened, and with a trembling chin, she whirled around and scurried away.

Severus took a minute to collect himself before he picked up the book that had been in her hands and noted the title again, but his head was more on the girl who had just hurried off than it was on his research. His hands shook, and he felt drained now she had put some distance between them. Not relieved, however, as the compulsion to find her was only growing stronger by the moment. The professor called on all his resolve and stalked over to Madam Pince's desk. He growled under his breath as he checked out the tome. If he was surlier than ever, no one seemed to notice. Since surliness appeared to be his only defense against his inner turmoil, he embraced it.

2: Messengers

Chapter 2 of 51

When the Weasley twins decide Hogwarts could use a little love in times of war, Hermione Granger and Severus Snape get caught in the crossfire—finding themselves pulled together by true love chocolates. As Severus Snape is pushed to fulfill his Unbreakable Vow, the two of them must work together to help the Order and Harry prepare for the final battle. This story was completed prior to the publication of DH and is HBP compliant

Chapter 2: Messengers

Hermione hurried to her room in Gryffindor Tower, rushing past people with little more than a greeting. It was all she could do to keep the tears out of her eyes as she rushed up the stairs and threw herself onto her bed. Lavender...the wench...was, no doubt, in the hospital wing snogging Ron while Parvati worked on divination homework. She was, for the moment, alone and thankful for it.

What had just happened? How could she feel so suddenly THAT for her dreaded professor? It wasn't that she hadn't always respected Professor Snape. Even when he was at his worst, she respected him. She respected him both because he was a professor and because she knew he was under tremendous pressure to keep the Order informed of Voldemort's plans without compromising himself with the Dark Lord.

He put his life on the line every time he showed up at Voldemort's side, and she appreciated what he was going through, even if she had no real understanding of it. Also, this year he had taught his students more to help them against dark wizards than any other Defense teacher had. Not that it would take much to outdo other professors. Lupin had been pretty good, and the fake Mad-Eye Moody had taught them a few interesting things, but the other three had been complete rubbish.

But respect doesn't turn to this kind of emotion, not like that. It was completely ridiculous to think the sudden rush of longing, the desperate attraction, had popped from respect. . . Wait. She remembered the conversation they had over dinner about Fred and George's newest treat, the true love chocolate. And hadn't they said they planned to visit Dobby in the kitchen on their way back to work that afternoon?

Just what had they done to the biscuits? The thrill of knowing she had found her love, her soul mate...if she was right...was squashed by the huge scowl her true love had worn when the contact was made. His demand that she leave him at once both thrilled and terrified her. Did it mean he was as strongly affected by the potion as she? She tried to deny the way she felt, but the draw to Professor Snape was too powerful to ignore or pretend it didn't exist. Despite how hatefully he had behaved toward her.

They had just sentenced her to a life of loving the worst-tempered person any of them knew.

She was going to kill them.

After sending a whale of a Howler to the twins, without divulging who her soul mate was, Hermione forced herself to return to her rooms instead of going down to the dungeons where she knew Snape still resided. He had said she mustn't leave her room that night, but she hadn't followed orders to the letter. At least she managed not to run into him while she was out. There was little hope any homework she pulled out tonight would go well. Her mind was far too focused on the man several levels below her to see straight.

If only he had been someone nice like Seamus. Not that she had any particular interest in Seamus, but at least he was nice. To tell the truth, she had seen herself with Ron, if the prat ever quit being . . . well, himself, long enough for things to happen. Now that would never happen. She couldn't quite bring herself to be unhappy about it. The grinding disgust and jealousy she once felt about him and Lavender seemed far from important now.

Of course, she still expected to find Lavender's high-pitched giggle and calls of 'Won-Won' irritating. Anyone with ears and a modicum of taste could find that obnoxious. Even 'Won-Won' seemed to find it tiring.

Hermione looked down at the piece of parchment on which she was supposed to be writing a history of the Goblin rebellion of 1745. Doodled on the surface instead were the words 'Hermione Snape' written dozens of times in different styles and sizes. Disgusted with herself, she ripped the paper in half and tossed it in the nearby fire.

She was still shaking her head at the chocolate chunks in the biscuits being infused with love potion. What were they thinking? Why would anyone in their right minds want to find out they were the true love of the surly Professor Snape? Not that he seemed half so bad, now she thought about it. After all, he was tall, imposing, his voice had a rather sexy quality to it she had never considered before. His hands...oh, his hands had such long, dexterous fingers. He obviously had some strength under that robe, or he wouldn't be able to keep up with the things she heard about Voldemort's meetings. And some of those cauldrons were really heavy, but he seemed to handle them with little trouble.

And though his nose was hooked, his skin pale and his hair long and a bit greasy, she was sure those qualities were highly underrated by the majority of the student body. The fact was, she was more disgusted at herself for not being disgusted than anything else.

Hermione flung herself back down on the four-poster bed and let her mind wander for a few minutes before forcing herself to pull out her school books again. Whether she accomplished much that evening or not, she ought to at least try to get something done. Come morning the twins should have returned her note with instructions on how to solve her dilemma. Maybe it wasn't them after all. Or maybe it was a different product. Maybe it would wear off on its own in a day or so. After all, 'Won-Won' was in the hospital indirectly because of a love potion that wasn't so long lasting. Maybe she was mistaken about this particular potion.

She could only hope.

The question was whether her hope was for the potion to wear off or not.

Snape was striding back and forth across his living area, trying to work out a solution to his problem. He had already made up a standard antidote to love potion and taken it. There had been no improvement. He didn't understand. *I'm a dirty old man lusting over a student half my age. Albus will have a fit and be well within his rights. It had to be lust, what else could it be?*

Not that the compulsion he felt for her was all physical. A great deal of it was physical...a very great deal, but he also wanted to be near Hermione...Miss Granger...to talk, to discuss Potions, dark magic, Transfiguration, Charms, having a family, and how many babies she wanted. He pushed that thought from his head and tried to focus on the problem before him. He had never even considered the idea of babies before. Being surrounded by children all day tended to remind him why he didn't want a family. Suddenly the thought of half a dozen babies, of seeing Hermione's...Miss Granger's...belly swell with his child, held an appeal he had never anticipated.

He shook his head, trying to rid his brain of the tempting image. It was the spell or potion, or whatever happened to them in the library *What could it have been?*

Most love potions worked only one direction. The person dosed with the potion was the only one affected, but he had seen it in her eyes, the returned ardor he was feeling. Somehow they had both been hit with a spell or dosed with the potion, however it was they had ingested the stuff, and it had turned them toward each other. She would certainly never have looked at him like that without some kind of coercion.

The trouble was, he hadn't heard of a spell that worked so completely, not that one of the idiots he taught might know. He hadn't eaten anything that the rest of the school hadn't imbibed as well. Which meant it could have been in the students' food. All of the students' food. The whole school could be having a wild orgy at the moment, and no amount of antidote, should he have cauldrons enough to make it, would work.

He supposed he better make a whopping dose of birth-control potion, but by the time he had it made, half the school would be beyond help anyway. He only hoped Poppy kept enough on hand to prevent too many children this night.

Another thought occurred to him then. This potion seemed to work off touch. That was the only reason he could have imprinted on Hermione...Miss Granger. He had seen many other females between dinner and pulling the book from the shelf. That, at least, cut down the number of potions that could have done the job. Still, he would have to do some more work to pinpoint exactly what had caused the reaction to Hermione...Miss Granger's...soft, supple lips. Could it have been something he ate in his office earlier in the day? No, that was all prepared by his own hand. A mist in the air? The diaphanous wafting of her perfume as he stood near her? He shook the memory of her scent from his mind, focusing back on probabilities.

His well-developed sense of smell would have alerted him to anything in the air. The only thing he could figure was dinner.

Perhaps most students wouldn't get that close to someone of the opposite gender and be spared. Everyone under fifth year, at least, he hoped. He imagined Hermione...Miss Granger...oh, sod it, *Hermione*, and half the other girls secluded in their rooms. It could happen. Then he imagined her with someone else. Maybe the potion only temporarily imprinted on someone. Maybe the reason he was still thinking of her was because he had touched no one else. What if some other male now had his hands on her?

The thought made the pulse pound in his head, and he could see a red haze forming in his eyes. No fumbling youth would lay a finger on her. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. He couldn't allow that; she belonged to him now. She was his. The fact that the thought was irrational, and he knew he might not feel the same way in another day, didn't change the way he felt now.

He stood at the threshold of his door, trying to curtail the desire to rush up to her rooms and be certain she wasn't touching anyone else, knowing it would be nothing but trouble. He heard the crack of a house-elf and turned to see the small tea-towel draped body dropping off more bath towels in the cupboard under the sink. Then the answer came to him.

"House-elf," he called, a little louder than necessary.

"Yes, sir," the elf said, bowing until her nose nearly touched the floor. "What is sir needing?"

"Go to Gryffindor tower and be sure that Miss Granger is in the sixth-year girls' room. If not, I need to know if she is alone or with a boy. Do not let her know I have sent you to check on her, then return and report." It was entirely insufficient, but the best he could do if he didn't want to get canned over the little chit. He had to think clearly over the situation. If only he didn't remember the soft scent of her perfume wafting over to him in the library, the way her full lips shone softly from the clear lip gloss she had been wearing, beckoning him. He shook his head, trying to regain control.

"Yes, sir. Tilly is doing it, sir. Right away, sir." She bowed again, then disappeared with a crack.

Snape strode across the room again, then back several times before another crack was heard, announcing the return of the house-elf. "Sir, Tilly is telling you Miss Hermione is in her room studying, sir. Alone, sir. Is sir needing anything else?"

Relief galloped through his system and he shook his head. "No, Tilly. Thank you. That will be all." The house-elf Disapparated and Snape turned back to his desk. He didn't know that he would be able to focus on his corrections, which was just his luck when he was already behind. If the pull on Hermione was half as strong as on himself, he doubted she was getting much studying done.

He hissed as his scar burned, and he reached into his closet for his cloak and mask. Of course, tonight when he was nowhere near his best. Tonight would be the night he would be called. He walked down the hall to the back exit of the castle, focusing on putting the effects of the potion away in a neat compartment. The last thing he needed was for the Dark Lord to know about this.

When he apparated at the Dark Lord's side, he dropped to his knee and fought to focus on the things that would keep him alive.

Hermione arrived at breakfast the next morning frazzled, with stacks of homework she had barely touched, little sleep to her credit, and frustration weeping from every pore.

A glance at the High Table showed Professor Snape had made an appearance. At least he looked a little worse for the wear, and Hermione wondered if he had as bad a time of it last night as she had. He was so strong, not exactly handsome, but so striking and powerful. She didn't realize she was staring until he looked up at her, his obsidian eyes meeting her brown ones. In them she saw a hunger equal to hers. She tried to be disgusted by her feelings, by his, but she couldn't. His interest in her only seemed to increase her need to speak with him, and she feared she wouldn't make it through the day without at least brushing her hand across his again. The compulsion was overwhelming. Yet she didn't have Defense Against the Dark Arts class that day, and she didn't know how she would manage a chance to speak with him.

An owl flew down and perched at the side of her plate, dropping an envelope on her eggs and bacon before taking off to join the other owls in the owlery. Aha! A letter from Fred and George. At least it better be from them, or she was going to kill them with her bare hands. She'd skive off classes and take a ride on the Knight Bus if she must, but she was going to get some answers from them. Soon.

When she got the letter open it was, in fact, from Fred.

Dear Hermione,

Yes, it would be our special chocolates you ate. They were cut into the biscuits last night. You didn't say who your soul mate is, but congratulations on finding him!

At this point Hermione was ready to send another Howler. What were those two thinking, messing with people's lives like this?

Um, I'm pretty sure she sent the Howler because she wasn't happy, Fred. *Right you are, George. Sorry you don't seem too thrilled with your love connection. Hermione. I take it then that it is some serious git...like our little brother...and not a charming chap like Neville. Sorry to tell you, but there is no known cure for the Amoriata, nothing to dampen the effect except working things out with your one true love. Having a good snog wouldn't hurt.*

She was going to flay them both alive. Have a good snog with Snape! They had to be kidding. She glanced back at the Head Table and saw Snape looking at her again. Not that she wouldn't like to have a good snog with him. Her face burned with heat, and she returned her gaze to the page in her hands.

In short, your have little choice but to live with it...so take the time to enjoy it instead. Unless Snape is willing to find a cure for you. If worst came to worst, it wouldn't kill you to marry ickle Ronnikins.

But I was hoping she would find me as her one true love.

Sod off, George. Nothing much to tell. Guess you'll have to chat up the soul mate and come to an understanding. Love is grand...or so Bill and Fleur say...hope you enjoy it.

Fred (and George) Weasley.

With a low growl, Hermione folded the letter to stash in her bag, though she would rather have burned it. What would be the best method, and which of the twins would she kill first? She hadn't decided when Professor Snape swooped down and grabbed the letter from her hand, rubbing his fingers across the back of her hand in the process. She felt chills from the brief contact, and it seemed to feed the longing, both satisfying it and making it grow. How was that possible?

"Writing love letters, are we? Let's see who your correspondent is?" He flipped the pages open despite indignant protests of those around them and began to read. His face grew more and more taut and angry as the letter progressed until he looked over the top of it to glare at the younger Weasleys.

"It's not *their* fault, sir," Hermione said quickly, not wanting to get her friends in trouble. She lost what appetite she had before and stood now, pulling her rucksack onto her shoulder. She fought every instinct to lean into the thin form of her professor. To soak in his presence and smell the musky scent of his clothes.

Professor Snape turned his malevolent eyes on her, folding the letter and tucking it away in his breast pocket. "You will meet me in my office after dinner tonight to discuss this . . . missive."

"Yes, sir." Hermione turned and hurried from the Great Hall before she gave into her desires to pull him out with her and follow George's suggestion to snog her professor.

This would be impossible.

3: The Interview

Chapter 3 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 3: The Interview

When Hermione showed up at Professor Snape's office door that evening she was feeling a bit faint. She couldn't be sure if that was because she had hardly been able to eat anything that day due to her growing anxiety over the interview with her soul mate or if it was simply the prospect of the soul mate being Professor Snape.

She did some research in the library that afternoon, learned a bit about the potion used in the chocolates, and wasn't very happy with the outcome.

Most of the day passed while she came up with increasingly complex and painful ways to make the twins suffer. Hermione was sure even they would be impressed with her ingenuity...when they eventually recovered.

Feeling as though she would fly apart if she didn't get into Professor Snape's office, but afraid he would flay her alive when she walked in, Hermione stood at the door for a long moment before giving into her longing to see him. Professor Snape sat behind the desk, his hands clasped together on what looked like Fred and George's letter, which sat open on top. His eyes were hooded and scanning her. Hermione wasn't sure if the look was one of interest or simply an attempt to find the best way to cut her to the quick.

Normally, the second possibility would undoubtedly be the true answer, but that was before the Soul Mate Potion came into play. Everything she was experiencing now was without precedence in her experience. Just the sight of him was enough to increase the effects of the potion. Hermione longed to run into his arms, but worried that would be suicide. *Just call me Sybill, it's like I have two different people inside me.* "Here I am, sir," she said as the door shut behind her. He hadn't said anything yet and it made her nervous. Usually he was far from reticent about his thoughts and feelings, especially the negative ones.

Professor Snape slid one long, thin finger down his lips to rest on his chin, appearing deep in thought. Hermione stood, feeling as though she were under a microscope...if only wizards had those. "Sit down, Miss Granger," he finally said after nearly a full minute had passed.

Hermione wasted no time following his directive and took one of the hard wooden chairs opposite him.

"Am I to understand then that the Weasley twins are responsible for the . . . circumstances we are involved in? I'm assuming you did some research today." She nodded and he continued, "You found no cure then? No way to defeat the power of the potion, aside from the inane suggestion Mr. Weasley made?" It seemed more a statement than a question. He knew there was no solution.

She shook her head. "As far as I can tell, and I spent a couple hours today searching, it is impossible to break. I haven't given up searching but, well." It hurt that he was fighting so hard against the enchantment, even though Hermione knew she was no happier about it than he was. Holding a man in high regard is not the same as wanting to be in love with him. At the same time she was in love with him, even if by artificial means, which made it imperative to move a little closer. The desk between them seemed as wide as a lake and twice as impossible to cross. With great restraint she held herself to the chair.

Snape seemed to understand her point, though she hadn't finished it. He stood from his desk, turning his back on her to look over the tomes lining on the shelf behind him. "What have you learned, exactly?"

"*Amoriata*, also known as the Soul Mate Potion, was developed in the year 1327 by Heloise Madrigore as she wanted to be able to find her true love. She was growing older and hated being alone. She felt the potion would help her cut down her list of suitors to find the one man she should spend eternity with. It took her two years of redosing herself weekly before she found her soul mate, only to learn he was already married. She died three years later, driven insane by not being able to be with the man.

"Over the centuries the potion was occasionally used with more or less success. Its use was widely discontinued a couple hundred years ago due to the tendency for unrequited loves driving the users insane. Why more of them didn't just dose their loves I wasn't able to figure."

The silence was deafening as Hermione waited for her professor to respond to her recitation. She glanced around the walls at the grotesque pictures of those injured by the dark arts and shuddered.

When Snape turned to face her, she knew he was not happy. "My research picked up your points plus a little more. If you look at those known to have imbibed the potion, none of them have lived more than a few years without their soul mate. None. Whether the soul mate lived a separate life or died from other circumstances, the dosed member of the couple didn't live long." He let that hang in the air, his face a blank mask as he stared at her with obsidian eyes.

After a lengthy pause, he continued slowly. "I may not have more than a few days, or months left to live, but you are young and full of potential. What the twins have done to you is inexcusable. I'll grind them into potions ingredients." His face turned savage with this last sentence.

It thrilled her that his concern seemed more for her welfare than his own. "You'll have to beat me to it." The glint of anger in his eye, far from terrifying her as it once would have, only made her longing to be in his arms strengthen. The thought that he didn't expect to live out the war angered and terrified her as well. Now that she had found him, she wanted to get to know him better, longed to be by his side always. She was terrified at the thought that her own life expectancy might be so short. Not that she hadn't acknowledged the low chance of her surviving the fight against Voldemort. Still, the twins would be paying. Highly.

He quirked an eyebrow and she got the impression he was amused by her response. He walked around the desk and took a couple steps in her direction. "Miss Granger, I find we have come to an impasse. You are a student here, I a teacher. To answer the potion's mandate would certainly put the relationship in dangerous territory." He drew slowly closer, and she could see his eyes dilating, the hunger in his expression. She felt her own grow in response.

He continued, "Yet, I had to struggle to focus today, knowing you were only a few floors away, and you do have my class tomorrow. It is unlikely I..."

Unable to help herself, she reached out and let her fingers brush the back of his hand.

That seemed all the impetus he needed. "Oh sod it all. George had the right idea." He swept her into his arms and pressed a savage kiss to her lips.

Hermione felt the rush of emotion all the way down to her toenails as she slid her hands under his teaching robes and grasped the jacket beneath, pulling him even closer as she returned his kiss with equal fervor. She'd kissed before, boys, but had never felt anything a tenth as strong as what she currently felt in Severus Snape's arms.

His arms slithered around her back, pulled her solidly against him as he plundered her mouth, tilted his head further to the side, and took some more. As she gave, her mind too thick to think, what little control she had previously possessed shattered. Nothing she'd experienced, nothing she'd read, had prepared her for this one moment of bliss. The need for more raged within her, and she wondered if she would drown completely before they were through.

"Oh my dear, Hermione," Snape said as he pulled back to place a hundred kisses across her face and neck. "I thought that was supposed to ease things but instead..."

"It's only getting worse," Hermione supplied before she found his lips and dived in again.

Several more minutes passed as they clawed their way closer, their clothes nothing but a hindrance in their frenzy. To Hermione's surprise, they were both still fully clothed when Snape pried her away from him. She had no clue how she had managed to rest one hand on the skin of his neck, and he had pulled her blouse from her skirt to caress the bare skin of her back.

"Don't. You must . . . Sit." He finally ended his garbled sentence and moved back until they were no longer touching. "Let's just give that a few minutes to see if it helped any. I need my wits about me, can't go on this way." He turned his back to her, put a couple more feet between them, running a hand through his long, black hair.

Though Hermione knew his hair was greasy and heavy, she wished she could be the one to play with his dark tresses. She imagined the strands would be silky beneath her hand. As the long moment passed, however, she felt herself begin to equalize again. Her brain began to clear, and her heart stopped dancing the polka in her chest. When she felt enough in control to return to her seat, she did so.

Snape turned around, his eyes looking much calmer than they had when she first entered the office. He returned to his seat behind the desk. Hermione felt a trickle of annoyance as she suspected the move was made simply to return them to their teacher/student roles. She found the idea of pretending none of this had happened utterly ridiculous.

"That seems to have helped somewhat," he said calmly, his hands clasped on the desk again. "Now that we have that much out of our systems, we need to discuss the future."

Feeling his rejection down to the bone, Hermione let her shoulders droop. "What future? You've already determined we won't have one, haven't you?"

His voice returned to its usual grating irritation. "Though part of me is strenuously opposed to my putting space back between us, I believe we both know now is not the time to get tangled in something. I don't *want* to want you. This little prank could have cost me my life before the Dark Lord last night."

She felt stricken by the news. "Oh, sir, is that why you looked so tired this morning. I'm so sorry." Now that she had touched him, she couldn't bear the thought of losing him. It was little wonder so many loves left behind simply withered away if they felt as she did now. Though the connection to him had been strong before, after their kiss, the power of it was overwhelming, even if she could think a bit clearer now.

"I do not need or want your pity, Miss Granger. Thankfully he didn't spend much time on me last night, and I was able to keep my Occlumency shield up for the short time. If we don't get this compulsion under control, I may not be so lucky another time." His voice was harsh, as she had heard it many times before, his eyes flashed with anger and disgust. "I need only know what kind of time frame we have to work around this before the situation becomes desperate."

"Desperate?"

Irritation flashed across his face again. "I am not in the habit of bedding down my students, Miss Granger, nor would the Headmaster appreciate it if I made an exception in this case. You are a child, no matter how my libido may respond to you."

The bald statement was enough to make Hermione wince. She'd never thought of him bedding down anyone ever until the previous day. During the long hours since, she had repeatedly wondered what such an experience would be like. She had no experience beyond heavy kissing and had a healthy curiosity for what came next, though she didn't consider herself ready to deal with the whole of it. Not yet. "No, sir, I am not a child. I turned seventeen last September. I'm of age."

"Semantics, Miss Granger." He waved a hand, indicating her being of age didn't change her childhood status in his eyes.

"There don't seem to be firm guidelines on this area, sir. I doubt most people make much of a study of the potion, considering the results. One would have to be mad to undertake it themselves."

"For if they weren't already, they would certainly become so." The words were barely more than a murmur as he spoke to himself more than her.

After a short time he looked up at her, his face serious. "I'm afraid, Miss Granger, I can promise you no future and am very likely to earn your eternal hatred. Yes, you can hardly believe so now, can you? Though I support Dumbledore's cause and that will not change regardless of what's to come, I think it highly likely you will soon develop an enduring dislike of me...even stronger than the hate you already carry." He ran a hand along his jaw line, as if pulling the thoughts from deep inside. "Yet, though I am destined to lose you, and thereby we may both be driven mad with need, I am a jealous man by nature. It would be rather in your best interest not to court any other man's attention. In this case," he paused to roll his eyes and frown, "any boy's attention as it will undoubtedly call my wrath upon you both."

Hermione pursed her lips, then nodded her understanding. It hardly seemed possible at this point that she would even notice another male, so caught up was she in the enchantment between them. "Yes, sir, I would make the same comment except I doubt that should you find yourself in such an opportunity, I would ever know. But, I don't like to share, either."

"I suppose then, I will offer to have our relationship, if you can call it such, remain mutually exclusive for the time being. I imagine that would be acceptable to you."

She nodded, fidgeted with the bottom of her skirt and uncrossed her legs, re-crossing them the other direction. "And I don't hate you. I never have."

"I know how the students see me." He rubbed a hand over his face. "I'm sure you were horrified at the thought that I, that we, well. There's no need to dissemble."

"I wouldn't, not with you. I haven't really liked you much, granted, but I don't hate you. You're a brilliant Potion master, have really taught us a lot in defense class. I admire your brain and ingenuity. You may be surly and bad tempered, but you have your reasons."

Professor Snape blinked in surprise, then his expression grew unreadable again, though he said nothing.

"I have a question," she said after a moment.

"Of course you do." The comment was spoken with resignation, but his manner didn't discourage her.

"Professor Slughorn told us at the first of the year that a love potion can't create love, they only create a temporary obsession. It doesn't seem so temporary at the moment."

With far more patience than she had ever thought to see him display in answering one of her questions, the professor nodded. "This one doesn't create love, it only exposes it. At least, that's the theory behind it. Madrigore dosed herself for two years before meeting her true love. If it created something, surely she would have found someone else in that time period. In theory, the potion works only with the potential within us. But again, extensive studies have not been conducted on it."

"So if it is based on potential, is there more than one person out there for us? If it hadn't been you I touched first, could it have been someone else here?"

"Been panting after Mr. Goyle, have we?" The acerbic question was far more in keeping with Hermione's experience with the man.

She huffed in irritation as both disgust and indecipherable jealousy shot through her. "Eww. Don't even say things like that."

He shifted in his seat and tipped his head, a calculating look in his eye. "And would your response to me have been so different only two days ago if someone had suggested you would fall for me?"

Hermione tried to be honest, to think without the haze of potion interfering with her thoughts. It was no easy feat. She wet her lips with her tongue and noticed the way his eyes tracked the movement. It sent a thrill through her that this virile man was so interested in her, even if it wasn't by his choice. "I certainly never thought of you in that way before, but at least I respected you. I can't say the same for Goyle. He's nothing more than a thug with an IQ of thirty-five." She considered asking the question of him in return, but was certain she didn't want to hear the answer. His expression didn't change when he heard her words, so she decided to get the discussion back on track. "About the potential for multiple possibilities?"

Severus shrugged, a singularly strange action for him. "It hasn't been studied enough to know. It's impossible to find out. Perhaps if neither of us had been dosed for a decade, our soul mates would be different, as we would have been different then. Or perhaps there is only one soul mate for us each. If we never met them, but we continued to look only for them, the potion could have an adverse reaction. Maybe with enough doses we would pine for that one, unknown person until we withered away, regardless of never finding them. There's no way to be certain."

Hermione nodded, then winced as another thought crossed her mind. "What will you tell the Headmaster? Will you tell him? I couldn't stand it if he sacked you."

Severus Snape merely shook his head. "I don't know. I must tell him something. He's already harboring so many of my secrets, I doubt one more will make much difference." He spoke slowly, his eyes averted as though pained by the thought of his secrets. "If I didn't tell him and he found out later . . . it would be a great betrayal of trust. I will have to talk to him soon."

He continued, "The research I did on this situation indicated that proximity and touch, even innocent ones, can keep the compulsion at bay. Spending time together and getting to know one another are supposed to help. I don't suppose there's much you would like to know about me, and certainly not much I care to share, but we'll have to work something out. I'll speak with the Headmaster about it. This situation must remain our secret for now. None else must know, especially your friends Potter and Weasley."

"Definitely not them. That would be a complete fiasco." Hermione could only imagine the response she would get from Harry and Ron. There was no one Harry hated worse than Professor Snape, not even the Dark Lord himself. No, the last thing she needed was to bring them into it.

"Quite. You should tell them . . . you spoke back to me at our meeting and I gave you detention for Thursday night. Eight o'clock. That will give us both time to learn more and for me to meet with the Headmaster. We will be able to discuss this again at that time. Do not be late, Miss Granger, or I may have to set another detention."

His eyes glittered with promise, but this time Hermione didn't feel threatened. She rather thought she might enjoy detentions with him if their kisses were any indication. "Yes, sir." She smiled and took one last longing look at him before turning and vacating the classroom.

It wasn't until she was nearly back to her common room that she realized he still had the twins' letter.

4: Confessions

Chapter 4 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 4: Confessions

Snape sat at his desk after the door shut behind Hermione and let out a long, steady breath. It had taken all of his considerable control to put her away from him during their kiss. He hadn't paid attention to the girl over the years, not to her appearance in any case, but he had paid attention tonight. She had filled out in all the right places, and he could still feel the silky texture of her skin under his fingers. It made him crave more, even while he wondered how he had come to be touching her there at all. The urge to touch, to take more, had been so strong he hadn't realized how far things had gotten until he pulled away.

That thought unnerved him. He couldn't afford to forget himself, not even around her. Just because the *Amoriat*a ensured their mutual lust, and interest in each other, did not mean Hermione was infallible. She had friends she might share certain things with, and the word could get around like wildfire in the small world of Hogwarts. His heart still beat a bit faster than usual, but he couldn't help resenting the potion, the enchantment, that forced him to feel something for the young woman...for regardless of what he'd said to her, after having his arms full of her, he couldn't deny she was a young woman and no longer a child. Now was an incredibly inopportune time for him to become involved with someone.

Especially a young, Muggle-born someone who was best friends with Harry Potter.

He didn't need to have someone more to worry about. One more thing to hide from the Dark Lord. How long would it last? How long before the crazy megalomaniac picked up a hint of his relationship with the young woman? And though she was legally now an adult...he had checked earlier that day, she'd turned seventeen months earlier...she was so young yet. Severus knew he couldn't survive this war, justice alone would demand his blood. Thanks to the interfering Weasley twins, he now had someone to leave behind. Someone to mourn him. If his death weren't the herald for her own, he would find comfort in the fact that someone would mourn him now. Someone beside the Headmaster...a man Severus knew he would have to kill before too much more time passed.

It took a great deal of will power not to rush to his rooms and reach for a bottle of Old Ogden's to dull the emotions crowding through him. This predicament was unbearable. He had spent too many years shielding himself from emotions and relationships to be tossed into this storm without reeling in shock.

He stood and stalked across the room, then doubled back to the desk again. There was no choice, he had to speak with the Headmaster. Severus needed to let him know. A voice inside Severus's head suggested he keep it a secret, just between himself and Hermione, but he knew he couldn't. If Dumbledore found out another way, the Order's spy would be in considerable trouble. Yet he longed to keep it secret, to hold his love close and . . . He shook his head to clear it of the sugary musings and headed toward the Headmaster's office. If he didn't tell the old man now, he might talk himself out of it.

The walk to the Headmaster's office was faster than usual, Severus was sure, and he arrived before he was ready. He didn't hesitate, however, but pushed his way up the stairs and knocked on the closed door.

"Come in," the Headmaster called.

Dumbledore was standing next to the window that looked out over the grounds, as though he had been interrupted mid pace. "Severus, I trust you are well. Have a seat. Would you care for some tea?"

"Firewhiskey would be more apt, but yes, tea will suffice." Snape took a seat in one of Dumbledore's squashy armchairs and waited while the tea was conjured and poured. Dozens of past Headmasters peered down on them from their picture frames, obviously anxious to hear why Severus had come to speak to Dumbledore.

"So, what has brought you here this evening?" Albus lifted the cup to his lips and blew across the top.

"I, dash it all." Severus set the cup back on the edge of the desk before he followed the urge to throw it into the fire and stood, striding over to the window. He turned back to face his mentor and gripped his hands together behind him. "Perhaps you have heard of the Weasley twins' true love chocolates? I believe they are a relatively new addition to their stores."

When Albus nodded that he knew of them, Severus launched into a full account of what had happened between himself and Hermione the previous evening, the letter she had gotten that morning and the research he had done on it during the day. He left off the bit about the snog session he and Hermione had enjoyed, though he didn't doubt the Headmaster understood enough to know that a line had been crossed there. Whether he spelled out their activities or not would depend on the Headmaster's response to what he now knew.

The silence lengthened between them for some time as they looked at one another. Albus stood and walked over to a silver Muggle perpetual-motion toy, started the balls rocking, then watched it until it slowed nearly to a stop. Severus had seen this behavior before and knew it meant the Headmaster was considering his response.

"You don't have to say anything, and I already feel like a chastened student. This is beginning to feel entirely too familiar, me coming into your office to admit I have found myself in an untenable situation. I know you won't like this revelation any more than the one of last summer." Severus found his voice dropping off at the end, ashamed, despite his lack of control this time. Almost more ashamed because he would repeat his evening's activities again and hoped to do so very soon. He touched the tip of his tongue to his lips in memory and could swear he still tasted Hermione on them.

"Oh, you are wrong there. I find this one much less disturbing than the previous discussion." Dumbledore looked over his shoulder and smiled slightly, but it didn't reach his eyes. "You finding your soul mate is considerably less disquieting to me than my impending death, even if the circumstances of the match are far from ideal."

Severus snorted at the understatement.

Albus turned back to the toy for a moment before beginning to speak. "The timing really is horrible."

"It could hardly be worse."

"It could be worse. This could have happened a couple years ago when Tom first returned to power. Explaining your Muggle-born soul mate would have been awkward. Not to mention that she would have been only fifteen at the time."

Severus ran both hands through his long hair in frustration. "Yes, that would have been worse. And please, I hardly need any reminders about how young she is. I already feel like a dirty old man."

A smile flit across the Headmaster's face before it became more serious. "What are the demands of the potion, Severus? How far must you take this?"

"It is believed that those affected can be satisfied for a time with handholding and kissing without venturing on to other waters. I do not know how long that will last before the compulsion to . . . push beyond those limits becomes unbearable." Severus didn't meet the Headmaster's eye. It was too awkward discussing his future sex life with a child...a *student*, he amended in his head, *not a child*.

The Headmaster nodded. "You will have to find a way to spend time together without drawing attention to yourselves. It wouldn't hurt to see if conversation alone will satisfy you to some degree. In fact, I highly encourage you to try this route. Letters, perhaps."

*Letters my arse. The only letters she'll be getting from me are the ones I write on her skin with my tongue*The image of him spelling things out on various areas of her body sent his blood pressure soaring. He cleared his throat and forced his attention back to the Headmaster. "I'm not much given to conversation, Albus. Not even in the best of times. I'm afraid allowing her the outlet might lead to Miss Granger believing it was a free-for-all to ask questions to her dear heart's content." He said this last sentence with a degree of disgruntled amusement he had not even felt before, never mind felt appropriate to express.

He found her constant question irritating, exhausting, and stimulating all at once. Though he would never admit it, his soul mate was the most brilliant student to ever sit his class. In case the Headmaster decided he was growing soft, Severus added, "I have many other things to do with my time, both for my work here, and my work for you in other capacities."

"Yes, Tom does seem to be keeping you busy. But you will hardly be fit for these duties if you don't fulfill the potion's mandate. I do not approve of teacher/student relationships, no matter what the school charter says." Dumbledore's arms crossed over his chest, a frown forming on his face.

Severus ran that last bit through his head again. He had never heard anything like this breathed aloud, never mind detailed. "What *exactly* does the school charter say about teacher/student relationships?"

The old man's lips pursed together, as though sorry he had mentioned it. "The stipulation in the charter is that a romantic or physical relationship is prohibited between a staff member and student except in the case where a permanent commitment has been made. Very permanent. Binding, in fact."

Marriage. He's talking about marriage. He wants me to marry Hermione, and soon. I never planned to marry. "Binding? But Albus, the second it's registered..."

"You have lived a hard life, a dangerous one with little love, little companionship. I believe Miss Granger can provide both for you, if you give yourself a chance. There are ways to be bound that do not attract Ministry attention. I would encourage you to discuss this with Miss Granger and come up with a suitable date."

"And get myself killed on my next foray into the Dark Lord's presence? And where would that leave Potter's sidekick? Sure, she may live to fight the Dark Lord. She may even survive the odds, along with Potter, but her future will be short if I die. She's brilliant. How can I not feel responsible for her eventual death, knowing I am most likely to meet my own?"

Albus's eyes twinkled, though his face remained calm. "Don't die, Severus. Live. For the first time in your life you have a real reason *to want* to walk away from this battle beside the most basic survival instinct. Live for her, and for the future she could have, not only with you, but for herself. You are right, she is a very bright witch and deserves to have a chance to use her brain in the future."

Irritation ripped through him. "I didn't say she was bright, I said she was brilliant. And I'm afraid you're dealing with a lost cause. As though telling me to live will make it so." He snorted in disgust, then relented. *Marriage. Married to Hermione. Sleeping beside Hermione. Waking beside Hermione.* He pushed the thoughts away and focused again. "I will keep things on a semi-appropriate plane for as long as possible. When she is ready to take that step into something more, I will be sure to offer her what she deserves, regardless of the impossibility of her getting it from me long term." Relieved to have gotten off so easily, he wondered how he was to manage to keep physical contact to kisses for any reasonable stretch of time when he wanted so much more. He hadn't any clue.

"I may not be around a great deal longer to see this through. Don't put it off too long. You will eventually have to marry her anyway; the enchantment will demand it." Albus tipped his head and sent Severus a piercing look. "Just how fully did you explain all of the, er, side effects of this potion to Miss Granger?"

Severus froze in surprise for a fleeting second, then realized he should have known Albus would be aware of the final side effect. He spoke slowly and carefully, "Not as fully as I might have. I thought she had enough to be getting on with for now. I will apprise her of the final issues when I feel she is ready."

"She's not as breakable as you may think, Severus. It would be well for you to trust her. And don't be too long about the explanations, either. She won't appreciate it."

Severus nodded but didn't say anything in response. He hoped the subject was now closed.

"So all of the biscuits were dosed yesterday?" Dumbledore asked after a brief moment.

"I believe so, yes. I was thinking, sir, perhaps it would be a good idea for me to make a rather large batch of Anti-Conceptus and have the elves add it to the morning's pumpkin juice. I've no idea how many others may have been affected, but it would be a good idea to take measures in case some of those students are unprepared for the force of the chocolate's effects."

"Yes, good idea, and I'll increase prefects' rounds for the week. Some may be discouraged from certain behaviors that way."

Severus walked back to the desk and quickly drank his now-cold tea. "If there's nothing more, Headmaster."

"Just one more thing for you to think about. If certain events come to pass, this situation may provide a means for you to stay in touch with the Order. Whether she is officially a member or not, at least Miss Granger is privy to some secrets and understands your role. It wouldn't hurt to prepare her for certain eventualities. Harry may need your help to complete his mission as well."

"The boy hates me now, Albus. You can't think he's going to love me after"

Albus lifted one eyebrow and sent Severus a piercing look, one that clearly asked who was at fault if the boy hated him. Or perhaps that was the tiny shard of Severus's shattered conscience speaking. After a long moment of silence, Albus spoke, "He trusts Miss Granger. If she trusts you, your role can still be fulfilled."

Severus clenched his jaw and nodded, then let himself out of the office. He knew Dumbledore had a point, though he hated that the old man was pragmatic enough to think so clearly. The last thing Severus wanted to do was to help Potter...except that doing so was the best bet for defeating the Dark Lord. And while he could imagine only the worst kind of betrayal would even impact his feeling for Hermione, he knew she would see what he must do to and for the Headmaster as that kind of ultimate betrayal.

It doesn't bear thinking on, he told himself. *What will be, will be. Now get to that potion making, unless you want half the students expelled for pregnancies.*

Marriage, to Hermione. What a joke that would be. It wasn't as though anyone could know about it. I wouldn't be waking up beside her in the morning, sharing intimate breakfasts and such. None of that could be ours.

The whole thing would be a secret, a formality to appease the school charter. A travesty when one considered the way a marriage should be. He may not have dared expect the kind of marriage he saw between the Weasleys, but that didn't stop this new, sapplier part of him from wishing something like it could be his.

The original, non-sappy part of him wished he could cut his own heart out with a spoon and dispose of it. This enchantment was going to make his life a living Hell. As if it wasn't bad enough without the assistance.

5: Trouble in Class

Thanks to everyone who has left me a review. I appreciate the feedback and hope you'll continue to enjoy the story.--Vivian B

Chapter 5: Trouble in Class

Keeping the secret of her soul mate from Harry and Ron hadn't been easy for Hermione, though she admitted it was completely necessary, given Harry's feelings towards the professor. After meeting with Severus, she had gone to the library and hidden to study in a corner, coming out when a reasonable amount of time had passed. When Harry asked what Snape had made her do, Hermione only shrugged and snorted. "His favorite detention is cauldron scrubbing. What else would he assign? Unfortunately I let my emotions get out of hand and have to go back Thursday." She muttered under her breath so they would think she was angry about the return trip.

"Greasy git was just looking for excuses," Harry said with a glower. "Making you meet him to discuss your private mail that you got during breakfast. It wasn't like you were disturbing his classes. What was the letter, anyway? You didn't say."

Hermione shrugged and shook her head. She had spent a considerable amount of time in the library trying to figure out how to explain the meeting after avoiding the question all day. "I sent a message to a potion maker asking about a theory I've been playing with. He was angry I hadn't brought the question to him, though he'd probably have told me to quit asking so many questions."

"Too right. Well, sit down and pull out your Transfiguration homework; I'm sure you're feeling way behind." Harry indicated a squashy armchair beside him. Hermione doubted his motives were entirely pure. She was well aware he hadn't gotten to the two-foot assignment yet.

Still, if it took everyone's attention off her business that night, she couldn't complain. She glanced across the room to where Ginny sat with Dean and wished she could confide in the girl. They had grown fairly close while spending summers and holidays together.

Hermione was desperate to tell someone, but had no one with whom she dared discuss a subject like this. She was in love, even if it was the greasy git who now taught Defense. *Just what was it that Severus..*that was the only way she could think of him now..*had meant when he said I would soon hate him?* It took a great deal of self control to keep her focus on homework instead of letting it float wherever. Most of wherever pertaining to the man living in the dungeons.

As the time for her DADA class approached the next day, she grew more and more anxious *I have to keep my feelings for him tucked away. No one must guess* she told herself. She worried even the interminably clueless Ron would have no trouble sensing something was off. Hermione bit her lip as she entered the classroom and only allowed her glance to slide over Severus before focusing on her chair and putting one foot before the next.

Silent spell casting had been a challenge, but Hermione was doing better than ever with it. At least she had been during the previous lesson. Now she wasn't sure she could focus enough to cast *Wingardium Leviosa* aloud, never mind complicated dueling silently. It had taken everything in her to make it through that morning's Transfiguration lesson, and having him so close would only exacerbate the problem.

Severus slammed the door across the room closed with a wave of his wand. "Bring your homework to the front, then separate into groups. We will continue with casting the Jelly-Legs Jinx again, *silently*. Anyone who manages that feat repeatedly will move up to Bat-Bogey Hex. After the abysmal performance of last class, I hope to see some improvement. Get to it."

Harry was paired with Seamus and Hermione with Ron. She managed to cast her shielding charm a few times, but Ron had only successfully produced the jinx once without muttering the words under his breath. When they switched, Hermione found Severus circling around behind her. She could practically feel his breath in her hair, though she knew he wasn't that close. Her concentration was shot with just his presence behind her...not that she'd much to begin with. Sweat slicked her hands and made it difficult to grip her wand, and the longing to touch him seemed to be spiraling upward and out of control.

"Come, Miss Granger, does the little Miss Know-It-All have trouble from time to time? You can't recite this out of a book, can you?" His voice was low and seductive with the cutting edge of taunting to it.

She gritted her teeth, but couldn't see straight; her attention was not on Ron.

Severus grasped her by the shoulders, allowing his right thumb to trail down the side of her neck beneath her hair where no one would see. He turned her and pointed to her opponent, Ron. "Hex him, Miss Granger. Quit going easy on him." The combination of his hidden caress and his snarky professor attitude gave her chills. Then in a much lower tone intended only for her ears she heard, "Just imagine he's one of the twins."

His silky tone and the centering power of his touch, coupled with that image, helped Hermione to focus. Ron didn't stand a chance. Unfortunately, what came out was not the Jelly-Legs Jinx, but a far less comfortable itching jinx. Hermione let it fester on Ron's skin for several seconds before realizing what she had done and ending the jinx. "Sorry Ron." *He's only been out of the hospital wing for a couple of hours as it is. Poor guy, probably thinks I sent him itching because I was mad at Severus* She had to hold back a grin at that thought. The feeling in her chest seemed to grow warmer until she had to bite the inside of her lip to keep her smile at bay. Severus removed his hands with another soft touch across her skin and moved away.

"That was . . . acceptable, though it wouldn't hurt you *to stay within the syllabus*, Miss Granger." His voice had returned to its usual acerbic tone. "But don't imagine in a real duel you will have time to plan and focus. There is no room for mistakes, even for Potter's friends. Back to work, everyone."

Hermione glanced around and realized half the class had been watching. How humiliating to be used as an example in class. Of course, she wouldn't have been able to catch Ron out at all if Severus hadn't touched her, so maybe the humiliation was worth it. She returned her attention to Ron and repeatedly hit him with the correct jinx. It was amazing how much easier it was when she pictured Fred or George's face in his place.

Hermione found herself walking those familiar steps back to Severus's office again the next night, trepidation and anticipation both rising inside her. Since the DADA class the previous day, she had been unable to speak to or get near him, and she had felt the growing tug on her psyche as the day continued. Now she was almost frantic with the need to see him.

When she arrived at the classroom, she stopped in the doorway and blinked. There was a student already scrubbing cauldrons at the sink. Her eyes flit over to her professor as she wondered how on earth they would manage to have a private discussion in the midst of a detention.

"Come here, Miss Granger, or don't you wish to borrow that book after all? McGonagall insisted I lend it to you." He sneered convincingly, and she made her way to his desk, from which he rose and headed toward his attached office. "I'll only be a minute, Robins, and I expect to see you still working hard when I return. Follow me, Miss Granger, it's in my office."

Hermione followed him into the office and nearly gasped aloud when he shut the door behind them, then pulled her into his arms for a desperate kiss. His fingers slid from where they gripped her shoulder so that one cradled the back of her head and the other raced down her back to pull her body fully against his. The power of the connection was turned way up from the previous kisses, though Hermione would have sworn that wasn't possible, but the length was lamentably shorter. She had only delved her fingers into his hair when he ended it. He pulled away and lifted his hand to her hair, running his fingers down to rest them on her shoulder. "I wish it could be more, but I forgot about this detention tonight. You don't look too mussed."

She may not have looked it, but she felt it. She lifted a hand to her kiss-swollen lips and couldn't quite hold back a smile, though she felt herself panting. "Yes, sir." She really didn't know what she was saying; between the power of the kiss and the shock of the almost tenderness in his voice, she felt like her world had turned upside down.

He reached for something small and book-shaped that was wrapped in brown paper. "Take this with you; there's a note inside that will explain everything. But first, lay your palm on it." His voice was flat and controlled now, the complete opposite of a few seconds earlier. Reeling from the inconsistency of it, she followed his directions, and he whispered something under his breath, touching the back of her hand with his wand. She felt the tingle of magic ride through her system, then looked back at him.

"Well, don't just stand there, my dear, take the package and leave before I lock us both in here, and Mr. Robins is left to wonder what happened to us." His voice was harsh, but when she looked up into his eyes, she could see he was fighting the enchantment at least as hard as she was. After only a second's deliberation over whether to follow directions or follow her own desire to reinstate their kiss, she grabbed the book. Before she could turn away, however, he placed a hand on the back of her neck and pulled her close for one more, firm kiss.

Released, she blinked at him for a couple seconds, then turned and left the office, heading back through the classroom where the student was making good progress on the nasty, stained cauldron.

Moaning Myrtle, the ghost who haunted the first-floor girls' lavatory, was thankfully absent when Hermione arrived. She secluded herself in the stall where she had made the Polyjuice Potion in her second year, then opened the package, finding a diary and a parchment covered in Severus's spidery writing.

Miss Granger,

I regret that my detention will keep us from being able to discuss circumstances this evening, but this should alleviate the problem. The Headmaster knows about the situation and has given us tentative permission to carry on as we are doing. I have charmed two diaries to copy each other, the one you hold and the one in my possession. I have further charmed them to be unreadable to anyone besides ourselves. If anyone other than you opens your diary, they will see nothing but notes about class with possible inanities about life as a student. Mine will look like Potions notes to anyone but me, as I am still doing some work in that area. This way we can keep in contact with one another and arrange meetings without drawing unwanted attention to ourselves. I understand that conversation will work to satisfy the situation to some extent, and though I am not a man of many words, or at least not pleasant ones, I thought we might try and see if the diaries help satisfy the potion when we can't be together.

I will keep my diary on my person at all times so that in the event . . . well, you'll understand when that happens. We have much to do to overcome the Dark Lord. Do not forget that I am always on your side regardless of what circumstances may appear to be. And I hope when the time comes that you may forgive me. In any case, let me know you have tried the diary, and we can try and set something up for later. Until then,

Yours,

SS

Hermione was puzzled and concerned about these additional hints about how she would grow to hate him. She couldn't imagine a circumstance that would bring that on, not if he was really on the side of right. He swore he was fighting for their side. She returned to the library and sat down with the boys to study, secreting the note in her robe pocket with the intent to burn it at the first opportunity...if she could bring herself to do so. It wouldn't do for anyone else to see it, even if it was her first missive from her soul mate.

That evening after completing her Transfiguration homework, Hermione pulled out her copy of the diary. Harry and Ron sat nearby discussing their Charms assignment, which they had predictably put off until the last possible moment. Ginny was by Harry's side with her own school work propped on her knees.

"Come on, Hermione. You've finished your work, so you can help us," Ron whinged as Hermione tucked her feet beneath her and settled into the corner of the squashy sofa.

She didn't look up as she spoke, but opened her diary to the first page instead. "It's not my fault you chose to waste your time with games of wizard chess instead of studying when you had all that free time recovering." She wasn't sure what to start out with, never having owned a diary of any kind, never mind one that Severus Snape would be reading. Then the worry niggled at her: what if something was wrong with the charm or if she had misunderstood Severus? She resolved to write a few innocuous lines first, to make sure it was working properly, but nothing that looked like more than notes to herself. And if they had the bonus of raising Severus's blood pressure a little, that might make things interesting, anyway.

The study of Potions is one of the senses, And much like personal relationships. The student must employ every sense: the feel of the ingredients in her fingers as she prepares for the potion, the fingertips smoothing, caressing, testing. The scent of ingredients making a chemical reaction...sandalwood and myrrh combined. She paused for a moment when she wrote that, analyzed her memory of his personal scent again to determine if she had caught it, then continued on.

The taste of melding flavors on the air, picking them up on the skin. Sight is used to determine doneness, readiness for the next step, and the sound of the potion coming to a boil, bubbling in the pot slowly, then faster until it gradually reaches completion.

Wondering if what she had written would draw the attention she had hoped for, she re-read it. It was rather cheesy, but under the circumstances, she didn't dare be more bold. Then she passed it to Ginny and asked for her opinion.

"I don't know why you're taking notes on the Crumpled-Horned Snorkack, but I suppose that's your choice." Ginny shook her head and passed it back. "Are you feeling OK? You've been acting strange lately."

"Yeah, I'm fine." Hermione tried to look like she knew what Ginny was talking about, then looked back at the diary as more writing appeared in the book. This time in his handwriting.

What is that inanity?

Sorry, I was checking it out. Ginny thought I was taking notes on the Crumpled Horned Snorkack though, so it looks like we're working well. She wondered if what she'd written had affected him. Glancing back at her words, she felt slight arousal of her own.

Did you doubt my Charms abilities? I'm really very offended, Miss Granger.

Oh please, in this one place where no one else can intrude, could we drop the formality? We are soul mates. I long to hear you say my name again.

Romantic nonsense. When did I ever say your name?

She blushed at the memory. During that first interview. I don't believe either of us was thinking clearly at the time.

Hmm, yes. I suppose, under the circumstances, I could call you by your given name, Hermione. But you will call me Master.

In your dreams, she wrote with a snort. It seemed unreal that Severus Snape could possibly have joked with her, but his response confirmed that he had.

Precisely. But the rest of the time I suppose you may call me Severus. If you slip up in front of anyone else, you'll be scrubbing floors with Filch for a week. Do

you understand me?

Completely. Severus.

6: Secret Meeting

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Chapter 6: Secret Meeting

Every day Hermione wrote something in her diary, and occasionally she and Severus would continue in the same back-and-forth banter. She couldn't believe how easy it was to talk with him on paper. After their short conversations...sometimes questions, sometimes laughing at something in class, and other times just observations about life...she found herself better able to focus on homework.

They made plans to meet Sunday afternoon in his quarters, and Hermione debated whether she should ask to borrow Harry's invisibility cloak. Of course, if she borrowed it, Harry would want to know what she was doing, where she was going. And if he didn't like her answer, he might look on the map to see where she had gone. That was a chance she didn't dare take. Better to let him believe she was going to study somewhere. She just hoped he wouldn't spend the afternoon looking for Malfoy on the map and accidentally catch her out.

That left a question of how she would get to Severus's rooms without detection. After spending several hours searching the library Friday night, she decided a basic Disillusionment Charm would work best. She hurried to her room to practice in private. 'Lav-Lav' would be far away, as the annoying girl had been avoiding Hermione ever since she found out Ron had spoken to Hermione in the hospital wing, while he kept pretending to be asleep whenever Lavender went up. Honestly, Hermione no longer cared what her annoying roommate did with or without Ron, as long as she did it somewhere else. And as Hermione had just seen Parvati in the library, she would most likely have a while to perfect the charm.

A few minutes' practice was enough to ensure that Hermione could perform both the spell and the counter spell effectively, and she settled down in bed to read ahead for her Potions class before sleep.

Accordingly that Sunday afternoon, she left the common room and walked down a nearby corridor where she could ensure a moment of privacy and cast her Disillusionment Charm. Then she cast *Muffliato* on herself so others wouldn't hear her footsteps, then headed toward the dungeons. She knew she got after the boys for using *Muffliato* when they were in class or in the common room, but the spell did have its uses. Hermione figured she would keep that fact to herself for the time being, however.

It took more than ten minutes to arrive at Severus's office door. She looked both directions, then ended the muffling spell before raising her hand to knock. After a long moment, the door opened and Severus stood before her in all his black-clad, scowling glory.

His expression was one of deep suspicion as he looked through her and off to each side.

He blinked and looked right at her, then stepped back to allow her through the door. "Best come in."

When the door closed, she tapped herself on the head and shivered as the spell dissipated. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to that feeling," she said with a shiver. "How did you know it was me?"

He crossed his hands over his chest and gave her a long look, but said nothing.

"What?" She touched her hair and straightened her skirt, wondering what he was staring at. "Is something wrong?" She could feel the longing to touch him begin to grow inside her.

He let out a long breath. If it had been anyone else, Hermione would have sworn it was a sigh, but Severus Snape would never have sighed. "Yes. You look like a school girl. Do you know how much it irritates me to be in lust with a school girl? It goes against everything I've ever believed in."

"In lust?" It was frustrating to have such a shallow word applied to such deep feelings.

"What else do you call it? It's all hormones and enchantments." Though his look of disgruntlement didn't change, he took a step toward her.

"You have a point." She hated to admit it. After all, it felt so much like true love, it *was* made to feel like true love, but she didn't even know the man. Of course, she respected him, and just lately she'd found him wildly attractive, senselessly attractive...okay, sexy as all get out. But she didn't know anything about his personality that was the least bit attractive. Well, beside his wicked-funny sense of humor and apparent ability to hold reasonable conversation when they wrote each other. Those had to count for something, if very little. Still, she took a step closer. "I can't say I'm upset that you don't routinely fall for your students. It would make things rather uncomfortable if you did." With his next controlled step in her direction, she marveled she could hold a train of thought with him so near.

"I always have a point." He slid his hands inward along her shoulders and pulled her to him, slowly, every so slowly, pulling her near. Then his lips touched hers and her brain disengaged.

His lips were soft and sure, tantalizing, enchanting, numbing her to everything except for the points where their bodies touched. Then his kisses grew firmer and he parted her lips to taste her. That seemed to be both their undoing, and everything whirled into sensations of hands and fingers, mouths, teeth, tongue and the long length of his body pressed against her own. The sensation grew and multiplied as Hermione fought to keep up, warred against her spiraling reactions as she wondered which of them was more desperate.

She felt his fingers crawling up the loosening buttons of the demure, white school shirt she wore beneath her school robes...robes that somehow seemed to be missing. The question of missing robes seemed completely unimportant, however, as her fingers struggled with the buttons of his vest and finally with his own white shirt.

About the time his lips trailed from her collar bone, down along the swell of her breasts, she managed to get the first few lower buttons on his shirt undone. She splayed her fingers along his chest beneath the cotton. When one hand glided up her side and over her ribs, she moaned out, "Severus."

He stiffened, paused for a split second, pressed and held a kiss to the side of her throat, then, impossibly, pulled away. His hands seemed to hang in the air where they had

been touching her body before he turned toward the wall and took in a deep, shaky breath.

"Why did you stop?" She let her hands fall to her sides, feeling bereft.

"If I hadn't stopped now, I wouldn't have stopped at all." He turned back to face her, straightening his shirt and beginning to return his buttons to their previous arrangement. His eyes, however, roamed over her disheveled state, pausing to linger over her bosom.

"And would that have been so bad?" She didn't bother to do up any buttons, but wrapped her shirt around her, holding it closed by crossing her arms in front of her body.

"Yes. We have things to discuss. I believe it was only a couple days ago you were saying you weren't ready to go that far." His fingers were now finished with their work, and he hesitated, then walked over to her, separated her arms and as she showed no signs of doing so, began to rebutton her shirt himself. He was back in full Professor Snape persona now, all business, and his touch was clinical. At least Hermione thought so until, when finished, he allowed a couple fingers to caress her collar bone before stepping back.

"I may have changed my mind by now," she said. She felt like her brain had melted into a puddle of lust and she would give nearly anything to return to their former activity.

"Even so, we need to talk before we go any further, and I will not allow your teenage, potion-effected hormones to make decisions you aren't prepared for. Not yet, anyway." Severus turned and walked over to the book shelves, removed a book near the middle of the second shelf, and the wall opened to reveal a door. He placed a hand on it and muttered something she couldn't hear, and the door opened. "My rooms are through here. I would rather conduct this conversation in more comfort and certainly more privacy as I sometimes get visitors to my office." He gestured for her to go through, and Hermione stepped into his private quarters.

The rooms were little different from the student facilities, besides being a bit more spacious and holding more book shelves for his collection. The room was a bit cluttered, but the house-elves obviously took care to keep it clean. His orderly mind was reflected in the perfect organization of the books she could see from where she stood. Her expectations of green and silver everything covered in snakes were misplaced she realized, though the forest green and blue furnishings, generously augmented with black accents, suited him. There was a chess game set up on a side table along one wall.

Severus seemed to see her eyes light on the table and said, "Occasionally I play a match against the Headmaster or even, on rare occasions, Professor McGonagall." Hermione lifted a brow at him, copying his usual expression of disbelief. He smirked. "We get along quite well when we aren't arguing over who started the last fight between your friends and Malfoy's bruisers...the bullying prats."

That comment surprised Hermione. "But I thought you liked Malfoy."

His expression was sardonic. "Friendships with people in power can come in handy, Hermione. Sometimes you have to play the odds, even if you do get stuck dealing with arseholes from time to time. Part of being a good spy is knowing who to play nice with. And Mr. Potter could always use a bit of chastening, which makes coddling Malfoy a bit more bearable."

"That was a rather generous description of the Malfoys, though. Right foul lot of evil prats if you ask me."

He lifted an eyebrow, and amusement played at the corner of his lips and in his eyes. "Quite. Take a seat, will you?" He gestured, wand in hand, to the sofa sitting before the fire, and the fire flared to life. "We didn't get much of a chance to talk at our last meeting. Though I could have used the diary to discuss the situation, I thought face-to-face might be better."

Hermione walked over and settled on the edge of the sofa. She wasn't sure what to do with her hands or how to act. The whole situation was so unreal and awkward, and hormones were still stirring through her blood from their kisses. If she hadn't caught an occasional flash of desire in his eyes as well, she would think he had turned his emotions completely off. *He has been a spy for two decades. He has to be able to master his reactions*, she reminded herself.

"Tea?" he asked.

"Yes, please." It would give her something to do with her hands, if nothing else.

Severus pulled out his wand and waved it a bit. A tea set appeared before them and he began to pour out. "I spoke with the Headmaster after our discussion Tuesday night. He apprised me of some school rules I hadn't been aware of before." He met her eyes, then blew over his cup of tea, focusing on the brown liquid before him. "Apparently it is fine for a teacher and student to be involved *romantically* so long as there is a binding in place."

Hermione all but coughed up her tea at his words. "A binding. As in marriage?" She hadn't planned on marrying for years yet. A decade, even. Of course, she realized the potion would make staying single for so long impractical, as so much time spent apart would undoubtedly cause frustration and difficulty. But the way he spoke. . . "Not right away, though."

"You mean like tomorrow? No. But Albus has requested before things become . . . desperate," there was that word again, "that we make that step. Of course, that gives us a little leeway. But I think it unrealistic to put the day off for long. Already I find it difficult to pull back. And your reactions speak for themselves."

Hermione couldn't speak, part of her thrilled at the prospect of marrying this man, but the rest of her revolted. She was too young, he was too difficult, and things were too uncertain. It was all completely ludicrous, but she couldn't dismiss it out of hand. School rules were a compelling reason to take it all seriously. And, of course, the potion was pushing them very firmly in that direction.

After giving her a moment to consider his words, he spoke up. "Marriage is a very serious step, regardless of whatever artificial means have been employed to bring this about. It increases the personal danger for both of us. This is a war, Hermione, and word of a personal relationship between us can mean death to either of us...possibly with a very long, painful bout of torture beforehand. What is going on between us must remain perfectly secret unless or until I can manage to make certain parties aware in a light that will please them. Even then, I prefer to live my life quietly, without fanfare, which is the safest course under the circumstances."

"You mean Voldemort, of course."

He hissed. "Don't say his name, not around me. If you value my life, and by extension your own, do me this one favor." His face was black and threatening.

"I will try not to speak it around you."

"I would appreciate it." He took several swallows of his drink, then placed the cup and saucer on the table before them. "I will reset the wards to recognize you, but I must ask that you not come here except when we have an appointment or in case of emergency. I wouldn't want to draw extra attention to our relationship."

"Okay, Severus." She set her own cup down, not interested in finishing it, and turned toward him.

He pulled her into his chest and dropped a kiss on her forehead, then leaned back against the arm of the chair with her snuggled against him. "Excuse me, I want to talk, but I feel drawn to hold you." The words sounded as though he was pained to speak them, confused that he could even feel such a thing. When she was settled in place, his voice returned to normal. "Perhaps it may alleviate some of the distraction in our brains as well. I cannot always touch you to help you focus in my class. It was risky enough to do once. Now, about that question you had on the infusion of wormwood used instead of the powdered form."

Hermione was dazed. She was snuggling with Severus Snape, the unapproachable, unlovable, evil git of the dungeon, and he was all but inviting her to ask all the questions she wanted.

Surely the world was about to come to an end.

She smiled to herself and proceeded to discuss the matter thoroughly before they continued onto other subjects.

7: Pain Brings Enlightenment

Chapter 7 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 7: Pain Brings Enlightenment

Tuesday night as Severus was grading papers in his office he felt the burn of his Dark Mark. It had been a full week since his last call, and as he had already shared a short diary conversation with Hermione, he was feeling far more centered tonight than he had on the previous visit. Still, he didn't look forward to appearing before the Dark Lord. He had nothing new to share...at least nothing that he would share.

With a wave of his wand, he transfigured his teaching robes into the heavy velvet ones the Dark Lord's supporters wore. Severus also changed a handkerchief into a silvery white mask, but stashed it in his pocket until he could get off school grounds.

It took but a minute to get beyond the wards. He used the time to lock away any memories he didn't want exploited that night and to bring forth anything that would be an advantage for him. He still hadn't determined the best way to introduce his relationship with Hermione, so determined to say nothing yet. He knew he needed to come up with something before a whisper of the truth made its way to his master. And for all that she tried to hide her feelings, Hermione wasn't as subtle as she might be. One of his fellow Death Eater's children was certain to carry tales eventually. Malfoy, Zabini, Crabbe, or Goyle may already have noticed. Well, not the latter two, they didn't have a working brain between them, but Draco and Blaise were far from clueless. Hiding it for long would be difficult.

He was so weary of the pretense.

The meeting dragged on as the Dark Lord questioned his minions, doling out praise or punishment where he saw fit.

"Severus," the red eyes fastened on the professor.

Severus stepped forward, falling to one knee and keeping his eyes averted. "Yes, my Lord?"

"What have you to report?"

"Things have been quiet this week. The old fool continues to keep watch on me, but I am certain I still have his trust. Order members come and go, but I have heard little of their plans. Potter spent an evening with the Headmaster this week, however. Both of them seem satisfied with the results. I believe his Occlumency is improving. It's really quite surprising, considering how little talent he has for it." Severus infused every word with disdain and disgust. He was fully aware the Headmaster was not working on Occlumency with Potter, that they were instead searching out information on Horcruxes. He wasn't about to tell the psycho in front of him anything about that.

"That is disssapointing, Severusss. Next time you will bring me something useful. Do you understand?" The pure venom in his voice was all the warning Severus received. "*Crucio.*"

Thrown to the ground, writhing in agony, Severus tried disassociating himself from the pain. Sometimes it worked. Other times, not so well. Thankfully the Dark Lord only held the spell for about half a minute. It was little more than a warning...one that would fill Severus with wracking aftershocks for the whole night, but a warning nonetheless. Severus was grateful for small miracles.

"Yes, my Lord. I'll do better this week." Aching, Severus picked himself off the ground and moved back into his place in the circle. He would have to be careful in how he introduced his relationship with Hermione. It was his best hope...for both their sakes.

Back in Gryffindor tower, Hermione sat in the common room with Ron, Harry, and Ginny. Ginny and Dean had split up that week, and the redhead had spent more and more time by Harry's side as the days progressed. Seeing the way Harry and Ginny seemed to be sitting next to each other all the time, and touching, and looking at each other so often, Hermione wondered if the potion had affected them. But no, they didn't appear to be under half the compulsion she felt.

"I know Malfoy's up to something," Harry said, folding up the Marauder's Map again and sticking it in his bag. "I can't find him anywhere on the map."

"Please, can we let it rest for one night?" Hermione rubbed her temple with her fingertips. A sense of discomfort had settled over her nearly an hour earlier along with a strange itching sensation on her left forearm, and she was getting a headache.

"I can't just let it go. He's got something planned and Snape is trying to help him." Harry all but hissed the words at her.

"Dumbledore trusts Professor Snape, and so should you...he's spying for the Order." She remembered Severus's words: *I think it highly likely you will soon develop an enduring dislike of me.* What did that mean, anyway? What had he been trying to tell her? "Please, can we just get through this..." She gasped as pain lanced through her, low grade, but strong enough to get her attention. It seemed to go on and on. Her nerves were on a low burn, and her brain felt electric. "What is he doing?" These last words were spoken low, to herself as the pain ebbed away, leaving her breathless.

"Hermione, What are you on about?"

Waving a hand, as though it had been no more than a passing thought, Hermione stared down at her homework. "Nothing, sorry, just had an epiphany." She didn't know how she knew, but she *knew* Severus had been summoned and hit with the Cruciatus Curse. That was the deep foreboding she had been feeling, it was an echo of his discomfort in Voldemort's presence.

She forced on a smile and hopped up from her seat. "I just realized I need to look something up in the library. Be back later." Without waiting for a response, she headed for the portrait door and out onto the landing where she cast the Disillusionment Charm and *Muffliato* on herself and hurried down to the dungeons. Her nerves were still tingling painfully, but it was clear the worst was over.

How long had she been feeling his emotions and physical sensations and not just her own? How long had it been going on and was it strictly a result of the Amoriata? Had Severus been aware of it and never told her? Was something else in play here?

As she hurried down the empty corridors, she considered and rejected various possibilities. It didn't seem long before she was passing through the wards into his private chambers. She didn't remove either spell on herself even when she sat down. On the slight chance that he wouldn't return to his rooms alone, she didn't want to cause any complications.

Where was he?

The meeting dragged on and Severus stood in his accustomed place. He could feel Hermione's fear and concern for him and knew she had figured it out for herself. And she was worried. Knowing any distraction could be fatal right now, Severus pushed the knowledge back behind a shield and focused on what was going on around him.

Finally the meeting ended and after the requisite greetings to those around him, Severus turned to leave, nearly bumping into Hestia Nott. *Of course this had to happen tonight. Couldn't catch a break, could I?* "Hello, Hestia," he greeted his occasional lover.

"Hello, Severus." She stepped closer, pressing herself up to him and trailing a long finger down his chest. It was a move she had used to good effect in the past. This time it did little for him. Instead, his mind brought up an image of Hermione, eyes dilated with desire, panting slightly after he had released her from the kiss they had shared in his quarters Sunday night. This woman couldn't come close to comparing. "Wondered if you have a bit of time tonight. Thought maybe we could get together."

He smiled and flicked a finger over her cheek. "Wish I could, but I have so much going on right now. And the old fool of a Headmaster expects me at a staff meeting in a few minutes. It would be hard to explain my tardiness."

A slow smile spread over her face and she dropped a kiss on his cheek. "Tomorrow, perhaps?"

"Far too many dunderhead students have earned detention this week. Perhaps another time, Hestia. I really can't commit to anything right now." His mind raced as he wondered how he would get out of this if she pressed. He didn't even want this woman any more and feared she might push him into a tight corner. Aware that Hermione might realize something was off if he indulged even a bit to placate the woman, he searched for a way out.

"Hestia," another voice called from the right.

Severus barely reigned in the sigh of relief he felt at hearing Hestia's brother, Theodore calling her.

"We really must be going. Mother's party? She's going to be angry enough that we left in the middle as it is."

She frowned. "Right, I forgot about that. Next time then, lover." With a sultry smile, she turned and Disapparated.

Taking his own chance before someone else decided to speak with him, Severus popped outside to the castle grounds. His body still quaked with aftershocks of the Cruciatus, and he felt drained and weak. The energy required to drag himself across the grounds and to his rooms seemed more than he could stand, but he put one foot in front of the other until he found himself at his door. At this distance, he could tell Hermione was inside. He could feel her.

The enchantment's effects were such that as he focused on the bond between them, he had been able to sense changes in distance and direction between them. Now he wondered what he would say to the child. At least she seemed more concerned for him than angry.

He pushed open the door to his quarters and flicked his wand to bring the candles around the room to life. The fire was already going, but as Severus looked around the room, he couldn't see Hermione. Still, he knew she was there. "Hermione, please show yourself. I don't have the patience for hide and go seek." Even to his own ears the words sounded tired.

There was a shimmer in the air and then Hermione came into view. She was already approaching him. "Are you OK? I know there are potions to calm the effects of Cruciatus, but I don't know where you kept them, and I didn't want to go through your things." She helped him off with his cloak and led him over to the sofa.

"Thank you." He sank into the comfort of his rooms and allowed his eyes to close. There was something comfortable about Hermione at the moment, not just comforting, but comfortable as well. She was his soul mate, whatever that meant, and she cared. At the moment he was far too tired to push that caring away. "The potion is in a blue bottle in the bathroom medicine cabinet."

Light footsteps crossed the room, and he heard her enter the bathroom. He figured it was the calm before the storm...she did have a temper on her. A moment later she returned with the bottle in hand. She removed the stopper and placed the vial in his hand.

Ignoring the wretched way the potion tasted, Severus gulped it down and waited while the magic seeped into all his pores, leaching the pain and discomfort away to a more bearable level. Nothing could completely wipe out the aftershocks, but this would help a good deal. After a few minutes he felt much better and opened an eye to look into Hermione's face. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Feeling better?"

"Much. It's . . . nice . . . to have someone here when I return." It was a huge concession from him, and he knew she knew it. He allowed his eyes to close as his head rested back against the sofa.

"I'm glad I could help."

Conversation dropped off for a long moment, then he could sense her indecision and decided to put her out of her misery. "If you have a question, just ask it."

He heard her shift around a bit before she spoke. "Ok. How long have you known about this connection between us? I've been feeling your emotions all week, haven't I, but I didn't realize it." Her voice was low, but there was an underlying touch of accusation in it.

He didn't answer right away, not sure he had the strength to deal with this right now. She managed to interpret the truth anyway.

"You've always known, haven't you? From the very first."

"Yes. I've always known. It is one side effect that isn't often mentioned in books. I happened to pick it up in an obscure source in my office. One of the many features of this potion is the way it connects the two people so they feel what the other is feeling. Not all the time, mind you, but whenever the emotion or physical sensation is strong, or when they are in close proximity and trying to read the other. That was one reason I knew how to help you in class last week. I could sense your preoccupation with me, your growing distraction. It is also why when we kiss, our emotions get out of control so quickly. We feed off each other in a never-ending spiral.

"It's one reason people who are denied the chance to be with their soul mate go crazy and die. Feeling whenever your beloved is with their spouse, whenever they reach sexual gratification with another, would be a living nightmare." His voice had grown stronger throughout his discussion until at the end, he sat straight and gave her the full truth. Then an after shock of the Cruciatus slithered through him, destroying the image of strength he was trying to project.

She seemed to decide he could handle the brunt of her irritation anyway. "Why didn't you tell me? Did I not deserve to know what was going on in my own head?"

"I wasn't sure how I felt about it, nor did I want to bring it to your attention. The references were vague and the strength of the bond seemed to vary from case to case. I wasn't sure how strong it would be for us. Strong enough, I guess."

"I guess." She huffed and stared him down. "Maybe I don't want you in my head all the time. You're a very depressing man, Severus Snape. You hate everyone, and I

keep finding myself wanting to snap at people for no reason whatsoever."

"So you think I like it any better? You aren't always so pleasant yourself. Half the younger students are scared to approach you for fear you might draw up a study schedule for them." It was not completely true, though he had heard some of the Slytherins her age joking about it. "And the other day I was in a staff meeting and you...you were in the common room laughing with your friends, practically rolling with it. I nearly smiled! In public! Slughorn would have had a heart attack if he'd seen it." He was leaning over her now, his irritation flashing. If she didn't look so delectable sitting with her arms crossed over her chest, it would be much easier to stay angry with her.

She held a straight face for nearly three seconds before her mouth started to twitch.

"What is wrong with you?" he asked, confused by the change in her bearing.

A full smile came over her face and finally she burst into laughter. Hermione grabbed her stomach and folded in half, tears running down her face. "You. Smiling. Staff meeting. Ha ha ha."

"It's not that funny." But her laughter was contagious and far more overpowering when he was actually in her presence. He had to fight to hold in a chuckle of his own. And she looked amazing when she was laughing, like a brilliant candle shining in the darkness.

"Hilarious. Here's the pouty Defense teacher, sitting regally in his chair," she had to stop speaking to let out a few more laughs. "And fighting his best to keep in a smile, for fear someone might think..."

The rest of her words were cut off by his lips as he realized it was the best way to silence her.

Besides, he really wanted to kiss her.

Some time later, when Severus started thinking he was nearing the point of no return, he forced himself to slow the pace of their kisses and finally pulled away. He slid his hands from where they had been fondling her breasts through the fabric of her blouse, down to her waist and tipped his head so their foreheads met. His heart was racing and he took several slow, deep breaths as he fought for self-mastery.

"I'm thinking April 15," she said finally.

"Too far away." He didn't have to ask what she meant by the date. The need to complete this was pounding in him as well so the date must be for a wedding. "March 29?"

"That's a little over two weeks."

"Yes, you're right, still too far away. How about right now...today?" He was only half joking, but he didn't take offense when she laughed.

"March 29th it is. Wizard or Muggle? Is there a way to do it so it won't be recorded in the wizarding rolls?"

"Has to be a wizard binding. The Headmaster will officiate. There are some more obscure ceremonies." Unable to help himself, he kissed her again, though he fought against the urgency in himself to take things further.

She didn't fight the desire at all and soon he was breaking away entirely. "You better get out before I break my word to Albus. Besides, we both need to rest.*Not that I'm bloody likely to get much tonight anyway.* A tremor shivered through him again.

"All right. Goodnight." Hermione pressed one more quick, hard kiss to his lips and with a wave of her wand toward herself, shimmered into invisibility.

"So two down, four more to go." Hermione said after Harry finished telling her and Ron about Dumbledore destroying the Horcrux in Slytherin's ring.

"Yeah, and he thinks he knows where the next one is. He even promised to take me with him when he goes to retrieve it," Harry said.

Harry and Ron continued to discuss the issue, but Hermione sat back and considered the job ahead. If Dumbledore had nearly lost a hand to remove the ring's Horcrux, what would happen with the other four...never mind killing Voldemort. And what could the last few Horcruxes be? Dumbledore had explained the leader of the Death Eaters had tucked pieces of his soul into artifacts that had special meaning for him. The first destroyed had been Riddle's diary. Harry hadn't lost an appendage in that case, but Ginny had nearly died. So what would be the stakes in the next round? She shivered at the thought and was secretly glad that she would be kept abreast of everything going on, but could spend her time studying instead of being responsible for the destruction of the bits of Voldemort's soul.

She wondered if Dumbledore would tell her what spell he used on the ring.

AN: I've been terribly remiss in not thanking the incredible admins for their help in getting my chapters up to snuff. I find I am correct-comma-usage impaired and they have been very patient as I try to learn the rules better. So a big thanks to: Soul Bound, Angel Mischa, Phoenix, amsev, RobisonRocket, and Southern_Witch_69

8: Telling His Other Master

Chapter 8 of 51

See chapter 1

Chapter 8: Telling his other master

Saturday nights were always good for finding students snogging in the corners and niches of the school halls. As the second week of their relationship drew toward the end, Hermione was dutifully searching out all of the possible hiding places for snogging couples, though she would prefer to be tucked up in the arms of her Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. She still couldn't get over the fact that Severus Snape cuddled with her. If she were daft enough to tell anyone else, they would never believe it.

Of course, he wouldn't call it snuggling. He would say he was only holding her to satisfy the potion's demands while they held a reasonable facsimile of conversation.

She had completed her check of the hallways near the library and couldn't help but turn toward the dungeons. It had been several days since she had spent time alone with Severus, and even the diary conversations weren't satisfying her completely.

"Granger, what are you doing in these parts?" a voice called behind her when she reached the vicinity of the Slytherin common room but was still a few corridors away from Severus's classroom.

Blaise Zabini stood in the hallway leaning a shoulder against the wall and fiddling with his wand in his right hand. His dark eyes seemed amused by her predicament. "Don't you know we don't appreciate Gryffindors snooping around in our dungeon?"

Hermione gripped her own wand tighter, but fought against the urge to act offensively. His stance was menacing, yes, but she had rarely experienced trouble with Zabini...he didn't seem to think she was worth the effort to pick on. Malfoy seemed absent, so she fought to stay cool headed. "Just doing rounds. I hadn't realized you claimed the whole area to yourself."

"I'll cover this area, thanks." He walked over to her, a sneer on his pinched face. "Unless you were looking for trouble. I'm sure I could help you out." His eyes flit down her body, undisguised interest in them when he returned his gaze to her own.

"No, thanks." Hermione fought to maintain her composure. What had she been thinking to come down here alone without her Disillusionment Charm? She refused to take a step in retreat as he continued to stalk closer to her.

"Granger, Zabini. Isn't it a bit late for rounds?" Severus's voice broke the tension, and Hermione felt a wave of relief.

"Just finishing mine, sir," Zabini said as he took a reluctant step back from Hermione, then turned to his Head of House. "I was wondering what a lone Gryffindor was doing in these parts. Dangerous move, if you ask me. Probably snooping."

Hermione looked over in time to see a sneer cross her beloved's face. "Indeed. There's no call for you to be down here, Miss Granger. Five points from Gryffindor for being such a busy body. If you have rounds to do, I suggest you check out the hallways surrounding the library. It seems to be where you are most at home."

Zabini laughed at the malice in Severus's voice, but Hermione only nodded. Severus was saying he would meet her in those hallways as soon as he could.

"Back to your common room, Zabini." He turned back to Hermione and lifted a brow. "On with you, Miss Granger. Wouldn't want to lose more points for your illustrious house, would you?"

"No, sir." Hermione lowered her eyes, afraid her longing would be plain, even to the prat Zabini if he saw them. She turned and hurried out of the area.

Hermione was on her third patrol of the corridors by the library when she was pulled into a dark recess in the hall. A hand clamped over her mouth to stanch a scream, and Hermione let the certainty that it was Severus trickle through her. She knew instantly by his touch.

A whispered silencing spell later, and his voice was rumbling in her ear. "What have we here? A definite arm full of future Head Girl." One of his hands quickly unbuttoned her robes and blouse while the other held her back against his chest, still covering her mouth.

His hand smoothed over the bare skin of her belly, and Hermione shivered. She found herself growing anxious for more, desperate for what he could give her but still held back. Though he had unbuttoned her once before, that was as far as it had gone. This time she hoped he carried things a bit further despite his vow to leave her virtue officially intact until the wedding. "A handful too," he said in a whisper that had her shuddering with its sensuality. His hand flowed over one breast, feathering it and bringing her nipple to erect status through her bra. Hermione wished for a moment she had worn racier underwear that day.

His lips trailed along her now-bare shoulder, up the side of her neck and to her ear. "I felt your longing, sensed you growing closer to me. Your emotions are as easy to read as Potter's mind. I love that you're such an open book to me." He twisted her around, knocking her bare back against the cold bricks and taking control of her mouth with his. His mouth left hers and headed south to her exposed chest, and she stopped thinking all together.

A long time later Hermione stumbled from the recess, tugging her clothes back into place. Her whole body throbbed, and she wished for a time turner that could transport them both to the end of the month...their wedding day. Though the state of want he left her in was pleasant, she longed for the fulfillment of the promises his mouth and hands made with each encounter. He was still a snarky git, but she couldn't say she found those qualities completely disgusting anymore. In fact, she was somewhat turned on by them. Deciding she would drive herself mad, she refused to think about her visceral responses to him.

She was starting to think she would burst before her wedding day arrived. How they would manage to keep their relationship hidden after that was something to worry about later.

Hermione was almost clear headed when she reached the common room to find Lavendar Brown cuddled up with Neville Longbottom. She blinked and wondered how long that had been going on. Harry and Ginny sat side by side on another sofa, their shoulders touching while they discussed what she figured must be Quidditch. Ginny reached over and set a hand on Harry's arm, and Hermione saw the flash come into his eyes. He looked the way Hermione felt when Severus touched her.

Come to think of it, in the past few weeks she had noticed an abundance of strange relationships. Not that Harry and Ginny were an odd couple, but Cormack McCleggan seemed to have won Pansy Parkinson's hand from Draco. Slytherin Miles Bletchley had started seeing Marietta Edgecomb, and Seamus Finnegan was tirelessly trying to gain the attention of Alicia Spinnett.

With a raised brow, Hermione wondered how many of them had been hit by the potion. If Seamus had been dosed, it appeared Alicia had not. Poor Seamus.

Hermione considered writing the twins and asking for a dose of their chocolates to make the relationship more even, at least. But then, they would hardly admit they had any left on hand. She had threatened to hex their bits off if they didn't dispose of their whole inventory. Not that she believed for a second they had thrown the stuff out, but they would certainly go out of their way to keep it quiet from her.

Just then Seamus walked over to Alicia and tapped his wand to the quill he was carrying, changing it into a large bunch of tiger lilies. Alicia smiled shyly and accepted the proffered flowers. Perhaps Seamus would make the second dose of chocolate unnecessary, Alicia didn't seem entirely adverse to his attentions. Hermione smiled to herself as she walked up the stairs to her room.

The only thing that still confused her was why these other relationships seemed to be potion-induced, but the strength of the pull between them didn't seem nearly as strong as her own with Severus. To her knowledge Harry still hadn't even kissed Ginny. Hermione made a mental note to ask Severus about it later.

Fear that the Dark Lord would learn about his relationship with Hermione kept Severus extra wary of any public interactions he had with her. He was still considering what approach to take, how to introduce things to the Dark Lord.

He Apparated to the Dark Lord's side only two nights after his interlude with Hermione in the dark halls, filling his mind only with images that might show his devotion to the Dark Lord and his cause. He dropped to one knee before his leader and bowed his head in obeisance. "You called, my Lord?"

"Severus, I need an update. How are things going with Dumbledore's plans?"

Since Severus made it a point not to learn anything he could accidentally divulge to the Dark Lord unless absolutely necessary, he was able to answer honestly, "The old man keeps his plans close, and I've heard little. The werewolf Lupin continues to be ostracized from the group most of the time. He doesn't look as though things are going well for him, sets himself apart from the others." He projected a memory where Lupin hurried out of a meeting after Tonks tried to speak with him. The detached

unhappiness on Lupin's face was clear.

"Good, and his other projects?"

Severus pursed his lips. "My Lord, he has something he's working on with Potter, perhaps Occlumency. I am not privy to their meetings, but I get the feeling it may be something else." He considered, then decided to test the waters. "There is, however, an opportunity I may be able to take advantage of. If I'm careful. A chance to learn more from another source." He slid his expression into calculating lasciviousness. "And it may have other benefits as well." He allowed an image of Hermione into his mind.

"Yes, I'd heard Potter's friend seemed to be paying more attention to her instructor than was normal."

Severus nodded, grateful he hadn't waited any longer to bring the subject up. "She seems to have developed a *tendre* for me." He arched a brow and smirked. "She's not unappealing, in her way, and could be a useful avenue to obtain information. Granger and Potter seem to share all of their secrets...though with the way Potter hates me, I doubt she's shared this particular secret. And the boy is far too obtuse to pick it up on his own. Still, I had wondered if I might not use her feelings to my advantage. Like the naïve child she is, she trusts me. With a bit of care, I might get her to speak of things I wouldn't otherwise hear."

"Those are good points, Severus. Points I hadn't considered. You know them best. What do you think would upset Potter more: luring out and killing his little friend, or her seduction to our side?"

Severus had to pause for a moment to make it seem as though he was considering the question. "Loss through seduction, my Lord. He would see her feelings for me as a complete betrayal of all he holds dear, whereas her death would only make her a martyr. Of course, she may be useful in other ways before we show Potter his loss. Learning of her defection should be held off for a time. She will no longer be privy to secret information once her preference is made known, and it will take time to turn her infatuation to something more to suit our needs. I can build on her trust and hormones." He tapped a finger against the chin of his mask. "Dumbledore will be furious if he finds out. She's the favorite choice for Head Girl next year, after all. I'll have to find a way to spin it for him. Do I have your permission to pursue this angle?"

The Dark Lord pursed his lips and ran a finger along his chin as he considered the possibilities. "Yes, see what you can do. I will call you again in a couple weeks. You are dismissed."

After another bow, Severus stepped back and Apparated to the castle grounds. He stepped to the stone wall nearby and leaned against it, relieved he had managed to twist things his direction. If he had waited to mention Hermione's preference for him when other students were starting to notice, he could have found himself in a bind. At the same time, he needed to tutor Hermione better on keeping her feelings hidden. There was no telling which of the students had noticed her actions and reported them...any one of half a dozen were in a position to see them together in class. Anyone in the school could have seen the occasional stolen glance during meals.

He could *crucio* those Weasley twins for putting him in this position in the first place. Severus knew Dumbledore had words with the young businessmen, but those two particular Order members had been conspicuously absent at the last meeting Severus attended. The Headmaster had done well to keep them away. With a sigh, Severus trudged up to the castle. He changed his Death Eater garb back into his standard robes and prepared himself to report to Dumbledore.

Later that week, Hermione's blood was settling after a dedicated snog session with Severus. She could see he was growing more agitated as their wedding drew closer. She wondered what the big event was that he kept alluding to. Why would she hate him? She had asked him about it, but he told her he wasn't at liberty to say. His only clues were that she would need to believe in him, no matter what. And then he turned the topic. "Potter needs to work on his Occlumency. In fact, it wouldn't hurt any of you to work on that. The whole Order would fight more effectively if they weren't mentally shouting their plans. There are several passable Legilimens in the Dark Lord's service."

Snuggling more fully into Severus's lap, Hermione ran a finger along his exposed collarbone. "Could you teach me? Then I could help Harry, maybe." Hermione bit her lip and considered what had been going on between them over the past few months. "Then again, if he pushed into my memories, he might see us."

His hand feathered over her bare back and settled at her waist. "Yes, that could be a problem, seeing as how he hates me. Maybe we should practice together first, get you started before you expose us to everyone."

"Speaking of exposed." Hermione flicked a fingertip over his flat, exposed nipple and heard him suck in a sharp breath. It made her grin to know it took so little to affect him. Knowing she affect him as much as he did her was a great comfort when he insisted on stopping before trouser zippers could be employed, or deployed, as the case may be.

Severus Snape at the best of times wasn't a sweet and gentle lover. He may use an occasional endearment, mostly when they were deep in the throes of a serious snog, but that was it. The term 'my dear' slipped out in their writing from time to time and during visits, on rare occasions, but Hermione felt that at times it was said with a touch of irony and wondered what that meant. His reactions to her presence thrilled her, however.

"You'd best get off me now before my control slips." Severus moved to release her from the cuddling position he had settled her into. The limits he had set were no doubt driving them both crazy.

"Are you sure you don't want to," her fingers slid further down his chest, over his ribs and he all but shoved her off of him.

"No, I'm sure I *do* want to, which is precisely why it's time we got dressed again."

Though at the time the Amoriata potion took effect, she hadn't felt ready to go further than a few kisses; the past couple weeks had done away with her concerns in that vein. Severus had been filling her in on bits and pieces of his life, of growing up, and his likes and dislikes. Hermione felt she was beginning to truly know him now and was frustrated that he insisted they wait until the wedding, regardless of Dumbledore's request.

After dressing, she took a moment to center herself, then submitted to Occlumency practice.

AN: Thanks to robisonrocket for correcting my punctuational infelicities and thanks to all of you who took the time to review. Every time I get a new review, it is like Christmas has come again!

9: A Night of Bonding

Chapter 9 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 9: A Night of Bonding

Only a few days later, Hermione hung behind the others after Transfiguration class to discuss a question she'd had about the Animagus transformation. During her discussion with Professor McGonagall, the Headmaster's face appeared in the office fire. "Minerva, I was wondering if you have those reports ready for me. Hello, Miss Granger." The last was tacked onto the question with mild surprise.

"I can bring it over on my way to dinner, Albus."

"I really would like to get a look at them before that. Could you send Miss Granger to my office with them? I believe she has a free period right now."

How does he know that? "I'd be happy to help, Professor," Hermione said.

"I'll see you soon then." His eyes twinkled at her and he disappeared with a pop.

"Well, Miss Granger, I have a book that gives more information on the process than what you will have seen elsewhere." The professor turned to her long bookshelf and ran her finger along the backs, stopping at a slim volume with a muted purple cover. The book was titled, *Uncovering the Animagus Within*.

"I appreciate it, Professor." Hermione clasped the volume carefully like the treasure it was, then took an envelope with the Headmaster's reports and said goodbye.

After walking fifty feet, Hermione stashed the envelope in her rucksack, then continued her journey. She carefully opened the book, unable to wait to see what new things she might learn.

The gargoyle guarding the Headmaster's office jumped aside as soon as she drew near, and Hermione reluctantly closed the book as she took the last turn in the stairs. It was a fascinating process, and she wished she could devour the entire book immediately. Promising herself she would make time to finish it that night, she smiled at the Headmaster and handed over the envelope Professor McGonagall had given her.

"Thank you, Miss Granger. It was quite serendipitous you were around when I Floo called. I wanted to speak with you anyway."

"What can I do for you, Professor?" Hermione couldn't think what he wanted.

"I understand you are using your time with Severus to good advantage, strengthening your Occlumency." He cut straight to the point, though his eyes may have sparkled at her.

Uncomfortable with the conversation, knowing that the relationship between her and Severus wasn't exactly appropriate despite their engagement, Hermione licked her lips and nodded. "Yes. We both felt it was a necessary skill. Something I can work on with the boys this summer. Harry didn't really take well to his previous lessons."

"Yes," the Headmaster pursed his lips in thought. "My mistake, I suppose. Your soul mate and your friend are unlikely to get along at any point in the future, either, I'm afraid."

"It seems rather hopeless, doesn't it? But I have hopes when everything is said and done that they might put up with each other, enough for me to continue my relationships."

His blue eyes flashed back at her, piercing her to the heart. "And if you were forced to choose between them? If it appeared they were on different sides, if you couldn't have both Harry and Severus in your life?"

Hermione felt her eye twitch, surely Harry would be able to see how happy Severus made her. She took a long moment to try and read what lay beneath the Headmaster's question. "I am against Voldemort first and foremost. If both men are on the side against that madman," she swore reflexively as she imagined having to give up either her love or her best friend, "I hope and pray I can work things out, that they can behave like adults for my sake. If not, I hope I can make Harry understand that I have no choice. Even if I didn't desperately want to be with Severus, I have to if I want to live." Tears threatened to fall from her eyes. "I worry about him constantly. What would happen if Voldemort found out about our real relationship? And I know the wedding is putting him in more danger."

The Headmaster's face grew serious. "If discovered, he would die a most painful death, Miss Granger. Or perhaps, Voldemort would instead ensure you died a long and painful death in front of Severus's eyes, then leave him to waste away in a cell. What better weapon?"

Hermione flinched at the honesty of his words, but was grateful he felt her responsible enough to be told the truth.

"That said," Dumbledore began again after a long silence, "you must stay safe, work on your Occlumency to protect the both of you, and help the others in the Order with their shields. It is of utmost importance." His eyes were serious, all the twinkle dimmed when he paused for a moment. "I had another reason to wish to speak to you. Your wedding is sneaking up on us, it seems."

"Yes, I've barely had time to think about it, things have been so crazy. I really have no idea what to expect. I always thought I would have a big wedding with my family and friends . . ." She stopped and covered her open mouth with her hand, shock rocking through her. "Oh, my gosh. What do I tell my parents? I can't, of course. How do I keep something so huge from them? They'd never understand." With everything going on, the whole wedding thing seemed completely unreal, so unreal she hadn't allowed herself to consider the ramifications. How would it happen? How would they keep it hidden from the Ministry? Severus's life would be worth less than the tripe currently being printed in the *Daily Prophet* if it were learned.

"I'm sorry for the subterfuge you will have to employ on your parents and friends. Such a burden can be heavy, I know. But, as you said, it is necessary. I will be taking care of any arrangements for the binding. I will see to it that you received the appropriate clothing and instruction before the ceremony. I will have them waiting for you in the Prefects' bathroom at curfew Friday evening. You must keep the event entirely secret, Miss Granger. For now, at least. Even from your closest friends and Professor McGonagall. It is necessary."

Hermione only nodded her agreement. It was unclear why she had to keep the secret so close...aside from the fact that her best friends hated Severus with a passion. However, she trusted the Headmaster's judgment.

"I have another job for you, as well." He paused a moment to be sure to gain her full attention. "There are certain things that have been required of Severus in my service and in the service of the Dark Lord. Such requests may seem incomprehensible to you, but they are necessary. Severus will need you more than ever when you feel least inclined to help him."

Again with the foretelling of doom. What was going on, anyway? "He has hinted as much, but I don't understand. Why can't he tell me what's going to happen so I can be prepared?"

"He has decided it would be best if he didn't share that information with you at this time. And I do not disagree with him. I want to reiterate for you that he has his orders to complete certain promises to me, despite the way it may look to others when he carries out those orders. Please stand by him. You can be his best thing, his biggest strength. The one person who keeps him sane when things are looking their worst."

When Hermione left his office a few minutes later, she had the feeling that she was missing an important piece in the puzzle and that once she had the piece, she wouldn't like the picture one bit.

Friday night arrived...the day of her wedding...and Hermione felt like a bundle of nerves, both wondering what she was doing and anxious for the night to follow the binding ceremony. By now she was really becoming quite adept with the Disillusionment Charm, though she was playing around with a few other charms as well. A big sign was placed on the Prefects' bathroom "Closed for Repairs" early in the afternoon so she would have privacy to prepare for her wedding.

"My wedding? What am I thinking?" Of course a part of her couldn't be happier about marrying Severus, she admitted to herself as she lay back in the lilac-scented waters and ran her fingers through her wet tresses. They had time for little more than a few lingering kisses at their meeting the previous night, what with Occlumency lessons and Prefect rounds and homework piling up for her to complete and for him to correct.

And really, with the wedding night ahead of them, they would have plenty of time to explore all of the other territory she had been so anxious to cover. The thought made her blush, and she finished rinsing the conditioner from her hair, then slowly rose from the water and made her way to the edge. It was time to begin preparation.

A large white box sat on the edge of the counter. It had been sitting there when she'd arrived in the room, just as Dumbledore had told her. She glanced again at the instructions on the sheet of paper that came with it, then turned to the mirror while she finished toweling off and charmed her hair dry.

She had always thought for her eventual wedding...whenever she bothered to think that far ahead...she would be decked out with her hair tweaked into decent shape and her makeup just so. However, the binding the Headmaster had chosen required her to come with no enhancements. The drying charm listed on the sheet of paper had made her hair far more manageable than usual without taking the curl out of it. A fact she would be forever grateful, she acknowledged, as she wished she had found the charm earlier.

With a bit of trepidation, she smoothed back the tissue paper for the first time and pulled a sheath of white fabric out. She would have called the fabric satin, but that wasn't quite right. It was silky and shimmered like stars as she touched it, and though it looked rather shapeless as she lifted it to pull it over her head, when it fell down to her toes, it seemed to cling and cuddle her body, creating an elegance she could never have imagined. Thankfully it was opaque enough it wasn't obvious that she wore nothing underneath. She wondered if it had embarrassed the Headmaster to write those instructions to her as it had to receive them from him.

Atop the box had been a few tiny white blossoms, larger than baby's breath, but not much. They were separated into small bunches, and Dumbledore's note instructed her to place them in her hair. They would be the only decorations appropriate for the ceremony. A glance in the mirror nearly shocked her, and she had to look again, studying herself. There was a natural glow to her cheeks, something she blamed on nerves, but looked nice none-the-less. She felt older somehow, like she was really entering womanhood. Though she knew she was no beauty, much like the night of the Yule Ball, she felt pretty. She only hoped Severus agreed.

After sliding her feet into slim white slippers, Hermione turned to the clock on the far wall and saw that it was nearing midnight. She picked up her wand and cast a Disillusionment Charm, then stepped out into the hallway.

The castle was dark and quiet as she walked toward the doors leading to the Herbology gardens. Not a ghost was in sight and even Mrs. Norris seemed to be in another part of the castle entirely. The night air hit her with a blast as she stepped out into the cold dressed in so little. A quick warming charm later and she felt comfortable as she crossed the school grounds. An internal clock ticked in her head, reminding her that midnight was drawing ever nearer.

Greenhouse 2 had a slight glow about it, and as Hermione entered, she saw dozens, if not hundreds, of floating candles surrounded a clearing in the center of the building. She slipped from her shoes, tapped her head to release the charm on her, and set her wand on a shelf next to the door. A pang of worry came and went as she left her wand behind, but she knew she was safe here with Severus and the Headmaster, though she never went anywhere now, not in the wizarding or Muggle worlds, without her wand tucked away within reach. Again, the ceremony dictated she approach her future without it.

Professor Dumbledore stood about twenty feet away at the far edge of the circle, Severus only a few feet away, his eyes glued to hers. Though she still couldn't call him handsome, he had never looked so striking or appealing to her before. His outfit was made of the same material as her own, a pair of simple, flowing trousers and a loose-fitting shirt. There were no buttons on the shirt, rather it had a wider opening at the neck, much like a Muggle t-shirt, to allow it to be pulled over the head. Hermione doubted she would ever see Severus with so few buttons again.

That was, when he was wearing clothing at all.

The thought made her blush as she stepped toward him, placing her hand in his extended palm. As his hand closed around hers, she felt calmness enter her, though she could tell he was as anxious as she was. They stepped into the clearing surrounded by floating candles, plants of all types, and the moonlight pouring from the skylight above. Even if she hadn't been at Hogwarts, even if such a scene had occurred at a purely Muggle location, she couldn't describe it as anything less than magical.

She couldn't say later that she heard the Headmaster's words as he intoned the sacred rituals, binding her to Severus. She barely remembered the feel of the silk-like cords wrapping around their clasped hands, or the moment they placed simple platinum bands on each other's fingers. What she would always remember was the touch of his fingers lifting her chin so he could kiss her, and the power that sped through her system as their lips met. Her eyes stayed closed for only a moment before the bright lights surrounding them made her eyes open again, though the kiss was nowhere near finished.

There seemed to be a whole set of Weasleys' Wildfire Whiz-Bangs going off around them...emanating from them to be more accurate. It was spectacular as the feeling of fireworks going off inside her was hardly less brilliant than that of the lights outside. She allowed her eyes to drift closed again as she let Severus's mouth dominate her senses.

She had no idea how much time passed before the Headmaster cleared his throat a bit later, and Severus pulled away. Their kiss had been powerful and overwhelming, and Hermione found herself swaying into her husband as they both turned toward Professor Dumbledore. Severus pulled his free arm around her, helping her stand, though she felt weak both as though she had expended a great deal of magical power and the power of his kiss had drugged her.

The Headmaster stood before them, his eyes twinkling as he tapped their bound hands with his wand and the cords came undone and flew up to rest in his empty hand. He then tapped each of their rings in turn, though Hermione saw no noticeable difference in them. She glanced back at the Headmaster with curiosity.

"That was a type of Disillusionment Charm, if you will. Only the two of you will ever be able to see the rings on yourself or each other unless you wish to show the ring to someone. The rings cannot be removed while you are both alive...thus a proof of sorts of your marriage, should one be necessary. I made sure to place special charms on both rings to prevent them from interacting with any potions ingredients."

"Thank you, Albus, we appreciate it." Severus's voice rumbled where Hermione's shoulder touched his chest. She had never heard anything so sexy in her life.

"Yes, Professor. Thank you."

"You are both welcome. Now, I will release you for the night with a reminder to be circumspect, to remember that there are always eyes on you both. Please try to continue being discreet."

"Of course, Albus."

Hermione agreed as well and the old man waved them out the door.

Though she had vague memories of receiving another Disillusionment Charm to hide them from prying eyes, crossing the grounds again, entering the school, and walking through the dungeons, Hermione couldn't say that anything registered for her so much as the feel of his arm around her, and the sensation of their growing desire slowly spiraling upwards between them.

As soon as Severus pulled her into his rooms, she found his arms surrounding her, his mouth on hers, and a fire growing in her belly. He continued to kiss her, his hands everywhere over the soft sheath of cloth covering her body as her hands took on an exploration of their own. The next thing she knew, the backs of her knees made

contact with his bed and they were falling onto the mattress.

She had no concept of the time that had passed when she came to her senses again. All she knew was that their union had made every part of her being throb in ecstasy. Now she lay in his arms, their skin cooling, the thrumming slowly ebbing as her ragged breaths grew longer and slower.

"Hermione," he paused, as if uncertain how to tell her what he had to say. She could sense the reluctance, the embarrassment in him. "I've never felt anything like that before. The power of this bond . . . it staggers me."

She smiled wanly, pleased with herself as his hand slowly traveled from the middle of her back, down her side, along her hip and onto her thigh, drawing it up and over his own. Their bodies meshed and she could feel the desire slowly growing again. "Insatiable, aren't you?" She said the words with a pleased grin. Who would have guessed that it could be like that between them?

"Only with you. Only ever with you." He murmured the words against her cheek, then took her mouth again.

AN: I apologize for the long delay, I had someone lined up to beta, but life seems to have gotten in the way of her getting back to me. Thanks for all the reviews. They make my day!

10: Unknown Curses

Chapter 10 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 10: Unknown Curses

The following Thursday Hermione was sitting in the Gryffindor common room, still tingling from the memory of her wedding night the previous weekend. She hadn't been able to get more than a few moments alone with Severus since, but she was looking forward to their appointment in his chambers that evening.

Arithmancy homework was keeping her mind occupied when she felt Severus's fury shooting through her, along with a healthy dose of fear. Since finding out where the extra emotions were coming from, she had managed to differentiate between their feelings, and keep her own from being too affected by his. She had even managed to use her Occlumency to block some of his more moderate emotions. No amount of Occlumency would block the raging emotion pouring into her now, however. She pulled her feet up beneath her in the chair and tucked her book more firmly in her lap, pretending to be absorbed in her studies while riding out the temper thrumming through her.

Harry burst into the common room a few minutes later, his shock and horror obvious. He asked Ron if he could borrow his Potions book. Hermione wondered if Severus's anger had something to do with whatever was eating at Harry.

When asked, Harry explained he had to stash his book in the Room of Requirement. Harry disappeared too quickly for Hermione to ask questions, however. What happened? Why was Severus so upset with Harry? And why the underlying fear from them both? Of course, the fear was beginning to fade a bit now, as though Severus had been reassured, but it still clung to him. He had never liked Harry, all but hated him now, Hermione knew. Severus had expressed his disdain for the teen's rash behavior and a large dose of lingering hate left over from Severus's own school days.

Giving up on her studying, Hermione focused on Severus, locating him on the far side of the school, away from his own quarters. He was suspiciously near the Hospital wing, from what she could tell, and realizing that only increased her worry. Biting back a sigh, Hermione shoved all her books and papers back in her rucksack and headed out the door, muttering something about the library for anyone who noticed her leave.

She made a beeline for Severus's private quarters, not forgetting to Disillusion herself when she had a moment of privacy in the hallway. He was still on the other side of the castle when she reached his private rooms. She made herself visible, then settled down in a comfortable armchair to try and focus on her studies. Her mind kept straying to what Harry was doing with Ron's Potions book, however. If he stashed his in the Room of Requirement, did that mean Severus knew about it? If so, did he know everything in the book, or had he only glanced at it? Why was he keeping it around, and how did he find out Harry had it?

She was still pursuing this circular line of thought when Severus entered his quarters, slamming the door behind him, and came to stand in front of her, glowering. Moving with deliberation, Hermione stuck a bookmark in her text and set it to the side of the chair, then turned her full attention on her furious husband.

He didn't let her stare at him for long. "Do you know what your idiot friend has done?" He didn't wait for her to answer, instead taking a step closer to her. "The bloody Boy Who Lived nearly killed the Malfoy brat today."

That brought a response from her. "What happened? I know he came tearing through the common room and ran out with his school books. And I could tell you were livid." She carefully constructed her Occlumency shield, protecting her memories of Harry and Ron's discussion.

"Livid hardly covers it. He used a dangerous curse...a little-known curse, I might add. Malfoy was cut down the whole front of his body. If I hadn't been nearby and able to close the wound so quickly, Malfoy could have bled out in minutes." By now he was all but hovering over her, wand in hand.

There was no warning. In the next moment he was casting Legilimens, and she could feel him burrowing into her mind, trying to find any evidence of Harry having the wrong textbook. Angry that he would invade her mind like this, she focused all of her energy on closing him out. Finally she gave him a physical push to complement the mental one she was pursuing. When she got her bearings again, he was sprawled across the floor, shock on his face.

She stood on weak legs and glared at him. "I don't care what our relationship is, it doesn't give you the right to invade my mind over every little thing. My mind still belongs to me, regardless of whatever the damned potion has done to twist it." It didn't register with her that she had actually sworn at him...something she never did.

"Every little thing?" He pulled himself up onto his feet, like a cat gracefully rises from a prone position, and glared down at her. "You call Potter nearly killing someone a little thing?"

"Wrong choice of words, but Harry wouldn't have cast that spell if he'd known what it did. I'm certain of that."

"Bloody stupid of him to cast a spell when he didn't know what it would do." He pushed the hair back from his face, all of the fight gone from him.

"Agreed." She crossed her arms in front of her chest, whether out of defiance or to protect herself from the hundred emotions that seemed to be thrumming through her, she didn't know.

"Potter has possession of a textbook that is not his own." It was half statement, half question as he stared her in the eye.

Hermione stared right back and remembered that Harry had stashed the book before returning to Severus's side. "Not to my knowledge." She put every ounce of confidence she owned into her words. They were technically true.

He studied her for a long moment, then lifted an eyebrow. "Why do I get the feeling that you're prevaricating? No matter." He reached out and pulled her to him, wrapping her in his arms and settling his cheek on her head. "I had all kinds of plans for tonight, and they didn't include arguments about that idiot boy."

A slight wave of irritation rose in her, she hated the way he spoke of her friends and was inclined to protest and protect them. Then she thought of the damage Harry had done and tamped back the irritation. This time the idiot deserved the derision. "So what did you have in mind then?" a smile slid onto her lips as she felt his fingers slide down her spine.

He kissed a line down the side of her face and hovered at her ear, his warm breath causing her to shiver. "Something requiring far less formal attire." His lips captured hers in a slow teasing caress, then slowly upped the power until she was clinging to him, desperate. He pulled away, leading her through the door to his bedroom.

Harry had to miss the Quidditch match Saturday, his detention working for Filch taking precedence. Though Hermione hated for him to miss the big match, she could hardly blame Severus for imposing the punishment. Considering what could have happened, he'd gotten off easily.

The match had been exciting, and Ginny had caught the snitch in a magnificent maneuver, ensuring the Gryffindor win.

The entire house was in the common room celebrating when Harry came up from detention. Hermione watched with fascination as Ginny pushed through the crowd toward Harry and Harry swooped her into his arms, pressing his lips to hers. Hermione could almost hear the wash of energy around them as the potion was satisfied. She blinked in surprise and wondered again how the two of them had managed to keep so much distance between them when she and Severus had been so inexplicably drawn toward each other. Compelled.

She wondered if Harry and Ginny would finally have gotten together if he hadn't been forced to miss the match that day. That brought her back around to Severus's irate response to Harry's spell casting a few days earlier. It wasn't the entirely justified anger that bothered her, but his fear that had coursed through her. Why the fear? Then she recalled the conversation Harry had overheard between Severus and Draco back before Christmas. Severus had made an Unbreakable Vow that he would protect Draco. That meant he would have died if Harry had succeeded in killing Draco.

Now she thought perhaps Severus had been a little too kind to Harry. And the stupid idiot was planning on going back for the Half-Blood Prince's textbook.

Not if she could convince him otherwise.

Several weeks passed before Hermione remembered to ask Severus about his theory on why the Amoriata potion had affected them differently, more strongly than other couples she had noted around them.

She lay in Severus's arms in his bed, feeling the rising and falling of his chest beneath her hand as her heartbeat returned to normal after a spectacular interlude. Neither of them spoke, both enjoying the moment of peace and comfort away from the rest of the world. Severus had visited the Dark Lord the previous night. Though he had gotten off lightly, he still had experienced a fleeting moment when he thought he would be hit with the Cruciatus Curse. He hadn't said so, but she sensed the dread from him, then the relief.

Hermione realized that before their bond, she had never considered the very real danger he faced every time he answered a summons. She sometimes caught glimpses of his meetings in his mind when she had turned the Legilimancy spell on him. He had been quick to shut her out of those memories, as she had when worried about the purloined textbook.

Severus seemed fully aware that Harry had possessed said textbook, though Hermione still wasn't sure how he had known for sure that the spell had come from there. The kid who owned it previously had been seriously messed up. Bordering on evil. Yet Harry had been so quick to defend the Half-Blood Prince.

She let her mind drift back to the potion again. "Severus, I have a question about Amoriata."

"You, questions?" His chest rumbled under her fingertips, and she smiled at the amused sarcasm in his voice.

"Shocking, I know." Her smiled widened when he chuckled low in his chest.

"Ask, Wife, before I lose my good humor."

"I noticed about the time we, um, got together, there were several other couples formed that appeared to be unexpected, or at least given a magical boost. But I didn't see that same desperation that flowed through my veins, the compulsion to be in each other's arms constantly. The attraction between them seemed fairly strong, but still . . ."

"Why was it so much stronger with us, then?" His arms came around her, sliding over her back.

"Yes. Why us?"

"I've wondered that myself, even done some more research. One theory I've come up with is that the compulsion would have to have been stronger for us because we could not otherwise have come together. Potter and Miss Weasley were all but guaranteed to get together eventually even without the potion's effects. One or two of the bonds I've seen around us seem so strong those affected practically simmer in each other's presences." He tugged her closer to him and began running his fingers through her hair.

"Is that the prevailing theory, then?"

He tugged her hair, so she tipped her face back toward his. "It's one." He buzzed her forehead, eyelids and cheeks with his lips as he spoke. "The Headmaster also suggested it may be related to how much the couples need each other." His lips landed on hers, and she could feel the desire beginning to simmer inside her. "I need you again," he whispered, then drove all questions from her mind.

11: Softer than Indifference

Chapter 11 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 11: Softer than Indifference

She felt prickles all over her skin, like when circulation returns after blood has been cut off to a limb. Hermione fought the urge to open her eyes and look at what might be going on, focusing inward instead as the discomfort grew in her hands and feet, along her arms and legs and even on her abdomen. The world seemed to grow large around her, or maybe she was shrinking. She couldn't be sure.

The sound of metal crashing on stone down the hall broke her concentration, and pain seared momentarily along her skin as her eyes blinked open in surprise and she lay panting on Professor McGonagall's office floor.

Muttering something under her breath, the professor marched over to the heavy wooden door, swung it open, and continued into the halls. A moment later Hermione, still breathing hard from the effort she had expended, heard the old woman's voice carry down the hall to the office. "Peeves, leave those suits of armor alone! How many times must I tell you?"

Hermione heard Peeves' sing-song voice in response, but couldn't understand the words. Then the sound of Professor McGonagall's footsteps echoed in the hallway as she returned to her office.

"One of these days that poltergeist is going to go too far. If it hadn't been for the havoc he caused Umbridge..." McGonagall stopped her muttering when she saw Hermione trying to stand on the rug again. Hermione got the distinct impression the woman had forgotten about her student. "That was wonderful Hermione. A very good first try. Any ideas what you were turning into?"

Hermione took the hand up her professor offered her and accompanied McGonagall to the desk, where two chairs sat side by side. McGonagall conjured some tea and biscuits and began to pour out.

"No, Ma'am. I could feel pin pricks on my skin, but I have no idea. I suppose it must have been fur sprouting. Does it always hurt like that?"

After adding a touch of milk to her own cup, the professor smiled and settled into her chair with a smile. "No, the first few times are the least comfortable. I never even feel the hair sprouting on me anymore when I change. And it wasn't fur, Miss Granger, it was feathers."

Hermione blinked in surprise. "Feathers. So I'm a bird. What kind, do you suppose? What color were the feathers? I'd like to try it again in a few minutes."

"They were white tipped, some were brown, others more bluish, and it was definitely a smallish bird. But don't be foolish; you shouldn't even attempt it again for at least twenty-four hours. There may be many years between now and the days I was learning my shape, but that doesn't mean I don't remember how exhausting it can be. You might strain your magic if you try again before tomorrow evening. And we're trying an interesting new bit of transfiguration in class tomorrow you'll want to have all your power available for." Her eyes sparkled over her tea cup as she took a sip.

"Really? What are we doing?" Hermione paused with a biscuit halfway to her mouth, curiosity overcoming her.

"You'll have to wait and see."

When Hermione left a few minutes later she felt a bit stronger; the tea and biscuits had revived her somewhat. She cast the Disillusionment Charm on herself, then made her way down the halls to the dungeons, slipping silently into Severus's private quarters.

Before she made a sound to announce herself, however, she heard his voice calling out to her. "It does no good to be stealthy around me, you know. It's not like I couldn't sense you growing nearer for the past five minutes."

Without making herself visible again, Hermione stepped behind him and slid her invisible hands along his collarbone. He shivered slightly when her thumbs touched the skin just above his high collar and she got an interesting idea. "Miss me much?"

"Why would I? You're nothing but a talkative," he paused when her fingers delved into his hair and pulled it back from his face, then one finger traced his cheekbones, "hand waving, know-it-all," he managed to say, though his voice was a bit rough on the last words.

She could feel the desire begin to burn through her, both hers and his as she walked around him and placed her right hand on his chest while her other hand returned to tracing his face and neck contours. The fingers of her right hand slid up and began loosening the buttons of his shirt one by one. Since he was in his own chambers, he had already removed his billowing robes and vest.

"What are you doing? It's bloody irritating to have you invisible like this." His voice didn't match his words, and she sensed his growing arousal. She found the thought of touching him, being able to do as she liked without him seeing her, rather erotic. Based on his response, he did as well.

She leaned in, her chest rubbing lightly against his as she placed her mouth near his ear and whispered, her warm breath blowing across his cheek and ear. "Liar."

Then she kissed him to distract his mouth while she continued divesting him of his clothes. This wasn't what she had come down to do, but she didn't think it would hurt anything to take a side trip.

When they lay in each other's arms in his bed a long time later, Hermione had forgotten what she had come down to tell him, but she hardly cared at this point.

"You know," he said, tracing one finger down her arm, then back up again, causing goose flesh to raise on her skin, "Longbottom seems to be doing better lately with silent charms. Has someone managed to teach him to vocalize silently?"

"Not me. But I do understand he's found a, um, good friend who is taking an interest in helping him with his studies." She was keeping her conjectures about Neville's relationship with Lavender Brown to herself. After all, she might have misunderstood their relationship entirely.

"A 'friend'? I really don't think I want to know anything else. Any help that tragedy calling himself a wizard can get is a bonus."

She pinched his chest. "Be nice."

He grabbed her hand so she couldn't pinch him again. "I'm not a nice person, lest you forget. And Longbottom is far from my favorite person. Though he is a far sight better than your best mates."

Hermione threaded her fingers through his and sighed. She wished the people she cared about could even tolerate each other. Unfortunately it was clear Harry and Ron despised Severus as much as he disliked them. With that thought, she let her eyes drift to the clock on the wall and noticed it was nearly curfew. "I ought to be going."

His hand...attached to the arm beneath her and which had been running over her hair...grasped a fist full of her tresses as his arm tightened around her. He let out an irritated huff of air. "I've turned into such a bloody sap, but I hate it when you go. It never bothered me to be alone before."

With those words he released her and pulled away. He stood from the bed and stalked across the room to the bathroom door. Hermione sat up in bed and watched him go, searching their link for his feelings and finding his conflicted: dread, loneliness, shame, despair, irritation, and a tenderness she had never noticed before. It made her wonder if it had been there for a while and she just hadn't paid attention.

At least she wasn't the only one feeling torn by their relationship.

"I hate it when you use the bond to sense my feelings. I can always tell, you know," he called from the other room, and she heard water running in the sink.

"You wouldn't be able to if you weren't constantly testing my emotions too," she called back to him. She cast a quick cleansing spell on herself so she wouldn't smell like she had just risen from her husband's bed, then began to dress. The fact that he didn't retort to her accusation was all the validation she needed. That realization made her smirk.

"And don't get all high and mighty because you think you know me. You don't. You only see what I let you see." This time the voice was coming from behind her.

Hermione didn't turn around to face him, choosing instead to continue dressing. "I may be young, Severus, but that doesn't make me stupid. I know you don't share yourself with me. Physically, sure, but not who you are on the inside, what you think and feel. Our diary conversations only go so deep into your real history. If it weren't for the bond, I wouldn't know you had any feelings softer than indifference."

"Everything is softer than indifference, wife. Even hate. Hate isn't the opposite of love, apathy is. To hate, one must feel something about the person or set of circumstances. Apathy requires only the absence of feeling." His voice was cold and impersonal.

Hermione turned to face him. He still wore only his birthday suit, and she was now fully clothed, clasping her robes at her throat. "So last year when you were thoroughly irritated by me, but barely noticed Zabini existed, you were actually showing that you held a soft spot in your heart for me? Even then? What would the Headmaster say?"

Severus snatched her shoulders and pulled her to him, commanding every inch of her attention with his mouth as it plundered hers. When they came up for air, Hermione couldn't remember what they had been discussing anymore.

As he turned and stalked back to the bathroom, she heard him suggest someone do something she thought most likely anatomically impossible, though her brain was far too fried to figure out who he was referring to or why.

She all but floated back to the Gryffindor common room where Harry and Ron were hunched over their History of Magic essays.

"Hey, Hermione. What was the third reason the dragons were cordoned off from Muggles in 1734?" Ron asked, scratching his head with the hand holding his quill and getting black ink in his hair as he did so.

"Haven't the slightest. Goodnight boys." She floated up the stairs, feeling their confused gazes following her.

May was drawing to a close and O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s were approaching. Severus was growing more and more anxious as the days passed, wondering if Draco would manage to accomplish his assignment, or if Severus would be forced to do it for him. The Headmaster was growing weaker everyday, and Severus was brewing stronger pain potions for him every week to keep on top of the growing infirmity.

It was amazing how easily Hermione fit into his life. Having her emotions humming in the background of his mind had grown familiar, comforting, almost. He blamed the *Amoriat* for the comfort he found in her presence, but he knew it was actually far more than that.

In addition to the comfort he garnered from their physical contact, the sexual release, he found he enjoyed debating Potions theories with her, Defense techniques, discussions on current events and Arithmantic equations. Her Occlumency would never be as good as his, but she was doing very well with it and, unless presented to the Dark Lord himself, Severus was confident she could protect her mind from prying eyes.

Her Legilimency skills were coming along as well, and when he would have to leave her, he was certain she would be able to make some headway on training Potter and the other Order members.

That thought brought him back to the issue of Draco's assignment. He treasured every moment alone with Hermione while the chance lasted before events unfolded. On the other hand, the growing tension on when and how Draco would act was driving him crazy, as the prat still wouldn't trust him.

Severus was correcting assignments in his quarters, and Hermione was in the library preparing for end-of-term exams when his Dark Mark flared to life. He glanced toward the Pensieve sitting behind a charmed wall where he had stashed his most damning memories of his time with Hermione. It had been too long since he was last called, and Severus had been prepared for such an eventuality.

The gathering was a large one, he realized, as he appeared in the darkness. Dozens of Death Eaters milled around the outskirts of the Dark Lord's inner circle. From time to time one or another would be called forward to report on whatever their master had assigned them.

The Dark Lord had been asking for frequent updates on Severus's progress with Hermione and had been shown several scenes that the megalomaniac found enlightening. The false information Severus and Hermione had planned for the evil leader had not been as useful as the Dark Lord would have liked, but as Hermione was letting more information about Harry and his state of mind 'slip' to Severus in their encounters, he had been lenient so far.

Soon Severus was called forth and asked to report. After showing the Dark Lord his memories, Severus stood tensely. In the past week, he had barely found time to sneak more than a few kisses with Hermione, their respective schedules had gotten insane with the end of the year drawing close. Severus looked forward to the next night, Friday, when he expected to have Hermione to himself for several hours.

"Severus, your relationship with the child has gotten interesting. She seems to trust you utterly and to be completely wound in your web of deceit. It will be interesting to see how far she is willing to go to see you this summer."

Bowing his head, Severus blocked out thoughts of what the summer might bring. "My Lord, I trust she will find a way to see me still. Her Muggle parents are naïve and permissive, and she is a witch of age." The fact that the young witch was his wife was a closely held secret. The Dark Lord would not approve, and the truth getting out could be the death of both husband and wife.

"See that you keep her on a leash, Severus. Your information from the Order is mediocre at best. Do try to improve your usefulness to me. I find you lacking." The leader swished his wand and sent a silent hex at Severus, one that cut a gash in his shoulder, causing it to bleed from a long wound.

With a bow, Severus backed away from the dark leader, gritting his teeth. After nodding to several others, he Disapparated back to the castle.

Severus wadded up the edge of his robe and pressed against the bleeding wound as he trudged up the hill to the castle. He pushed back the door, feeling weak from blood loss and tired of it all. A slight shimmer in the air that seemed to approach him was his first clue that Hermione was waiting for him. Then he realized he had felt her in the entrance all along but hadn't registered it over the pain.

Hermione pulled him into the nearest room and wordlessly pried his bloody hand away from his shoulder. Still under her Disillusionment Charm, she inspected the wound

with her fingers, then pointed her wand at the cut, murmuring a healing charm. After a quick cleaning charm she inspected the bared flesh, seemed satisfied, then slid her arms around his waist drawing him closer.

Only then did she address him. "I felt the hex, figured this was the best way to help you tonight."

Severus tested the muscles in his shoulder and found she had done a good job before wrapping his arms around her and resting his cheek on the top of her head. He whispered, "*Finite Incantatum*," and her charm melted away. "Thank you."

"Was it horrible?" she asked as her brown eyes bored into his.

"Not so bad this time." Still, he tightened his arms around her, drawing in her sweet scent that filled his head and chest with heady comfort. "I wish you could come down to my room tonight."

She nuzzled his neck with her lips, sending shivers down his spine. "Perhaps I could. After all, I did claim I had to look something up in the library. Perhaps I could go up in the morning, rubbing my eyes and saying that I fell asleep over my books. But really I could fall asleep over you."

At that moment, waiting until the next day to hold her in his arms seemed as impossible as it was unnecessary. Though there was a niggling voice in the back of his mind saying he ought to send her back to her own bed, he didn't want to listen. He wanted her with him, even if all they did was sleep.

Murmuring the Disillusionment Charm to cloak them both in obscurity, he backed off, then took her hand and led her down to his rooms.

AN: A big thanks to robisonrocket for correcting this chapter. Next up: The Castle Under Attack

12: Castle Under Attack

Chapter 12 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 12: Castle Under Attack

Hermione woke in Severus's arms the next morning. A warning voice in the back of her head reminded her she needed to get upstairs to her room before the others missed her, but the feel of his bare chest beneath her cheek was too tempting to ignore. She rubbed her cheek over his lightly furred body, and the hand he held on her upper back slid to her nape, lightly teasing her hair.

"You should get dressed and return to your room." His voice was thick from sleep and not the least convincing.

"I know." Instead of making any moves toward getting up, however, she turned her head and pressed a kiss to his chest. For once their physical proximity had led to nothing more than cuddling, something they both needed with events accelerating around them. Of course, Severus would deny that he was a cuddler until his dying day. Besides, she doubted he had been up for much more in his exhausted state. She knew his constant wait for the next call from Voldemort made his nights restless.

His arms tightened around her, pulling their bodies closer together. "I feel as though this night has been an idyll, a moment out of time. I fear we will not have another. The end of this situation draws near."

"Summer will be here in a few weeks, then maybe I can arrange to get away from home for a couple nights. My parents won't even know I decided to spend time with my husband instead of the Weasleys." Hermione stopped talking then, a pang in her chest forming when she remembered once again that her parents didn't know Severus and couldn't be introduced anytime soon. When this war was over, would they both be alive? And how would she admit to her parents that she had been married since halfway through her sixth year of school? She pushed the thought away again, unable to do anything about it.

"Thanks for reminding me that I've been sleeping with a school girl," he said, extricating himself from the bed. His tone was cool now. "There's little you could have said that would be more effective at putting me back in my place." He glanced at the clock and his brows lifted in surprise at the lateness of the hour. "You'd best get back to your dorm before you're missed. Madam Pince will be in the library in a few minutes."

Glancing at the clock herself, Hermione bit back a swear word and rushed to dress. There was no time to take him to task for his abrupt change of attitude...not that doing so would make any difference. She ran her fingers through her tangled mess of hair and wished she had set some kind of alarm to wake her earlier. Grabbing her outer robes, she cast the Disillusionment Charm on herself, then *Muffliato*, and hurried to the hall doorway.

She heard Severus call to her from the other room before she shut the hall door. "Next time you use a spell from that book Potter has re-appropriated, have the sense not to use it in front of me. It makes your assertion that he doesn't have it harder to believe."

"How did he know that?" she muttered to herself as she rushed up the stairs. Before heading to the dorms, however, she took a side trip to the female Prefects' bathroom. She ended the quiet and invisibility charms on herself as she approached, then slipped inside, transfiguring a paper in her pocket into a towel.

A shower ran in the back corner, and Hermione made a beeline to one of the other stalls.

When she arrived at the Gryffindor common room half an hour later, her hair was charmed dry and into some order, and she pulled her robes more closely around her to hide the fact that her school uniform was wrinkled from the previous day.

She shrugged out of her clothes when she reached the dorm room and grabbed up clean ones to change into. Lavender entered the room, her hair still wrapped in a towel from her shower. She eyed Hermione's discarded clothes. "Decided to come back then, did you? Wonder what Ron would think if he knew you spent the night with some bloke instead of in your bed. Then again, maybe he was the one you slept with." She eyed Hermione malevolently.

"Sleep with Ron? Eww, he's like a little brother. Fell asleep in the library. Stopped at the Prefects' bathroom on the way back to save time." Hermione focused on changing her clothes and moved toward the drawer that held her combs and makeup as she buttoned up her shirt. Lavender's ongoing jealousy over Hermione's friendship with Ron was beyond irritating, especially when Lavender was involved elsewhere.

"Is that where that love bite came from? I know some of those books in the restricted section tend to bite, but . . ." she allowed her innuendo to complete the sentence for

her.

Hermione looked down at the spot below her collar that held a love bite from Severus. It was a couple days old, and in her haste, she had forgotten to hide it. She bit back another curse and lifted an eyebrow in amusement. "Much as I'd like to claim that was from last night, alas, it's a few days old." She ran a thumb over the spot and remembered the sensations of Severus's mouth there. A smile came to her lips. It was too late to pretend she wasn't seeing someone now Lavender had seen the mark. She would just have to be more careful about visiting Severus in the future. Lavender was just jealous enough to take to following her around to catch her in the act. "I can honestly say nothing inappropriate happened last night. Unfortunately." As he was her husband, it was honest to say nothing inappropriate had happened between her and Severus since late March, in fact.

"Harry and Ron may buy that shite, but I'm not about to. Not everyone is as easy to fool as your little friends." Lavender turned away and flounced off to her own bed to change her clothes.

Cursing her lack of forethought, Hermione turned back to her own grooming, casting a glamour charm over the red spot on her neck. Even if it was below her blouse, she didn't need to take any chances.

That afternoon Hermione was back in Professor McGonagall's office during a free period. She had nearly completed her Animagus change this time, and it was obvious she was a small colored bird, but since the change had still never been completed, she wasn't sure which kind.

After another failed attempt...but one closer to complete than she had managed before...Hermione found herself sprawled on the floor yet again. The change wasn't nearly as taxing this time as it had been the first time, however, and the feeling of feathers prickling through her skin was far less uncomfortable than originally.

"Very good, Miss Granger. You'll be completing the change by the end of the week. Before you know it, you'll be changing for a member of the Ministry. You're doing very well, indeed." The woman all but beamed at her. "How do you feel? Up to trying again?"

Hermione considered whether or not to give it another go. Remembering her promise to Harry to monitor the school while he was away with Dumbledore that night, she decided she shouldn't push her powers any more than necessary. Besides, she had no intention of registering her Animagus accomplishment with the Ministry until after the war was over. Who knew, being a common bird might be a skill to the Order's benefit. "Maybe not today. What do you suppose I've been doing wrong?"

She and the professor settled down to the usual tea and goodies while they discussed the finer points of the change, and McGonagall gave pointers on completing the change more fully.

Severus,

Sorry about not being able to meet with you. I promised Harry to work on something for him tonight. He insisted and there was no way to get out of it without telling him why I couldn't help him.

Putting your friendship with him above our relationship, are you?

Not at all. We both have things we have to do to hide our relationship from the world. It's for both our safety. After all your machinations with Vol...er, You-Know-Who, I shouldn't have to justify this to you.

You must placate the prat. For now. Did you get many questions about being out all night?

Hermione told him about her encounter with Lavender, then sighed as she closed the diary, promising to work something out in a few nights. She picked up her school assignments and took them to the room where she was to meet Harry and Ron to watch the Marauders' Map while Dumbledore was away.

Personally, she was sure Harry was blowing things out of proportion. He had been on this 'Draco Malfoy is up to something' trip for months now. She considered it a miracle he never caught her with Severus on that map of his, as often as he scoured it looking for Malfoy. Still, she was his friend, and there was no reason she couldn't keep an eye on the map while doing her homework. If she hadn't been scheduled to be with her husband that night, she wouldn't have even minded.

Then something unexpected happened. Ron saw some names pouring out of the Room of Requirement that shouldn't have been in the school in the first place.

It took no time at all to charm the DA Galleons from the previous year and pull out the Felix Felicis left over from Harry's Potions 'success' on the first day of class. When only Ginny, Neville and Luna showed up to assist Hermione and Ron, Hermione took a deep breath to swallow her disappointment, then passed the vial around, warning them only to take a sip so there would be enough for everyone.

Then the students went onto the offensive.

Hermione and Luna ran into Professor Flitwick in the halls, and at Flitwick's command, they rushed down the dungeon stairs to Severus's chambers.

When she and Luna had arrived at Severus's door, on the heels of Professor Flitwick, Hermione hadn't suspected a thing. Severus called to them, "Flitwick has fainted, take care of him." Luna hurried into the office and Hermione held Severus's glance for just a short moment. For a heartbeat she saw the anguish and longing as clear on his face as she felt it in her chest before a mask of determination took over and he turned away.

She hurried into the office to help revive Flitwick, then skulked through the halls with him and Luna, every step echoing around them. They reached the main floor before they encountered trouble, and thanks to the Felix Felicis, the spells seemed to be deflected out of the way of Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna, and Hermione to help the teachers and late-arriving Order members and Aurors route the Death Eaters.

The desperate look on Severus's face haunted Hermione throughout the fight, and she wondered if he would come out OK. The Death Eaters were supposed to be his comrades, after all. Between her own tasks of fighting the attackers, and what she later realized must have been Severus putting up his own Occlumency shields between them, she didn't recognize his feelings over the next half hour. Other than his consciousness resting in the back of her own as proof that he was still alive and awake, she hadn't time to spare for him.

As she shot a long rope from the end of her wand, incarcerating a Death Eater, Hermione heard shouting as Harry yelled at Severus, chasing him from the castle.

And she learned the worst.

Her soul mate had killed the Headmaster.

AN: I know I'm a bit evil to leave the cliffie there, but I promise a quick turnaround for the next chapter.

A big thanks to Southern_Witch_69 for fixing my punctuation gaffes.

13: The Aftermath

Chapter 13 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 13: The Aftermath

Hermione sat in the hospital wing by Bill's bed and listened to Harry describe what had happened on the tower.

"And Snape did it. The Avada Kedavra," Harry said.

Hermione already had her hands clasped over her mouth, but now she understood the anger and hatred she had felt emanating from Severus during the last few minutes of the fight. Except she didn't understand. She couldn't. Hermione felt her whole world drop away. As the phoenix song filled the air around them, she felt the bond with Severus strain, felt the shields he had put up weaken so she felt the unrestrained pain, anger, disgust, worry, fear, anguish.

Anguish overpowering and unrelenting.

Silence surrounded the group until Professor McGonagall entered and Harry gave her the rundown of events. Every word impugning Severus's honor was acid in Hermione's stomach. Still, she couldn't protest, the events spoke for themselves. When she told them all what had happened at Flitwick's office door, and Remus told her Severus would have killed them if she or Luna had interfered, she wanted to scream out that they were wrong. Severus would never have hurt her.

Of course, he may have stupefied her. He certainly would have done all in his power to stop her from joining the fight. She wondered that he hadn't done so anyway. But then she would have been unable to protect herself from the other Death Eaters, and Flitwick...wasn't he a dueling champion? He would have been a formidable threat, indeed. If Severus was really fighting for Voldemort, he would want the Charms professor out of commission.

The thoughts flew through her mind as she tried to disassociate herself from her own feelings of anguish and those of her soul mate at the same time. Then the Weasleys and Fleur were running into the hospital room, conversation bantered back and forth and Tonks and Lupin's relationship came out. It was a blessed distraction, and Hermione fought to stay in the discussion. There would be time for her grief later.

When Harry accompanied Professor McGonagall out of the hospital room, Hermione paused for a moment with the others, then made her way to the Gryffindor common room with Ron and Ginny. They might not reopen the school, she thought. How will I get to my N.E.W.T.s? The worry was completely pointless at this time, but she had to have something to focus on besides the pain of betrayal in her chest.

She said goodbye to Ron and Ginny in the common room and went straight to her room. Thankfully, it was empty. The whole of Gryffindor house seemed to be gathered in the common room right now. Hermione stripped from her uniform and slid into a nightgown. Then she climbed onto her bed and pulled out her diary. Still, she only stared at the book on her lap. He said he would carry it on him, but did he grab it before leaving his rooms?

What would she say anyway? *Why did you destroy my faith in you? You're right, I do hate you. How can I love a man who is so evil? Why the overwhelming anguish? What do you have to mourn?*

She began sobbing, that last thought was all she needed to let loose as she tried to make sense of the night's events.

Severus collapsed when he Apparated to the Dark Lord's side, his back and shoulders bleeding from hippogriff wounds. Hate and anger still flowed through him from the words Potter had thrown at him. Twice the boy had called Severus a coward, bringing out his innate hate of the word, his self loathing at what the word could bring him to do. He had to hold back the retching that threatened to overtake him...an illness brought on by his wounds and the self-loathing he felt for his actions against Dumbledore.

So much for the niggling hope Draco wouldn't get the others to the school. If only Draco's efforts had been complete failures. Then again, even a complete failure would have forced Severus to act. But then maybe he could have done so covertly, and not brought the rage of the Order...no, the entire wizarding world, on his head.

"Rise, Severus." The Dark Lord's voice brooked no argument, and Severus summoned his strength to stand, head bowed.

"Yes, my Lord."

The snake/man turned his gaze toward the white, frightened form of Draco and tapped his wand against his other hand. "Draco, report."

The whole story came out from the beginning of summer to that evening. Malfoy glossed over his own failures and inadequacies, but he was facing the second best Legilimens in the world. Or rather, the man who was the best Legilimens in the world, now that Albus was dead. Severus knew the boy's failure would be punished heavily, but hoped the boy would be allowed to live.

Each of the other Death Eaters were given a chance to report in turn. Severus was last...a fact for which he was thankful. It had taken all his strength to block Hermione from his head, to put up his Occlumency shields so carefully they wouldn't be detected.

"Severus, do you have anything to add? I wish to know why you completed the task I set for young Malfoy."

Keeping his eyes lowered, Severus slid into his guise of obsequious obedience. "My Lord, his mother feared he would not be strong enough. She and Bellatrix LeStrange requested I assist him if it turned out he was unable to complete the task. When I arrived at the top of the tower, it was clear his courage had failed. Since you wanted Dumbledore gone anyway, I took it upon myself. Without the old man, the Order of the Phoenix will turn to chaos. Potter will falter without his beloved leader." At this Severus sneered. The boy was far from ready to face the Dark Lord. Their fight on the school grounds that night had been more than adequate proof.

"Agreed. You have been forced to break your cover, however. For that the boy must pay. For that and his cowardice."

The fear coming from Draco was palpable. Severus wondered if the brat had ever realized what being a minion of the Dark Lord truly meant before this moment. Severus knew he had required a similar situation to open his own eyes.

Stoic, not allowing a bit of his emotion to show on his face, Severus watched the youngest Malfoy be punished for his weakness and disobedience. He didn't let down his guard, knowing the crazed leader was not finished with him either.

Finally the others were dismissed and Severus stood alone before his master. "Severusss. What does this mean for your project concerning the Mudblood?"

"She trusted me implicitly. Perhaps I can still convince her to trust me. If I am allowed to disclose the nature of my vow concerning Malfoy, perhaps her weak sympathies may be appealed to. She thinks herself in love with me and has told me she would choose me over Potter, should the decision be required of her. We do not want her to make such a clear choice yet; she is far more useful in Potter's camp for now."

"Very good. I am pleased with your progress with the chit. See what you can do to get back into her good graces."

Allowing his back and shoulder muscles to loosen a bit, Severus let out a low breath. It was a moment too soon to relax, however.

"But, as punishment for taking this vow without my consent or permission." The Dark Lord lifted his wand at Severus.

"My Lord, I had little choice, Bellatrix and Narcissa"

"Silence! They will make their payment as well. *Crucio!*"

In her dorm room, Hermione curled up in the middle of her bed, sobbing as she felt the pain coming across Severus, lasting on and on. She felt his agony and despair.

It seemed to go on forever, but when it stopped, Hermione realized it had only been a few minutes, maybe five. She lay in a ball, shaking, shuddering from the aftershocks, though the pain had been no more than a sensation of pervading discomfort. She knew Severus would suffer for a long while from the aftereffects. Even if he did have his potion.

She hoped he put a store away wherever he would be hiding from the Ministry.

In the next moment she realized again what an impossible situation she was in. How could she be so angry with him, feel so betrayed, and still worry about his comfort? It was those Weasley twins' fault. They would surely pay.

She waited for her breathing to slow to a normal rate, then wiped the tears from her face. Grabbing her wand from her nightstand, she charmed her curtains closed, then opened her diary.

Several minutes passed as she stared at the blank page before her. Finally she lifted the quill, dipped it in ink, and wrote one single word that summed it all up.

Why?

"Why indeed, Hermione."

Severus had returned to his home at Spinner's End as soon as he was released from the Dark Lord's residence and immediately took healing draughts and his Cruciatus calmer, then took an excruciating shower to clean up after the hypogriff that attacked as he left school grounds. Now he was lying in bed with the journal open before him, his door warded against intrusion...in case the Dark Lord sent Wormtail to spy on him again.

"What answer do I give, love? The truth with a twist, cleaned up to be palatable? The truth unadulterated? A complete lie?" Not that he could lie to her. Not really. For this to work she had to have the truth, or a very close approximation thereof. Thankfully the truth was something that would calm her, not upset her more.

Probably.

Why what? Why did I take the Mark in the first place? Why did I turn from the Dark Lord? Why did I kill the Headmaster today? Why do I sit here with the diary open on my lap and hope you are still there, still waiting for an answer. That when I have told you everything, you will believe me? He sat back and hoped she would respond somehow, even an ink drop to let him know she was looking at the diary.

Yes. To all of it. But most especially the events of today, tonight, last night. The morning is near. I wrote my question forever ago, it seems. Lavender and Parvati have both come up since and fallen to sleep. I envy their ability to sleep after the night that has passed, or nearly passed.

There was an Unbreakable Vow...two actually. It is far too complex to use the valuable pages of this notebook on, but I was required to protect and aid Draco and to carry out the task he had been given if he couldn't do it. Both the vow I made to the Headmaster, and the one I made to Narcissa Malfoy required me to fulfill the task.

What do you mean the vow you made to Dumbledore? What vow?

If you want the answer to that, you must meet with me. Soon. Then we will discuss everything.

What? After everything that happened tonight, you expect me to trust you? Be alone with you? The words smeared slightly and he knew she was crying. He could feel her anger, confusion, mourning, and loss. He shared those emotions.

You trusted me this morning. You awoke in my arms this morning, warm and willing and pliant.

You weren't a murderer this morning.

He paused at that and considered again how much honesty was required. Then decided in for a penny, in for a pound ***Yes, I was.***

Yes, he was? What was that supposed to mean? Hermione sat and stared at the words, unable to believe her eyes. Had her soul mate just admitted to having killed before tonight? Intellectually she had known it was likely, but that didn't stop it from being a shock hearing it from him now.

Apparently the pause was too long for him because words began appearing on the page again ***I'm not proud of it, but I can't lie to you. I wasn't always reformed. The only difference between who I am now and who I was this morning is the bit of my soul that tore away on the Astronomy tower. I haven't been whole in a long time. Since before you were born. But again, that is a discussion for a face-to-face meeting. Wife.***

Wife, that was right. She seemed to have forgotten that small detail. She was married to him *How can I be married to someone who is so...* She paused, unsure what to write.

Evil, flawed, misguided, hateful, abusive, wasted,

Stop it! Stop denigrating yourself. Just stop! His words stared back at her on the page and she felt his torment ~~l~~ *love you, Severus Snape.*

It's the potion talking. Don't worry, I know.

No, it's not just the potion talking. It's not. The potion saw something in you that was worthwhile. It wouldn't have paired me with the man you claim to be.

And why is that? I am a deeply horrible person, Hermione. I have always been deeply horrible. My first kill was my Muggle father. I still don't regret that one bit. He beat my mother, punished her for being a witch, as if beating her would take the evil presence from her. She was once a brilliant woman, but she died at his hands as a broken shell of herself. I don't regret killing him.

I don't believe you are irredeemable. The Headmaster trusted you, despite the fact that you hated the Potters and used their attack as a reason to return to the light. There must have been another reason he trusted you. Something more. Dumbledore may have just been a wizard, but he isn't a complete fool. Please, please tell me there was more. Can I be so horrible myself that I deserve, and best identify with a murderer?

No. You are like a light in the darkness. I could never deserve you. Uggh, I hate this connection between us. I hate that I love you when life would be so much easier if it were only lust. Or better yet, if there were nothing between us at all. I hate this feeling of having lost control of my feelings. I hate that I feel compelled to see you, speak with you, hold you in my arms. And that because of that need, I had to share our relationship with the Dark Lord so he could share my memories of you.

She let a long pause pass while to she took in his last sentence.*It appears we really do need to get together to talk. When and where?*

She felt his relief through the bond and they made plans for the evening the day after Dumbledore's funeral, whenever that was set. She didn't know how she would arrange to meet with him, but one way or another, she had to see him.

One more thing. You need to send a message to McGonagall. They need a new secret keeper for Headquarters right away. Thankfully the Dark Lord didn't think to ask me for the location tonight, but it won't be long before he realizes his error.

Of course. Right away. Goodnight.

Goodnight.

She waited another minute, watching to see if he might come up with something else to say. As much as anything, she didn't want to put the diary away, to close the lines of communication, even if her mind was shutting down after all.

She lifted her wand, thought of waking in Severus's arms that morning, and sent her Patronus shooting through the school to the Headmistress to remind her of Headquarters. In the morning, she would follow up.

She was asleep in minutes.

"Thank you, Miss Granger, for your concern," the new Headmistress said when she came across Hermione in the Great Hall the next afternoon. "Lupin had the same concern and we had just completed it when your reminder arrived."

"Oh, good. I did try to think of the place this morning, and couldn't so I figured . . . When will we be told? And who?" Hermione wanted to keep things as cryptic as possible in case someone around them were to overhear. She was anxious to sit down to lunch, as she had slept through breakfast that morning, but the information was more important.

"You'll be told where before the train leaves." McGonagall looked as though she hadn't slept the previous night. There were circles under her eyes and her hair was a bit unsettled. Even her plaid tartan was a bit askew.

Hermione nodded and released the Headmistress to deal with the other hundred things that must have been on her mind. For herself, she was still reeling from the previous twenty-four hours' events and wanted more time to consider them. Parvati was already gone. Her parents had shown up that morning and pulled both twins from school. Many other students were sure to follow. Hermione hoped her parents missed their reading of the *Daily Prophet* today. They were bound to be sick at the news.

For once she wished her parents weren't so interested in her world. Hermione took a seat next to Ginny and began loading her plate.

"Decided to get up, then?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I have some things to look up in the library."

"I have something more for you to check out. Since classes have been cancelled." Harry passed her a note that had been rolled up and scrunched tiny. She opened it and read the note that had come inside the locket he and Dumbledore had picked up the previous night. R.A.B. "We need to know who that is."

"I'll see what I can do." She would look into it, but she wanted to do some checking into another matter first.

Thanks for your reviews. Also, for anyone who didn't recognize it, there were a couple of sentences taken verbatim from HBP in the first of this chapter. It was JK Rowling's genius, I just had the fun of changing the perspective.

Also, thanks to Southern_Witch_69 for her corrections.

14: The Funeral

Chapter 14 of 51

See Chapter 1

The next few days went by in a blur as everyone cried, talked, packed, cried some more, or just walked around the castle like zombies. Students were heading home left and right, and Hermione was starting to believe they really wouldn't open the school again the next year. At the current rate of attrition, there wouldn't be many left for the funeral. Well, that wasn't completely true, especially since Hogsmeade was filling up with witches and wizards who wanted to pay their last respects.

On the night before the funeral, Hermione was packing away the last of her things, envisioning what lay ahead for them all...but most especially for Harry. Somehow she doubted he would consider returning to school as important as hunting down the Horcruxes, and she couldn't blame him.

When there was a knock at her dorm door, Hermione called out, "Come in."

"Hey, I was wondering how your packing was coming along." Ginny's red mane of hair framed the face poking around the edge of the door.

"It's coming, but I could always use some companionship. Yours?"

"About done." She came in and sat on the edge of Hermione's bed, then slid herself up against the headboard. "I guess you're going home for the summer."

"At least for a while anyway. I haven't made any firm plans yet. My parents are frantic, of course. They must have owed me the moment the newspaper hit their table. I had to send an owl straight back to them yesterday to let them know I wasn't hurt and I would be home soon."

"Harry had to write the Dursleys to let them know he was coming home a bit earlier than expected. They probably went through the roof."

"Wish I could have seen it." Hermione's mouth twitched at the corners. She had heard enough about Harry's horrible relatives to have some idea of what their response might have been. "What about you? They going to let you take your O.W.L.s still?"

"Yeah. They'll set a date later this summer for the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T students to test. Tests seem a bit pointless at the moment."

"Yeah."

A long pause ensued before Ginny began to speak again, pulling her knees up to her chest. "He's going to dump me, you know. Harry. He loves me, but I can already feel him distancing himself from me. It's the strangest thing, it's as though I can feel his emotions lately, like we're so finely tuned to each other I can feel what he needs before he even knows it. Or at least without him saying so. And when I need a little more room, or a big hug, he seems to know that as well."

"That's because you're soul mates. You just needed a boost to know it." Hermione wondered if the red-head had figured it out yet. When Ginny gave her a funny look, Hermione realized it hadn't occurred to the younger girl. "Amoriated, chocolate chunk biscuits, your brothers. . . strange pairings in the school . . ."

Ginny's eyes grew wide. "They didn't. But it's exactly the kind of thing they would do. How did you figure it out? How did you know?"

"I did some research after our talk at dinner one day. I've learned more along the way: the emotion bond is one of the hallmarks. When you're kissing him and you're getting . . . excited..."

"It's like it starts to spiral out of control almost like we are feeding off each other. It can be hard to control sometimes." Ginny gave her a suspicious look. "How do you know so much? The twins didn't find this out, so it must have been rather obscure. How many hours did you dedicate to researching?"

Hermione evaded Ginny's gaze. "Not so long. My research skills are very good, you know. And your brothers..."

"Tend to act without doing all the research sometimes. Yeah, I know. But I think there's more."

"Harry won't be able to break things off with you completely. The potion, the enchantment, if you will, requires regular contact. He may try to separate himself from you, but if you don't at least pass letters, he'll be driven to come find you. And vice versa."

Ginny eyed her speculatively. "And who, exactly, is your soul mate? You've been very discreet."

Hermione bit her lip, then wet them as she tried to figure out what to say when the truth would never do. "Discretion, or rather, total secrecy, is still required." She looked Ginny in the eye. "I'd tell you if I could. I wish I could tell *someone*, but the time is utterly wrong."

"What, Draco Malfoy is it?" Ginny's tone was teasing.

"Eww, please, don't wish that prat on me."

Ginny smiled. "Fine, we all have our secrets. I can keep yours."

"I'd appreciate it. I'd rather not deal with questions from the boys when I can't tell them the answers."

"Then I'll expect a hand from you to nudge Harry back in my direction if he fights it too much."

"Done. I'd be happy to. Besides, he won't want to fight the enchantment when you've been apart for a few days. He'll start to pine." Hermione smiled at the thought, especially since Ginny had pined after Harry for so long. At least it would be mutual this time.

"And you? How will you keep in touch with your love?"

Hermione smiled secretively. "I'm of age and have a license to Apparate. I suppose we'll work something out."

Ginny left a few minutes later, and Hermione returned to her packing. Her mind returned to a conversation she'd had with the boys that afternoon where they talked about Severus, as the Half Blood Prince, anyway. Harry had collected the Potion book from the Room of Requirement that evening, and he, Ron and Hermione talked about the origin of the title. She couldn't forget the way Harry had described Severus. Murderer. Killer. Evil. She had denied the last. He wasn't evil. Traumatized, even deeply horrible...in his own words...but no, not even that. She couldn't believe it; there was too much good in him.

Certainly kindness wasn't overflowing. And he had more than his share of hate. Living with him in her head all this time had taught her that. But there were moments when she saw through all of that. She wondered if it was all real, or if he had played a role so long he was just confused about who he was, which parts of his personality were really him, and which he had cultivated in order to aid him in his duplicity. Then again, the very few memories of him that she had caught in their Occlumency sessions had shown even as a boy, he hadn't been happy and light. But then, he had grown up seeing his mother battered. And though she had never heard him say it, she wondered if he had shared his mother's punishments...all of those scars on his body couldn't have come from his adult years.

Murderer. Killer. Evil.

The words continued to circulate in her head.

Hermione sat at the funeral, tears pouring down her face, more upset than she had been at her grandmother's funeral the summer before. Then again, Albus Dumbledore had always been a grandfatherly figure, and she had spent much more time with him over the past few years than she had her own family. Ron put an arm around her and pulled her close, and though she wished it was her husband's embrace, she welcomed the reassurance.

As she rested her head on Ron's shoulder, he tightened his arm around her, and she felt anger piercing through her. Severus's anger. She focused on him and realized he was here in the throng. Over the months she had practiced honing in on his presence, and now she could tell he wasn't far away, back behind and to the right. He was certainly not more than a hundred feet away. What was he doing here? Was he crazy?

Trying to look casual about it, Hermione lifted her head and turned a bit to look in the direction she knew Severus was. She scanned the faces but could not see him. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Fred and George sitting a couple rows back. They would pay for their tricks later, but this was not the time or place. She took a second look for Severus, then realized he wouldn't have come in his own body...not visibly anyway. It would be too dangerous.

Hermione returned her gaze to the front and, feeling her husband's jealousy, eased out of Ron's embrace. It didn't seem to matter to Severus that her feelings for Ron were strictly fraternal, so she decided to humor him. Finally, the funeral ended and she and Ron stayed in their seats to wait for the crowd to dissipate somewhat. She watched Harry and Ginny walk off and knew the talk Ginny was expecting was about the happen, so when Ron stood to follow, she held him back. As people milled about them, she turned her focus back on her husband, trying to sense his location in the crowd. She wondered if he were to walk past her, would she know it was him? If she had been alone she might have tried it just for fun.

After a few minutes she felt a hand brush her arm and a shiver went down her spine. She turned her head just in time to see a stooping man with graying hair walk past. So it was a disguise, and not invisibility that had rendered Severus able to attend. She wondered if it was a glamour or Polyjuice and made a mental note to ask him sometime.

When Hermione saw Harry and Ginny separate, she allowed Ron to walk her over in Harry's direction. They watched him hold a short, but unfriendly-looking conversation with Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, and then saw the minister stalk off. Ron kept up a steady stream of chatter as they passed not five feet from his brother Percy, not looking once in the prat's direction. Hermione had to admire his restraint.

When they caught up to Harry under the beech tree, the three of them abused the Minister and Percy for a moment. Hermione looked back at the castle, wistful, wondering what would happen next. "I can't bear the idea that we might never come back. How can Hogwarts close?"

"I'm not coming back even if it does reopen," Harry said.

Ron gaped, but Hermione understood. "I knew you were going to say that. But then, what will you do?"

"I'm going back to the Dursley's once more, because Dumbledore wanted me to," said Harry, "but it'll be a short visit, and then I'll be gone for good."

"But where will you go if you don't come back to school?"

"I thought I might go back to Godric's Hollow," Harry muttered. "For me it started there, all of it. I've just got a feeling I need to go there. And I can visit my parents' graves. I'd like that." He mentioned tracking down the Horcruxes and his fight against Voldemort. "And if I run into Severus Snape along the way, so much the better for me. So much the worse for him."

It pained Hermione to hear the words, but she couldn't argue over it. She still wasn't convinced Severus had any even moderately acceptable reasons for his actions. Besides, Harry's anger against her husband was so strong, he was past talking to anyway.

"We'll be there, Harry," said Ron.

"What?"

"At your aunt and uncle's house," said Ron. "And then we'll go with you wherever you're going."

"No..." Harry protested.

"You said to us once before," Hermione cut him off, "that there was time to turn back if we wanted to. We've had time, haven't we?" Ron hadn't discussed this with her first, but for once the two of them were in perfect accord.

"We're with you whatever happens," Ron said. "But mate, you're going to have to come round my mum and dad's house before we do anything else, even Godric's Hollow."

"Why?"

"Bill and Fleur's wedding, remember?"

"Yeah, we wouldn't want to miss that."

Thoughts of Bill and Fleur's upcoming nuptials reminded Hermione of her own binding. No one could see her ring, she used only her maiden name, and rarely spent time with her husband. Yet they were bound no less than Bill and Fleur would soon be.

If only she *felt* a bit more married.

After a few more minutes of drowsing in the perfect weather, under the shade of their favorite tree, the three friends stood and walked back up to the castle. Without a word, they all turned toward the Headmistress's office when they entered the school and, using the password Dumbledore had last used, made their way upstairs.

The door stood open and Remus Lupin sat in a chair next to the window, looking out over the grounds.

"Remus, are you the Secret Keeper?" Harry asked, walking purposefully across the room.

The man turned his head and sent the three students a sad smile. "No, but I have a note for you." He handed over a scrawled message in a handwriting Hermione didn't recognize, but which was certainly not their old professor's. It read *The headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix is Number Twelve Grimmauld Place.*

"So, who is it?" Hermione asked as she passed the note on to Ron.

Looking at Harry apologetically, Remus answered, "We're not telling anyone. The consensus is, that the fewer people who know who the Secret Keeper is, the fewer who can have the truth wrested from them. Only Professor McGonagall, myself, and the Secret Keeper know who it is."

"But it's my house," Harry objected.

"I know the house belongs to you Harry, and as such, if you insist, we will tell you. However, we would really rather not."

"He does have a point," Hermione said after considering for a moment. "If Mundungus doesn't know, he can't let it slip while drunk. Ditto for Hagrid. Everyone is safer this way. Voldemort can't learn something from you if you don't know it." *Especially me and Severus. If Voldemort knows of our relationship on any level, it is safer for him if I don't know who the Secret Keeper is.*

Harry seemed torn for a moment between wanting to insist, and his better instinct wanting to agree with the chosen course of action. Finally he nodded. "You're probably right. Speaking of Mundungus . . ."

"Yeah, we thought we might hold back for a little while before showing him the note. Impress upon him the fact that the things in the house do actually belong to you, and

not to him."

Harry smiled. "And in the mean time maybe we can come up with a more permanent solution."

"I'll work on that," Hermione offered.

"Good. Now you all best go get your trunks and things. The train will be leaving the station soon. Unless you're going home with your parents, Ron."

"No, I'll take the train. We've things to discuss." His face was flat, hiding any plans he may have in mind. Hermione was impressed.

After saying goodbye to Remus, the three of them made their way back to Gryffindor common room. Before hurrying up the stairs as the boys had done, Hermione took a moment to walk through the room touching pieces of furniture where she had sat and talked with the boys, the chair she knitted hats in, the fireplace mantel. She felt overcome with emotion at the thought of leaving this place forever. Even if a miracle happened and Voldemort was killed before August 31, there was no assurance the school would reopen anyway. The years had been difficult, dangerous, crazy and wonderful all at once. Other students milled about her, saying goodbye and talking of the funeral, but she tuned them out with barely a smile or goodbye to those who caught her attention. She didn't belong here anymore.

Holding back a sob, she hurried up the stairs to her room to collect her things. When she opened the door, Lavender was packing the last of her own items and looked over her shoulder at Hermione.

"So it was Ron, wasn't it?" Lavender asked.

"What was Ron?" Hermione's thoughts had drifted far from their conversation of only a few days earlier.

"The one who gave you those love bites. You said you thought he was like a brother, but you're nothing more than a liar." There was definite venom in her words. "It's disgusting the way you were cuddling in public at the funeral. Dumbledore would have been horrified."

"Sod off, Lavender. It wasn't Ron. You're welcome to him if you can hold him. He was only offering me comfort, and I seriously doubt the Head...Dumbledore would have disapproved. After the appalling display the two of you put on in the common room night after night for all those months, I can't believe you have the gall to be shocked at a hug."

"It isn't Ron? So you have a one-nighter with some guy you don't even care about? If you were involved with someone, why wasn't he the one offering you comfort? You know what that makes you?" Lavender stood with a nightgown clasped in one hand, which was fisted at her hip.

"So glad I will never have to be your roommate again." Hermione was far too drained to fight anymore. "Have a nice life, Lav-Lav." She grasped her trunk and exited as quickly as possible. Lavender's frustrated scream followed her down the hall. "And good riddance."

AN: Obviously a large portion of the talk after the funeral came from the end of HBP, only with my cuts and additions. From here on out we alter our route from JK's storyline drastically (as though this whole ship wasn't a drastic enough redirection of her vision already).

A big thanks to my new beta MaevePotter whose suggestions were very helpful. Hopefully her assistance will save the admins from cramping their fingers too seriously. Also, thanks to RobisonRocket for correcting this chapter.

15: Confronting the Dursleys

Chapter 15 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 15: Confronting the Dursleys

Hermione watched Harry, Ginny and Ron play Exploding Snap for most of the trip back to King's Cross, forming plans in her mind. From time to time she interrupted the game to ask Harry questions, making a mental list of things to do. Prioritizing and changing the order, calculating odds.

By the time they got off the train at the station that evening, she had everything lined up in a row...or very nearly.

"I probably should have warned my mum I'm going home with you," Ron said to Harry. "You too, Hermione."

"No, I'm going home for a couple days." Hermione adjusted the cat carrier and tugged the trunk onto its wheels.

"I thought you were coming with us. You agreed." Ron looked surprised and confused.

Harry just gave her a speculative look. "What's forming in that brilliant mind of yours?"

"I have to spend a couple days with my parents. They've been worried sick about me, and I've a few other things to arrange. I can meet you there Saturday though. I've some books to buy, research to do, plans to arrange. If you need anything, Ron can Apparate to my place, or you can send Hedwig." Hermione nudged Ron forward as he was still gaping at her. "Everyone is waiting for us, and after the delicious encounter we're about to have with the Dursleys, I need to have a chat with your dad, Ron."

"Did you just say delicious?" Harry asked. He narrowed his green eyes at her.

"Oh, yes, I'm going to enjoy it immensely." After everything they had done to Harry over the years, there was little she wanted more than a chance to put them in their place. Now she had reached her majority, she was in a position to do so, if they forced her to it.

When they came out of the passageway to the Muggle side of the station, Hermione's parents were waiting nearby. She rushed into their arms, giving hugs and kisses, offering assurances and asking how they were. Arthur stood nearby where he had been talking to her parents, and Hermione looked about for the twins. Thankfully, they weren't there, or she might have been forced to hex them on sight. It would be much more interesting, not to mention private, if she could catch them at home or work. She doubted she would dare to be as inventive in public as she might with fewer observers.

As the Weasleys began tugging at Ron's trunk, he cleared his throat and looked at Harry, then over to his parents. "Um, I thought you should know, I plan to spend some time at the Dursleys' with Harry. The next few weeks at least."

Vernon Dursley was standing nearby and turned beet red at the possibility. "You most certainly are not. You are not invited to my house. It is bad enough having him live with us without you inviting yourself over." He stalked over to the group so he could talk in a lower voice, hoping not to attract attention.

"I'll be joining Ron and Harry in a few days myself. Well, two, actually. I'll be by sometime Saturday morning with my things."

"But, Hermione, we've just got you home again." Jane Granger seemed unhappy with the idea.

"You? I don't know where you think you're going to stay, Missy. We've not the room for the other one. Where do you think you'll sleep? Dudley has the only other bedroom." Vernon looked apoplectic now.

Holding back a grin, Hermione pretended to be considering his question; she had been hoping he'd bring that up. "Well, there is always the cupboard under the stairs. Dudley could sleep there. After all, I'll only be there a few weeks, and Harry slept there for years."

Harry's lips twitched while Vernon's mouth moved but made no sound. Then Harry stepped in, obviously relishing the moment. "I'm afraid Dudley would never fit. I've not slept there for years, you know, and Dudley is at least four times my size. It's doubtful he could fit through the door."

Hermione tapped her lips with the tip of her finger and made a humming noise. "That is a consideration. Well, we'll work something out. So I'll be over before lunch Saturday..."

"YOU WILL NOT!" Vernon finally exploded.

Staying perfectly calm, and affecting a puzzled expression, Hermione answered, "Of course I will. I just said I would, didn't I? So how about we shoot for eleven, and I'll let you know if anything changes."

"YOU ARE NOT COMING TO MY HOUSE! WHAT WOULD I TELL THE NEIGHBORS?"

"Good question. You could always tell people the truth, that we're school chums of Harry's."

"No, I'm afraid that won't work," Harry said with a wave of his hand. "Everyone in the neighborhood thinks I go to a school for incurably criminal boys. You aren't a boy, Hermione."

"Yeah, and I don't think I want the whole neighborhood to think I'm a criminal either," Ron said.

"Right. So I guess we'll have to be relatives. We can be distant cousins who haven't seen Harry since he was a baby. Of course, we all would have been babies at that point. But anyway, now that we're growing up, the Dursleys have kindly allowed us to spend a few weeks visiting our cousin." Hermione had planned to take this course of action from the beginning, but couldn't help poking at Vernon a bit first.

"You're no relation of mine. I will never agree to that." Vernon's tone had dropped as he noticed all the speculative looks shooting his way. "And besides, neither of you two are coming with Harry. It's bad enough I had to raise *him* without having more of *your* lot in my home. What would I tell people about your families?"

"Ron's father works for the government, and my parents are dentists. What could be more normal than that? Besides, we wouldn't want to be known to be related to you any more than you'd relish the thought of being related to us. We're related to Harry on his father's side. And the bit about being distant relatives, Mrs. Weasley, aren't the Potters tied into your family somewhere?"

"Yes, of course, dear. James would have been my fourth cousin three times removed on my mother's side, and our second cousin once removed through marriage on Arthur's father's side."

"See, we are related!" Ron brightened at this thought and pounded Harry on the back.

"Perfect. Can't claim any wizard blood myself, but that should be good enough for anyone else. So, back to the issues at hand. Can we fit both boys' trunks in your car Mr. Dursley?"

"No need," Ron said before Vernon could answer. "We packed our things so the stuff we need right away is all in Harry's trunk and our extra books and stuff is in mine. My parents can take it home for me, and if I need some of it, I'll just pop over and pick it up."

"You won't be popping anywhere in my neighborhood," Vernon said with venom oozing from his voice. His eyes were starting to look a bit wild, however, as though he was trying to figure out how to bully his way out of this without getting hexed.

All this time Petunia had been standing by, watching the exchange like someone at a tennis game, her mouth hanging open in surprise at the young witch's gall and presumption. "That's right, he can't just pop back and forth between his house and ours. You can't do magic outside of school."

"Oh, but you see," Hermione said with a feral grin, fingering her wands so just the tip protruded from her sleeve where the Dursleys could see it. "Ron and I are of age, which means we can do all the magic we want. And on his birthday Harry...who is, I might add, a very powerful wizard...he'll be able to do magic too. And we know some rather imaginative curses."

"Hermione's a natural. She can do spells on her first try that fully qualified wizards take a lot of practice to perfect," Ron said. "And I've always said she's a bit scary."

Hermione brightened as if thrilled with the compliment. "That's true. You always have said that, haven't you?"

"Hermione Granger!" Her mother interrupted. "I did not raise my daughter to speak to her elders like this. Never mind virtual strangers."

"Sorry, Mum, but you didn't raise me to ignore injustice either, and the way these people have neglected and abused Harry is just beyond belief."

"I never laid a hand on him," Vernon said, though his eyes nearly bugged out at the suggestion.

Hermione leveled a long look at him. "Not all abuse is physical. Locking a teenager in his bedroom with little food for weeks and only letting him out for bathroom breaks does fit in most people's ideas of abuse. I wonder what your neighbors would think if they knew Harry wasn't a criminal and didn't attend a school for incurably criminal boys. There are lots of things we could tell the neighbors."

"Magical secrecy, Hermione," Arthur Weasley reminded her.

Molly Weasley's face was a mix of amusement and panic as she vacillated between enjoying the Dursleys' discomfort and worrying things might get out of hand.

"Yes, of course. Well, there are ways of shocking the neighbors without bringing magic into the mix. Of course, if the Dursleys only put up with our visit for a few weeks, we promise to keep to ourselves, stay out of their hair and not speak overmuch to their neighbors."

"That's blackmail," Vernon said.

"That's a promise." Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. She nearly smiled when she realized she was doing an apt impression of her husband.

"Very well." Vernon clenched his teeth. "See that you bring no attention to yourselves."

"Agreed." *Since it's really not in our best interest to bring attention to ourselves anyway.*

The Dursleys muttered as they stalked back to their car, Ron and Harry following right behind them. Hermione smirked, then turned to the Weasleys, who were arranging Ginny's trunk along with Ron's. "Mr. Weasley, can I speak with you for a minute? I have a quick question or two."

"Yes, of course. You go along, Molly." Arthur looked impressed and a bit bewildered. Molly Weasley turned to Ginny and helped her with her truck.

"Mum and Dad, I'll be right out to the car. Promise I won't be more than a couple minutes."

Jane Granger lifted an eyebrow at her daughter and gave her a look that indicated there would be lots of explaining going on in the next few hours. "Don't be long."

Holding back a sigh, Hermione turned back to Arthur, and they began walking out of the train station. When she was sure no one was paying attention to them, Hermione began. "I have just a couple quick questions and requests, if you can help us out. First, is Mrs. Figg's Floo connected to the network?"

"Yes, has been forever."

"Great. Harry's too young to Apparate, so I figured we may have to do some Flooing to get around here and there. Second, can you let the Ministry know that Ron and I will be living at the Dursleys for the foreseeable future and that any magic coming from that location is ours, not Harry's?"

"Of course, though they have already placed an Auror near his house for the time being to protect him. What else, Hermione?"

Aurors. Wonderful. That should make things interesting. "Well, I've been thinking. I know the Dursleys only have the three bedrooms, but I figured if you could see about borrowing one of those tents that we used for the Quidditch World Cup, I could stay in the back yard. That would alleviate some of the space issues and give the three of us somewhere private to talk, once I've applied appropriate wards to the tent, of course."

Arthur smiled "Got it all figured out, have you?"

"Not quite, but I'm getting there. One more question; are the twins still living above their shop?"

"Yes, though Molly has had them coming home at night the past few days. This whole thing has spooked her, you know. I don't imagine it will last much longer."

Hermione's smile grew feral. "What time do they get up in the morning? I have a bit of unfinished business I need to conduct with them."

Arthur looked as though he wasn't sure he wanted to answer her, but did so anyway. "They get up around eight."

"Great. Expect me about 7:30. Oh, and tell Molly I'd be happy to help her with the wedding in any way she may need."

"Right. I'll see about that tent when we get home tonight."

"I'd appreciate it."

They walked out into the hot and humid evening air. Hermione said goodbye to Mr. Weasley before turning toward the aisle where her mother stood waving her over.

"What was that all about?" her mother asked when they fell into step together.

"Just some housekeeping items." She looked over at her mother and noticed the dark smudges under the woman's eyes. That made Hermione feel worse than her recent bout against Vernon Dursley ever would. She hated that she caused her parents so much stress. "I'm sorry I've made you worry so much. I know the past couple days must have been horrible for you. I just couldn't leave before the funeral. I couldn't."

"I know that, honey. I can't imagine what you've been through, having your professor attack your Headmaster like that. That Snape must be a deeply horrible person."

"Funny how that keeps coming up." *And now I really can't introduce my parents to him. How would I ever explain, even if I decide he's not quite as guilty as he appears? What have I gotten myself into?*

AN: This chapter was so much fun to write. I hope you enjoy it too! Thanks to my reviewers, and thanks again to my beta, MaevePotter!

16: Getting Even

Chapter 16 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 16: Getting Even

That night Hermione sat in her childhood bed with the Tinkerbell table lamp glowing beside her. If she'd had any idea what fairies were really like when she was a kid, she would never have bought the thing. But as it was a reminder of her youthful enchantment with magic, Hermione hadn't bothered to replace it. Especially as she rarely came home for more than a couple weeks at a time.

Her mother had peppered her with questions about her involvement in the events the night Severus had killed the Headmaster. She asked about Hermione's summer plans and what would happen the following school year. Hermione was honest about the school possibly not opening again, but hadn't mentioned her intention to skip the year to go Horcrux hunting. If she didn't take her N.E.W.T.s, she would find her job prospects very narrow. But there was no reason she couldn't prepare for the tests on her own. She added a mental note to head to Diagon Alley for seventh-year textbooks as soon as she reasonably could...the next day if possible.

Her fingers tapped on the cover of the diary. Did she want to open it? She had studiously ignored it for the past few days, but she did need to make contact with Severus soon to make arrangements to meet with him the next night. She had no idea how she would explain her absence to her parents as they already knew she wasn't meeting

the boys at the Dursleys' until the following morning.

With a sigh she flipped the book open to the place where she had last written in it. There were a few entries, all dated, strangely enough. He must have gotten irritated that she didn't respond and made sure she knew which one was written which day. The last time she had written him, it had been the early hours of Tuesday. It was now Thursday evening.

Tuesday night

Hermione, can you get away for the night Friday? I'd like us to have plenty of time to think and talk together, and I'm afraid an hour or two won't suffice.

Wednesday morning

Hermione, did you receive my message? I don't think a 24-hour period has passed since the potion when we haven't been in contact. I need to know about Friday.

Wednesday night

Where are you?

Thursday evening

Have you changed your mind about tomorrow? We really do need to speak, and I wouldn't want you to suffer any hardships from the bond, due to our separation.

Hermione interpreted that to mean *he* was getting physically anxious. The truth was she did find herself jittery today. Nearly three days without her Severus Snape fix was wearing on her, and she knew he felt the same way.

I'm here, Severus. Yes, we still need to meet tomorrow. I don't know if I can get away for that long. Or maybe I'll have to wait until after my parents go to bed. They already know I'm not expected at the Dursleys' until Saturday morning.

The Dursley's? Why are you going to the place where Saint Potter grew up?

Hermione smiled to herself when his words instantly started to appear on the page. His snark nearly leapt of the pages.

Ron and I decided to spend a few weeks with Harry. It'll give us time to work on . . .things. Projects and all that.

I probably don't want to know. The less I know the better, if it has anything to do with what the Headmaster and Potter were doing away from the castle that night. I'm not sure I like the idea of you being at the Dursleys'. How safe will you really be there?

Considering that the home is protected from Vol...the Dark Lord and his minions, I imagine it's probably about the safest place on earth for us right now. Even you can't reach me there.

Granted. Are you sure you don't want to meet tonight? I could come to you. I long to touch you, to slide my hands across your skin. Put my mark on that sensitive patch of skin just below your collar bone.

Despite the fact that she was still angry, his words still affected her. *Stop, please stop before you send my blood pressure through the roof.* Hermione imagined he was chuckling on his end now. He was such a berk sometimes. Still, if she had demurred and pretended not to be affected by the images now dancing in her head, he would know better. And he was getting every bit as excited as she was.

This was supposed to be a meeting of the minds, Severus, not a chance to get off.

Get both of us off, don't forget. And we will talk, especially if you have the night to spend in my arms. It's the only way to take care of both our problems at once. Speaking of blood pressure, what were you doing in Weasley's arms today?

Hermione sighed. She had known this was coming up.

He's my friend, remember? I needed someone to lean on, and my husband was across the crowd hiding so the Aurors wouldn't cart him off to Azkaban.

He doesn't think of you as only a friend, my wife.

Doubtful, but it matters little what he thinks of me, as I am forever tied to the bat of the dungeons. What's more, I don't want anyone but you. Surely you could tell that I wasn't interested in him, that I felt nothing but friendship for him. I needed someone to hold onto. How can you deny me my friends when you've made it impossible for me to collect that comfort from you?

I am no sympathetic man anyway.

Right, I forget. You're deeply horrible.

Why did that come across sarcastic?

Because you're wearing off on me. Look, I'll see what I can do about getting away and let you know before dinnertime tomorrow. I have some plans tomorrow that need to be taken care of. Starting with an early visit with Fred and George Weasley. It is way past time they had their comeuppance.

That's a memory I might have to see. I'll have a Muggle motel room reserved. Come as early as you can and stay all night if you can arrange it.

I'll let you know. Goodnight.

The next day she showed up at the Burrow, wand in hand. It was still early morning; early enough Hermione was hoping to catch Mr. Weasley before he left for work to check on that tent and discuss a couple other things she'd thought of over night.

Molly opened the door with a warm smile. "Hermione dear, it's so good to see you. I hope you are well?"

"Very well. Is Ginny up? How about Mr. Weasley? I'd like to speak with them, if there's time."

Molly looked surprised, but nodded. "Of course, I'll get Arthur. Ginny will still be in bed asleep, you can go up and give her a shake if you like."

"I think I will." Hermione Apparated up to Ginny's room and nudged her. "Gin, wake up."

"What's going on?" Ginny rubbed her eyes and yawned. "Been to see Harry yet?"

Hermione smiled at Ginny's question, it hadn't been twenty-four hours since she spoke with him last. "No. Thought I might pop by this afternoon just for the fun of harassing the Dursleys again. But I have other business to see to first."

"Business. You sound just like the twins. Everything's business to them. They spent the whole evening telling me about their newest products."

"Speaking of the twins." Hermione allowed a sadistic smile to come over her face. "Your dad said they were staying here sometimes?"

"Yeah, they keep talking about returning to their flat over the store, but then Mum cries about how she's losing all her babies and they let the subject drop a little longer. They came home last night." She looked into Hermione's face for the first time and lifted a brow. "If that look's for them, I'm glad I'm me. You look scary."

"They're going to be sorry they were ever born." She smirked, then left the room and crossed the hall to where the twins slept.

It was still early enough she had high hopes of catching them still abed. The question was which of her many, many fantasies of revenge to use first. She slipped the wand from her sleeve and opened their bedroom door silently.

Morning was not the twins' best time of day. She knew this not only from seeing them in the common room first thing in the morning for all those years, but also from the times she had stayed at the Burrow. If they were due at the shop at eight-thirty, they wouldn't be up until eight. And it was only a little past seven-thirty now.

Two lumps in the beds told her they were still sleeping, though she couldn't see even a hint of their skin or hair. The question was which brother to pick on first, since she couldn't do them both at the same time. Then again, since she couldn't tell which was which without seeing them, she doubted it mattered much.

With a flick of her wrist, one of the twins, Fred she realized when he let out a yelp, rose from the bed by his ankle. She had him spin a few circles in the air, then stuck him to the ceiling in nothing but his underwear. Thankfully, their room had a high ceiling. George was just peeking out of the covers when she gave him similar treatment. Boxers this time. Not a detail she really cared to know, but she worked on ignoring it as she considered her next move. "So many options, so little time."

"What's going on?" Fred asked, wide awake now and staring daggers at her. "What's the deal 'Mione?"

George let a few expletives fly. "We were sleeping. We've been putting in loads of hours at the shop. Give us a break."

"Yes, and I was moving happily along in my life until your interference. You had to make things difficult though, didn't you?" She really was feeling much nicer about the whole prank thing now, or she was until Severus killed Dumbledore. It had renewed her irritation with the twins. If it hadn't been for them, she wouldn't have the extra worry about whether or not Severus was telling her the truth or was playing her. She wouldn't worry constantly if he would end the day still breathing. All of the hiding, sneaking around and confusion were their fault. Still, she couldn't feel bad about placing the blame squarely on their shoulders without giving them credit for her tingling excitement when Severus pulled her close and kissed her.

Of course, she enjoyed being in love most of the time. She couldn't find much fault there, or wouldn't under different circumstances. Seeing as how they had figured their prank would be nothing but harmless fun, she thought they deserved a little lesson.

"Our interference?" Fred spluttered. "But we hadn't heard anything for so long, we thought you were finally happy with your soul mate. You didn't even hex us at the funeral. And the way you were cuddled up to Ron made us think you had worked out your problem."

"Ron isn't my soul mate. And please, like I would cause a scene at Dumbledore's funeral. What kind of person do you think I am?" She twisted her wand twice, and they each fell in turn onto their beds again. Then she conjured two large buckets of ice cold water from thin air and dumped it on them. She still stood in the door way, out of harm's way.

"A sadistic one," George told her through his chattering teeth.

"Oh, come now. I thought you would both appreciate getting baths this morning, I just saved you some time." She smiled as a new thought occurred to her. Remembering what she had done to Marietta Edgecomb in her fifth year, she gave each of them a new look. Their freckles changed colors, flashing from one to the next, each spot rotating through the spectrum like a circus ride. Marietta's had all been purple and formed the word SNEAK across her face. They had also lasted for months despite anything Madam Pomfrey could do.

"And you could each use a new look. That should do it. Don't worry, unlike what you did to me, your spots will return to normal color again. Eventually." She walked out the door, slamming it behind her with magic and returned to the kitchen, a new spring in her step. Considering the fates she had thought up for the two of them, the colored spots were positively generous. Of course, they may not agree when the rotating colors continued on their skin for the next six months at least. And that was if they didn't try to remove them magically...which they were certain to do. That last bit was inspired by their fireworks, which multiplied with every attempt to destroy them. Only in this case she figured they had enough spots already, so lengthening the duration was the best bet.

"Mr. Weasley, I'm so glad I caught you." Hermione spotted him as soon as she entered the kitchen.

"Sit, Hermione, join us for breakfast. There's always enough to go around," Molly invited and Hermione agreed.

Ginny sat blinking over her cup of tea. "What's going on?"

Charlie had come down as well. The second-oldest Weasley brother returned to Britain after Dumbledore's demise, wanting to be on hand to help the Order now that it was well known that Voldemort was back. He grinned at Hermione and offered her a seat next to him.

Hermione poked around the edges of the topic of the Horcruxes, asking for more information, hypothesizing and getting feedback without letting the older two men know what the actual subject was. They both looked completely baffled by her questions. She made a note to ask Bill about curses that might be on the objects when he was feeling better and then turned the subject to defensive spells for her to work on with the boys. Hermione was just putting away the paper when the twins came scowling down the stairs.

Molly, whose back was toward the boys, spoke over her shoulder. "I didn't expect you for another twenty minutes. Have some tea or coffee and I'll get something whipped up."

"What happened to your faces?" Ginny asked with a grin, staring at the rotating colors.

Hermione took a sip of her coffee, keeping her expression as bland as possible.

"Hermione did it. We can't get it off, either. We spent five minutes trying to get the bloody spots to return to normal."

After allowing a sly smile to cross her face, Hermione tipped her head. "I figure you just upped the life of your 'ailment' by a good, hmmm, twenty percent. You'd be better off letting it alone."

"How long are we talking here?" Fred asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Do you remember Marietta Edgecomb? She may still wear her makeup thicker than normal." She figured it was an exaggeration, or might be anyway, but didn't worry about correcting the perception.

Both men looked horrified.

"What have you two done?" Molly demanded. Obviously she decided Hermione wouldn't have attacked them without cause.

Both Fred and George looked at their mother, looked at Hermione, then back at each other. Fred spoke up. "Nothing. Nothing you need to worry about. Obviously our Hermione can give as good as she gets."

"I wouldn't concern myself about it if I were you, Mum," George added.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Weasley. They'll think twice before trying anything like it again. I promise you. This," she waved a hand toward the boys, "is nothing compared to the havoc I could have wrought. In fact, they're lucky I didn't see them months ago." She shot a glare in their directions. "I had much more inventive ideas I decided against using. Your mother didn't deserve that kind of heartache."

"Don't worry, we won't make that mistake again." Fred spoke, but George nodded his enthusiastic agreement.

Molly looked at Hermione with a touch of admiration before turning her back on the lot of them to finish preparing breakfast.

"That was brilliant, Hermione. Nobody gets the better of those two." Charlie's eyes sparkled at her over his coffee cup, and Hermione grinned back before returning her attention to her own cup.

She wondered how long it would be before Ron and Charlie got the story out of the twins. Not long enough, that was for sure.

AN: Thanks to all my reviewers, you are the best! I'm glad to hear you are enjoying the story and hope her revenge on the Weasley twins didn't disappoint.

A big thanks to my beta, MaevePotter, and the RobisonRocket for preparing my story for validation.

17: Face to Face

Chapter 17 of 51

See Chapter 1

AN: Just a quick note. This was written before Deathly Hallows came out, and I decided not to change the sections that don't comply with canon, as changing one bit would require changing lots of bits, and it wasn't worth the hassle. You are forewarned.

Chapter 17: Face to Face

As evening approached, Hermione grew more and more anxious about meeting Severus. She could sneak out after her parents went to bed at ten, she supposed, but then they would worry if they woke up and came to check on her. Normally she wouldn't worry about it, but she had still been awake when her mother had tiptoed in to check on her the previous night. She wondered if it was because of the war and what happened to Dumbledore or if her mother had always checked on her during school breaks. She didn't remember it happening before.

If she told them she was going out, they would worry most of the night, but at least then her mother wouldn't freak out if she checked in and Hermione simply wasn't there. Telling them the honest truth would certainly not do. Strangely enough, she didn't think things would go over well if she waltzed in and said, "Mum, hope you don't mind but I'm going to see my husband tonight. He recently murdered the Headmaster, but it's OK because I think he might have a justifiable reason, maybe, and I'm sure he won't hurt *me*."

She decided to split the difference between truth and lies. She walked into the kitchen when she heard her mother's car pull into the drive and found her bringing in bags of groceries. "Can I help you with that?"

"That would be great, honey. There are several more out there. I bought pork chops for dinner tonight, I know how much you like them." Her mum blew at an errant curl dangling by her eye.

Smiling, Hermione reached out and tucked the lock of hair behind her mum's ear, then headed to the car for some bags. There were only a few left, and her mum brought the last two in behind her. As Hermione began unloading fresh vegetables into the crisper, she wondered how to turn the conversation. Suddenly, there was a tap at the window, and Hermione turned to see the familiar sight of Viktor Krum's spotted owl. She hadn't written back to the Bulgarian Seeker since his letter a couple weeks before. With term finals coming up and everything that had happened at Hogwarts, she hadn't even thought about writing him back.

She opened the window and let the owl in. "Hey there, Sparticus, I'm sure we've got something here you'd like." Hermione detached the letter from the owl's leg and reached for the ever-present bowl of owl snacks her parents kept handy for when she sent notes to them.

The owl took the treat, then hopped back to the windowsill and with a flap of his wings, soared out into the evening air. Hermione stuck the letter in her back pocket and helped put away the groceries, then took a moment at her mum's behest to look the letter over. He opened with his regrets and concerns about the events that had recently overtaken Hogwarts and his best wishes for her health and safety. Hermione smiled when she saw the Viktor was planning a visit to England later that summer. She laughed over a story he told about a recent Quidditch match, then rolled the note up again, making a mental note to write him back soon.

"That Viktor sure has been persistent."

Surprised by the words, Hermione turned to her mother. "What do you mean?"

"I didn't expect him to still be writing you two years after the tournament, not with all those women you say flock around him." Her mother's eyes twinkled teasingly.

Hermione tried to decide what to say in response to her mother's insinuations. "Viktor and I have only ever been friends, and that's not about to change. He doesn't see me like that anymore." She pursed her lips and felt her brow furrow. "I'm not really sure he ever felt that way in the first place, though I suppose there must have been some youthful infatuation. Anyway, I just heard from another friend who is going through a rough time and needs someone to talk to tonight. I really need to go. I promise I'll be perfectly safe."

The disappointment in her mother's eyes was almost too much for Hermione to bear. "Honey, I thought you would be here tonight. I was counting on it. We hardly ever see you anymore. And I'm making one of your favorite dinners."

Grabbing the closest knife, Hermione began cutting florets off the bunch of broccoli her mother had just washed. "I'm sorry, I'm planning on staying here until nine or so, then I can pop over for the night. We'll have dinner and a nice talk first. And now I've got my Apparition license I can come visit regularly. I know the visit's been much shorter than either of us would like, but I have responsibilities I need to take care of."

She heard her mother open the freezer door, move stuff around, and close the door again. "I just worry about you. I feel like you belong to a world completely removed from the one we live in; one that has so many dangers that I didn't understand when you first started at that school. How thick is your file at the hospital wing by now, half a foot?"

Hermione chuckled despite herself. Being the best friend to the future savior of the wizarding world had come with a significant amount of danger. She touched her thumb to the inside of her wedding band, reflecting that not all of the danger had come from her friends. "It's not quite that bad, but there are quite a few pages in there. Minor accidents are common enough though, even in the Muggle world."

"Yes, but how many of your primary school friends have been petrified by a giant snake or had to have their teeth shrunk after a spell made them grow as big as elephant tusks?"

"They were only walrus length," Hermione demurred, then laughed lightly and switched from broccoli to cauliflower. "Point taken. But those injuries are comparatively minor in our world. Quickly repaired."

"Not so quickly, you spent months as a statue."

"Er, right." Hermione decided it was definitely time for a change of subject before her mum mentioned the month or so she spent in the body of a cat. "So anyway, I promise to come back regularly this summer, but after everything that's happened, my friend really needs to talk about some things."

"Your friend, huh? A roommate?" Her mother's raised brows showed she didn't buy it for a second.

Hermione turned away to pull some carrots from the icebox. She could feel a hum of lust running through her that was not her own. "Yeah, we've roomed together. *As much as you can call the few nights we've snatched here and there since we were married. How I hate keeping it all a secret from you, Mum. Then again, how could I possibly explain something I don't completely understand myself?*

"Didn't you see her yesterday?"

"Things have been happening too quickly to..." Hermione stopped when she saw the twinkle in her mother's eye.

"I'll let you be and you be careful when you visit what's-his-name, your sort of roommate. These are adult decisions you are making now, Hermione, and I don't want you to make any mistakes. You are an adult in your world, and very nearly one in mine. Just be careful and take precautions. I remember what it was like to be young and in love. It's not Ron Weasley, is it?"

"No, Mum, it's not, my friend is, well, hmmm." She ran her left thumb over the inside of her invisible wedding band. *My soul mate, my husband, that deeply horrible person who killed the Headmaster, twenty years my senior, very good at the dark arts and an accomplished liar.* What was she supposed to say, anyway? Her mother may accept the first descriptor as a bit of adolescent dramatics, but it would certainly lead to more questions, and the other descriptors would probably send her mum into cardiac arrest. Besides, her mother's calm acceptance of her possible sex life surprised Hermione. Her parents had been fairly open on the subject over the past few years, but there had still been plenty of discouragement on their parts to indicate they felt she should stay chaste.

"Do you love him?"

"Yes." *To my possible ruin.*

"That's what I thought. Now, let's get dinner started."

Hermione's hands were slightly damp when she walked into the motel parking lot a few hours later. He had sent the room number through her diary, so she walked over and lifted her hand to knock on number 145. She could feel Severus's presence humming through the door, his anticipation, anxiety and desire curling around her. Before her knuckles touched the door, it opened. The person opposite her didn't look anything like Severus Snape, but she could tell that it was him through the bond.

He opened the door completely and motioned for her to come in. Hermione stepped forward, but the second she was through the doorway he shut it behind her and blocked her between himself and the door. A murmured ward, a Silencing Charm and another to end his glamour, then he addressed her as himself. "I was starting to wonder if you were going to come." He swooped down and took possession of her lips.

The need churning through her was blistering as his lips slid across hers and attacked her neck while his hands slid up her arms, shoulders and into her hair. His lips returned to hers and she opened to him, acting on sheer emotion. As his fingers threaded deeper into her hair, she pulled back. "Wait, we need to talk," she protested.

"In a minute," he rasped and his mouth was on hers again. Her whole body thrummed and she lost herself in the kiss.

Hermione didn't come to her senses until his hands were on the skin of her waist, beneath her blouse and he had maneuvered her half way across the room to the bed. She pushed back again. "Wait. Stop. We have to talk. Really." They both panted as he put a few inches between them, though he didn't relinquish his hold on her waist.

His forehead touched hers as they both tried to regain control. He growled and let out a shuddering breath. "I really don't want to stop."

"Me neither," she admitted. It would do no good to lie; he could see through it easily enough.

"Then remind me why we're stopping."

"We have to. There's too much to talk about, and I don't want to go there with you again until I understand."

They stood there for a long moment, their breathing slowing to nearly normal and the overpowering desire thrumming through their link settling down to a low roar. Finally, he pulled his hands away, allowing her to straighten her shirt, walk to a nearby chair, intentionally avoiding the bed.

He sat across the aisle from her on the edge of the bed, his knee only inches from hers. Severus had drawn his eyebrows together, a scowl evident on his face, as if it was costing him a great deal of self control. "What is it you want to know?"

Hermione clasped her hands around her knee and willed her voice to be calm. "We can start with what shaped you to be the kind of man who would think following the Dark Lord sounded like a Really Good Idea."

He shook his head in disbelief, but she didn't feel the anger in him that she had expected, only resignation. "You don't want much, do you?"

"Only the world. I wouldn't pry, but given your actions this week, I have to know. I have to understand how you could justify your actions. It's the only way I can trust you

again."

"How do you know I'll tell you the truth?" His eyes peered into hers.

She considered him for a moment. "You can tell when I'm splitting hairs. I think I've learned something about you as well. That doesn't mean I won't get any half truths, but I suppose I'll have to trust you a little. What will our marriage be if I can't trust you at all?"

He frowned. "What kind of marriage is it now when we only see each other every few days and can't admit to anyone that it exists? If it wasn't for this," he lifted his hands, tapping his wedding ring, "I would often wonder if it wasn't all some cruel joke."

"Cruel that you could be stuck with me?" Though she felt she wasn't overly given to dramatics, Hermione had to know what he thought.

"Cruel as in something that can be taken away with nothing more than a word, or rather, two words. I realize it's actually the potion that draws us ever nearer, and I sometimes wish it could have been your choice. You are young and ought to be living carefree, but you are instead stuck in this sham of a marriage in the midst of war."

His point was valid. What kind of marriage was it? What did she want it to be? Did she even know? She rubbed her thumb over her wedding band. "How can I know what I want, what we might someday have, if you won't let me know who you really are?"

"I will die before this war is over, Hermione. If not, I'll spend what is left of my hideous life in Azkaban, and we will both slowly wilt away and teeter into madness from separation. There is nothing for us. We were a lost cause before we even began."

"I find your sunny outlook overwhelming."

He smiled wanly. "You said you wanted honesty. Here you go."

Severus spent the next two hours talking about his childhood, the abuse, the neglect, his friendless years at Hogwarts and the continued mistreatment from fellow students. He detailed the smooth way he was befriended by a Death Eater and his desperation for recognition, for validation. And then when Voldemort met him, the man was so flattering, charming and welcoming that Severus hadn't seen the truth until it was too late.

He talked of taking the mark and the slow spiral as things fell apart, and as he saw what was really going on around him, as he was asked to do things that were progressively more depraved and disturbing. The things he had been asked to do hadn't bothered Severus at first, as they had seemed fairly innocuous. He was so flattered that the leader of the Death Eaters seemed interested in him, and found Severus' spell work fresh and exciting. And when Lord Voldemort found out about Severus returning home and poisoning his father to avenge his mother's death, the man had laughed and congratulated him on taking revenge on the man who had tormented him, just as the former Tom Riddle had done himself. It had cemented his position in the Dark Lord's ranks.

"Then I reported the prophecy to the Dark Lord and the Potters were killed. I hadn't planned on that, on causing it." By now he had removed the heavy outer jacket and vest he had worn when he answered the door and was left in only his shirtsleeves, an informality Hermione was starting to think he only allowed himself when he was alone with her.

She thought he was sincere, though the myriad emotions running through both of them confused her and made it impossible to be certain. She wanted to understand him, to believe, but some things didn't add up. "But you hated James Potter, Remus even talked about how much you loathed him. Why would that matter to you? You already admitted to having killed people. What was it about these two deaths that mattered so much?"

"I hated James Potter, yes. But by this time I was growing disillusioned by the Dark Lord's promises. He was growing erratic, punishing people when they made the smallest infraction and his purported cause was not what he was really fighting for. I was starting to wonder what I was fighting for. No matter what the younger Potter told you about a memory of mine he saw in the Pensieve, I didn't hate Lily. I always felt a little badly about the way I treated her because she was one of the few people who treated me decently."

Hermione tried to figure out what he was referring to, tipping her head to the side. "What are you talking about? What scene in the Pensieve?"

Severus looked surprised, then wary, then surprised again. "He didn't tell you why I refused to give him any more lessons last year? Why I kicked him out? He said he wouldn't but I didn't believe it."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione internally berated Harry for glossing over the truth with a lie. Not that she should be surprised, if she had infuriated Severus, she would probably make up some excuse not to have to go back too. "He told us you thought he was doing fine on his own and didn't need any more lessons."

"Figures. So you don't know about the scene he saw of his father humiliating me in front of the whole school and Lily defending me?"

Hermione blinked, so that was what happened. Now she wanted to know something about the scene Harry had only alluded to. "No. Well, he indicated that his father and Sirius treated you badly, humiliated you for no good reason. It disturbed him, really. He even Flooed to headquarters to ask about the memory, though he never explained what happened. He wanted an accounting from Sirius and Remus for their behavior. For his father's behavior. I know that much from what I overheard. I got the feeling he wasn't very satisfied with the results." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Now, tell me about this memory."

She sensed his confusion, but there was no hesitation in his answer. "Not a chance. There are some things that are too painful to recall, even to someone we trust."

Hermione ignored how sore she was from sitting so long while they spoke. "Are you saying you trust me?"

"I have to trust someone. I brought you here, didn't I? Took the chance you wouldn't bring the Aurors down on my head." He took her hand in his, turned it over and rubbed his thumb across her palm, sending shivers down her back. "That's a very rare thing, Hermione."

She considered his words for a long moment, then decided he was right. The Severus Snape she knew didn't trust anyone, and in his current position, he couldn't afford to be wrong about someone. "So you went to the Headmaster after the Potters were killed?"

"Before. When I learned they became targets it was the last straw, but that was before they were attacked. I warned him to hide the family that night. As you said, the Headmaster wouldn't have believed me solely on my feelings about the Potters. He was well aware of my animosity toward James. No, the reason he trusted me was because my vow to Narcissa wasn't the first I ever took. Back before the Potters were attacked, several months before that night, actually, I came to the Headmaster's office to confess my role among the Death Eaters and to warn him to keep the Potters safe."

He detailed his experiences that night. He had expected nothing better than Azkaban. After all, Dumbledore was the man who had made him keep silent after Sirius had sent him to what would have been certain death at Remus's claws and teeth. Severus had never received fair treatment by anyone, and he hadn't expected this to change.

To his surprise the Headmaster hadn't immediately restrained Severus and called in the Aurors when Severus revealed that he was a Death Eater. Instead he had continued to sit quietly, occasionally asking questions for clarification, but never giving his thoughts away. Knowing that he would have to repeat everything he said to the Aurors, Severus had tried to provide as much information on the Dark Lord's movements and whereabouts as he could while implicating himself as little as possible...not that he ever expected to survive Azkaban.

He described his surprise when Dumbledore offered him a way out. A trade, for his own protection.

"I didn't believe it at first. This man had allowed the Marauders to get away with only a slap on the wrist after I was nearly killed, but he was willing to give me a chance...if it suited his needs. It wasn't a very palatable opportunity; spying is the kind of work that is far more likely to bring about torture and death than exoneration. But then, a lifetime in Azkaban was far from tempting."

"And so you became a spy," Hermione said in a low whisper. She was trying to take it all in, to process her emotions, his. To figure out how much truth he was feeding her, and how much of it was hedging. There was some hedging, she knew that. There were some pieces missing from his story, though she was sure the things he had said were, if not the whole truth, at least a credible variation of the truth.

"And so I became a spy, but as I said, the Headmaster didn't take me on my word that I wanted to be on his side. He required an Unbreakable Vow from me that I would support his cause, follow his orders, and spend my life working to defeat Voldemort."

"Then how was it you could kill him?" Hermione watched Severus flinch when she said the word 'kill.'

"I was ordered to do so. He told me I would have to kill him if there was no way around it. When I came to him with the news of my vow to Narcissa, Albus told me I must follow through if Draco didn't succeed. He said my intelligence of what was happening in the Dark Lord's camp was too valuable, and despite all my efforts to put a stopper in death, he was already dying."

Hermione sucked in a surprised breath at that pronouncement. Then she listened as he explained the effects of the curse that had caused the withering of Dumbledore's hand, and how the disease was slowly spreading, and his own efforts to keep the Order's leader alive.

When he finished, they both sat in silence for a long moment. Hermione could tell he was giving her time to absorb his words. It all made a certain amount of sense, and she could feel his sincere anguish and loss over Dumbledore's demise, yet she still felt a slight hedging in him. The question was whether to trust him and go with the explanation, which part of her screamed for her to do, or whether to prod a bit more and see what else was hiding. The lusty, potion-driven part of her said there had already been too much talk, but she pushed that away and looked into the blank mask that was his face. "What aren't you telling me?"

There was no change in expression. "I've told you everything I can, Hermione. Everything you need to know. I'd show you a Pensieve of the memories, but I don't happen to have one on me." His voice was a bit acerbic, his hands clenched at his side.

Everything he can, everything I need to know. So why the deception? What are you hiding in there, Severus? She stood and walked to the far wall where a painting of a fawn in a forest clearing hung over a long, dark bureau. The irrelevant thought that fawns never hung out in clearings alone like that, in danger's path, crossed her mind. Then Hermione pushed it aside. *How far do I trust him? Do I trust him? What he's told me is true, I think, but what about the things he's holding back? I have no reason to fear him for myself.* That one thing was certain. He was no threat to her. The question was whether he was a threat to anyone else she knew and loved, to the cause she had embraced so completely.

When she sensed his deepening worry, she turned back to him. His face was as impassive as ever, but his emotions were clear and his concern wasn't for his own life if he didn't succeed in convincing her. It wasn't all about his need to satisfy the enchantment, though there was a definite need tugging at both of them. It was a need to be believed. Simply to be trusted at his word. Though she wasn't sure how far that trust extended, she decided to give him what she could.

"Where are your loyalties, Severus?"

"I want the Dark Lord gone forever. I want a lifetime with you without his enslavement. His promises are nothing but dust, the future of the wizarding world with him in charge is one of slavery and despair for us all."

There was nothing but truth in his words, and though they were limited in scope, she decided to take what she could for now. She walked over to stand before him, then took his hand in her own. "I believe you."

He tugged on her arm, pulling her down into his lap and buried his face in her hair. Hermione felt his relief and a tiny tingle of something else from him, something that felt suspiciously like joy.

AN One more huge thanks to my reviewers. You are a great support. Also, thanks to MaevePotter for betaing for me and Southern_Witch_69 for her corrections.

18: Settling in at the Dursleys

Chapter 18 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 18: Settling in at the Dursleys

When Hermione popped over to the Weasleys' after leaving her husband's arms the next morning, she felt refreshed and reassured. There was still a lot of ground to cover between Severus and herself, but the hours they had spent talking the previous night, along with their other activities, made her hope they would work things out in the end.

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said when she was allowed inside.

"Hello, Hermione, dear. Have you eaten this morning?"

"Yes, thank you." Hermione remembered her intimate breakfast in bed that morning and had to hold back a grin. "How is everyone today?"

"We're all well. I haven't spoken with Ron since he and Harry headed to the Dursleys'. Can you have him contact me to let me know all is well when you see them today?"

"I'd be happy to. I suppose the twins are working now." She didn't bother to stop her smirk this time.

"Yes, though they didn't spend the night. They seemed to decide they better get out of your reach before you decided you let them off too easily." Mrs. Weasley gave her a speculative look. "No one could get them to say why they earned your wrath. Even Charlie couldn't get it out of them, and they usually tell him everything."

"I don't expect that will last too long, unfortunately."

Mrs. Weasley smiled back. "I hope not, the suspense will kill me. Now, Arthur left you the tent for your stay at the Dursleys', and I packed up some food, since I'm sure those people won't feed you properly."

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Weasley."

"Not at all. You and Harry are as much a part of the family as Ron. Let me know if you need anything else, and do come to dinner sometime early next week so we can see you."

Hermione smiled, knowing that would play right into Ginny's hands. She wondered if it had been Ginny's suggestion in the first place. "I'll let you know which night and bring the boys along. I'm afraid my own culinary skills are nowhere near your own. And then there's the boys. Harry and Ron can peel potatoes fine, I suppose. I'm not sure I trust them much beyond that."

Laughing, Mrs. Weasley handed Hermione a book, *The Witch's Guide to Complete Home Maintenance and Cooking*. "You can take this."

"Thanks, that will come in handy." Hermione grinned up at the woman who was very nearly as dear to her as her own mother. "I'd best get going. There's plenty to do yet today."

"Don't forget to write soon."

"We won't." Hermione hefted the tent bag and box of food in her arms and let Mrs. Weasley open the door for her. In a moment she was appearing in the Dursleys' back yard.

"What was that?" Petunia Dursley called only a second after the crack of Apparition.

Hermione set her things on the grass and walked up to the door, where Petunia was standing.

"Oh, it's you." Petunia's long, horsey face looked even more sour when she recognized Hermione than she had before...if that was possible. "Look, we told you there isn't room for you to stay here."

"Problem solved. I've brought a tent. Your back yard is plenty large enough for me to move it every few days so it won't hurt your grass. It isn't a very large tent anyway, and Harry and Ron can spend most of their time outside with me, so they won't be under foot. I'd even be happy to help take care of the back yard, to make things easier for you." Now that she had gotten her way, Hermione figured it would be easier to make things as painless as possible for her 'hosts'. It certainly wouldn't hurt to try. Weeding under cover of darkness, using her wand, of course, would take no time at all.

"This will be a *normal* tent, won't it? Not some freaky looking thing that will draw the neighbors' attention." Petunia's eyes glittered with suspicion.

"It's a wizarding tent, but it'll look mundane enough from the outside. I'll set up some charms that will make any nosey neighbors forget their interest in it. I promise it won't draw more than the slightest attention from your neighbors." Hermione knew it was awful of her to take that snippy tone, but she really had no patience for the woman and her ridiculous behavior.

Petunia sniffed. "And I suppose you expect me to feed you."

"No, of course not. Ron's mum has sent some food; we can buy groceries, and we'll get take out the rest of the time. We won't be a bother, I assure you."

"Just having you here is a bother. I assure you."

Not having the patience to deal with the irritating woman, Hermione stepped up and, since Petunia so kindly hurried back, as though Hermione were her personal boggart, she entered the sterile-looking home. "Could you get Harry for me? I'd appreciate it."

The woman looked horrified and insulted: first Hermione sullies her spotless house, then she orders her around. "Harry, get in here, now!"

"Yes, Aunt Petunia." His voice floated from somewhere near the front of the house, and a moment later Hermione saw him round the hallway as he came to join them. "Hermione, right on time." He smiled at her, though she could tell he was still struggling with Dumbledore's death, as they all were. She pulled him into a hug and squeezed him tight.

"We have some figuring to do, don't we?" She pulled back and looked over him. His clothes were old and ill-fitting; he looked tired as though he hadn't slept well and she wondered if the clothes were wrinkled because he had pulled them from the floor or because he had slept in them. It had only been two days.

"Yeah, too much. Ron's upstairs still."

"You don't mind if I go on up to Harry's room so we can make plans, do you? Thanks." Hermione gave Petunia no opportunity to respond before pushing Harry back toward the stairs.

He led her to his room, looking a bit embarrassed at the mess. It looked as though he and Ron had dumped the contents of their shared trunk and hadn't bothered to organize it since they arrived. At least there were no dirty clothes on the floor, she told herself. She didn't want to see boxers lying around. Or whatever else they may wear. She would have nightmares of Fred and George in their skivvies as it was. The rest she could deal with. She pulled the wand from her back pocket, and a wink later everything was in apple-pie order.

"How did you do that with Petunia? She didn't even protest," Harry asked, a bit bemused. "Dumbledore did a smashing job of railroading them last summer, but he was so blatantly magic."

"Acting as though I have a right to dictate to her was the key. Though, I did my best to be conciliatory. That she was probably frightened of what I could do to her surely didn't hurt." The sound of running water came from the room across the hall and a moment later Ron emerged.

"Hey, Hermione. Made it did you?"

"Yeah, can I get you guys to help me with the tent Mr. Weasley borrowed for me? Then we can set up house outside and get down to business." Hermione made a mental note to go home and get her things, and Crookshanks. Her parents would be willing to keep the cat, but Hermione didn't want to leave him behind.

Harry grinned. "One of those tents we used for the Quidditch World Cup?"

"Of course. Any other kind would be too obnoxious for long-term living. And since it's in your yard, it falls under the blood protection. Ron's mum sent some food too, and we need to send her an owl. She's worried about you two."

"Food. Good, the woman here acts like she's doing us a huge favor when she allows us bread and water." Ron's disgust was evident, and Hermione wondered if he had even heard the part about the owl. In resignation, she decided to bully him about it after some lunch.

"At least Dudley hasn't returned for the summer yet. We could be getting very small sections of grapefruit instead." Harry grimaced.

"Where did you say the food was?" Ron asked, a hand patting his stomach.

"Tent raising first, food afterward." Hermione led the way down the stairs and back outside.

After an afternoon of making lists of everything they were going to need, or need to find out to defeat Voldemort, Hermione threw together a quick stir fry while the boys played a game of Exploding Snap.

"You know, we're going to have to take turns with this cooking stuff. I'm not getting stuck with it because I'm the girl."

"I can take breakfast," Harry said. "I'm a dab hand at eggs and bacon. I even do pretty well with pancakes and stuff."

"And I can throw together sandwiches for lunch," Ron said. "That leaves you with dinner."

"Figures, since dinner takes the most time," Hermione grumbled.

"Yeah, but we'll get takeout sometimes and give you a hand here and there," Harry said with a grin. "Ron can peel potatoes the easy way now."

With Mrs. Weasley's handy book, Hermione figured they would get by. Spell work was one of her strengths, after all. "OK, on to the next issue. Didn't you mention, er, Snape said something about you needing to work on your Occlumency, Harry?"

Harry's face darkened and he nodded. "Couldn't help throwing that in my face, could he? Taunting me all the way to the school boundaries."

"Well, maybe he has a point. It wouldn't hurt if we worked on it together. In fact, it would probably be good for the entire Order to strengthen those skills. They could come in handy in combat."

"Yeah, and who's going to work on it with us then? I wouldn't go back to Snape even if he weren't a traitor...and Dumbledore's, erm, not available."

Something protective in her made Hermione want to tell Harry to stop talking about her husband that way. It wasn't fair or completely true. It wasn't as though Dumbledore had given Severus a choice. But he hadn't authorized her to share any of that information. And Harry wouldn't listen anyway. "We can work on it. The three of us. I've been playing around a bit with Legilimancy. It wouldn't hurt to see what we can come up with. It'll be kind of like the DA only on a smaller scale."

Harry's response was more than grudging. "OK, we'll give it a whirl and see what happens. You in, Ron?"

"Sure, mate, can't hurt. So how we gonna do this?"

Hermione laid out her plans for each of them to spend at least thirty minutes with her trying to get into their minds. They could go an hour if they felt up to it. Every night. The boys groaned, but Hermione stayed firm on this. "If you want to be any good, you've got to practice hard. In a few days, I'll add some real school work into the daily schedule."

Ron moaned. "It's summer time and we're not going back to school. What are we studying for?"

"Defense against the Dark Arts, Potions and Charms. Seventh year curriculum and a few more advanced things. We might learn something worth while. Something we can use in battle. I'd like to add Transfiguration too." She grinned to herself; she had a special Transfiguration project in mind actually and knew the boys would be enthusiastic about it. "Well, maybe we'll start that one early on."

"I doubt turning toothpicks into sewing needles is going to come in handy in battle," Harry complained. "And it's not like we're going to pause in the middle of a duel and whip up some headache cure."

"That wasn't quite what I had in mind...on either count. Anyway, who wants to go first?"

Harry moaned and agreed to start out, which left Ron cleaning up the dishes. As he could do so with the use of magic now, he only grumbled a bit before whipping out his wand.

"Harry, concentrate," Hermione said in a low growl half an hour later. She knew she wasn't that great of a Legilimens, even if she did get in a fair amount of practice with her husband, but that meant Harry was worse at Occlumency than she had expected. After all those months of practice, he was still this wide open? No wonder Severus had mocked him. He had done OK at first, but seemed to be getting worse since, not better.

Scrubbing his hands over his eyes, Harry let out a frustrated huff of air. "I'm sorry, I'm just having trouble concentrating today. Too much on my mind."

"All the more reason to focus. In the heat of battle there will be plenty of distractions around you and you'll need to focus, even if you aren't fighting a Legilimens."

"How did you get so good at this anyway? When did you learn it?" Ron sat down beside Hermione, just a little closer than was completely necessary.

Not thinking anything of it, Hermione scrubbed the hair back from her face and reached for a distraction. "It's not that hard when the person you're working on is only giving ten percent of his effort."

"I have a lot on my mind." Harry stood, his hands gripped in fists.

"Calm down. I'm sorry. We're all a little on edge. Between recent events and what lies ahead of us, we've all got a lot on our minds." Hermione tugged at the hair she still held wrapped around her fingers. "Let Ron have a go at it while you take some time to shut down your mind, Harry. It might be easier if I'm not all but sitting on top of you."

"I need a walk," Harry said, pushing up from the chair opposite Hermione.

"It's not safe to walk around after dark."

"I *need* a walk, broom ride, something."

What you need is a good snogging from Ginny. Can't say that, though, can I? "Go pull some weeds if you're antsy. After I've poked and prodded at Ron a bit we'll work something out." They'd only been out of school two days, and they were already going stir crazy. It didn't bode well for the summer.

"Weeds. Great. Just great." Harry stalked out into the yard.

After a moment, Hermione cast a charm that let her see through the side of the tent. Harry was, in fact, pulling weeds, to her great relief. She ended the charm, then looked at Ron, who had seated himself in the chair Harry had so recently vacated.

"All right, is your mind clear?"

"As glass." He reached out and took her fingers in his, then looked her in the eye. "I'm ready."

Hermione glanced at his hand, gave it a squeeze, then pulled her hand away. She transferred her wand to that hand and cast her spell. Twenty minutes later she decided he had been perfectly honest when he said his mind was clear as glass.

She could see everything in it.

Frankly, his memories of snogging with Lav-Lav made Hermione a bit queasy.

"All right, we'll work on technique tomorrow. Tonight I want both of you to work on clearing your minds." Hermione stood, a headache blooming where her spine met the back of her head. She hoped tonight wasn't a harbinger of things to come.

She walked outside and found Harry more than halfway around the perimeter of the backyard. Scattered piles of weeds lay every which way behind him. Hermione walked over and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Feel any better?"

"Yeah, actually. I'd still love to go for a broom ride, but I guess that's out of the question. Tomorrow let's get out of here for a little while, K?" When he looked up at her, he looked bone weary and discouraged.

"I think we can manage that." Darkness had gathered around them, and Hermione noted Harry had been pulling weeds by wand light. She ended the light spell with a soft "Nox," then vanished the weed piles under cover of darkness. "Let's get back inside and you guys can play a game of chess or something before bed." She reached out to him and he took her hand, pulling himself from the ground with her help.

"Sorry I wiggled out on you."

"Sorry I'm such a bossy know-it-all." She grinned at him, he smiled back and threw an arm around her shoulders in a friendly gesture. When Ron did the same from the other side, she thought nothing of it.

"Look, we've got a bookworm sandwich," Ron teased.

Hermione poked both of them lightly in the sides, then allowed them to lead her back to the tent. If she had to go through all of this, she was glad to have her friends by her side.

So how did things go today? Did you get settled out at Potter's place?

Hermione smiled when she saw the familiar writing in her diary after the boys went back inside that evening. She settled back against the sofa in her tent. After darkness fell, she had pulled out her wand and cast about a dozen more spells to warn her of visitors, to protect the structure, and keep the conversations she would be having with the boys from being overheard. She also popped home and collected her things, then settled them into the tent. Right now Crookshanks was investigating the back yard. She imagined Petunia would be hysterical if she knew.

I'm all settled in the tent in the back yard and the boys have gone in for the evening. They were both groaning with frustration when I suggested we start Occlumency practice. I know Harry won't have a chance to clear his mind if someone sneaks up on him, but he did OK tonight. He does need a lot more practice though. Ron was a total failure, but then, I did pretty badly at first too.

Glad you've got things moving along. Wish you were here in bed with me. I could come up with some rather inventive activities right now.

Hermione laughed. *I'm sure you could. I picked up some seventh-year texts yesterday in Diagon Alley, along with a couple other books that looked interesting. I'd like to start studying and looking for anything we might find useful in combat. That brought another groan from the boys, but they'll get used to the idea.*

I don't envy you the task of banging something into their heads this summer. I imagine you are used to it, however. I want you to carry your diary with you from now on. If I have time-sensitive information for the Order, I need you to be able to pick up on it.

All right, I'll charm my diary to let me know when something's been added. She paused for a moment, feeling awkward and unsure how to end the conversation, not wanting to end it at all.

I better go, I just heard Wormtail come in downstairs.

OK. This tent is palatial compared to most tents, but it's still not your arms. Be careful.

You too.

Hermione sat back in her bed, staring at his words and wondering what he really thought of their relationship. As he had once noted, their feelings were manufactured, and Slughorn said love potions could only cause obsession, not real love. The Headmaster had hypothesized that the strength of the bond was determined at least partly by the need of the participants.

She and Severus had certainly needed a strong bond, an overpowering obsession that kept them coming back to each other. Nothing less would have sufficed for the long run. Still, she couldn't help but feel that the longing in her, the longing caused solely by the potion, seemed to have diminished as her real feelings for her husband had grown. The events of earlier that week had cracked their growing relationship, but not broken it completely.

She wondered if he felt the change in the bond too, or if he would acknowledge it even if he had felt it.

Letting out a sigh at the impossibility of sorting it all out right now, and accepting the puzzle for what it was...a puzzle that would take time and care to sort out...she closed and set aside her diary. Beside it sat the Potions text she had picked up in Diagon Alley the previous day. It had cost her dearly and sucked up a huge chunk of time to locate...she had to be sure the book she bought held exactly the potion she needed before she bought it, after all...but she had been elated to find it. And if it led her where she wanted to go, it would be well worth it.

Again she scanned the index, found the potion she needed and flipped to the right pages. The list of ingredients was long, and a few would be tricky to get her hands on, but none of them were exactly restricted. She pulled out a fresh piece of parchment and began writing down all of the needed ingredients, along with the amounts she would need for a single batch. When this was finished, she read through the directions once, then again. Tricky and potentially disastrous indeed. With some advanced reading and a bit of picking her husband's brain, she figured she could handle it...if she had somewhere to brew it, that was.

That would be a real sticking issue, however. And she would need . . . she paused to figure out how many doses would be in a finished cauldron, then stared.

Only eight.

Eight.

That was going to be one heck of a lot of batches for her to mix.

She might be able to mix two at a time, but they each took a month so she was looking at a minimum of six months to prepare and create the amount required. Determined, she pulled out another sheet of paper and began working on a schedule.

19: The Word Gets Out

Chapter 19 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 19: The Word Gets Out

Hermione arose on the fifth day back from Hogwarts. It had been eight days since the Headmaster had died, an eternity since she had held her soul mate close, felt his breath on her face, touched her lips to his...at least it felt that way.

As had become her habit, the first thing she did after opening her eyes was to reach for her diary. Sometimes she found little more than a couple of lines, sometimes quite a bit more. Every day Severus encouraged her to impress on Harry the importance of working on his Occlumency and silent spell casting. Occasionally, he mentioned meetings he'd attended, but he provided no definite information. With Hermione and Ron in residence, the three of them bent the rules a bit and practiced silent defensive spells every afternoon...but only in the privacy of the tent of course.

This morning was different. When Hermione lifted the book to read over it, there were only a few new lines.

You must get word to the Order, someone, anyone who will listen. There is a large gathering planned at some stadium in London for a football match tonight. The Death Eaters plan to destroy the building. Thousands of Muggles will be in the building at that time. You must stop it if you can.

He continued with specific information about when and where the Death Eaters were planning to meet. The message ended with another plea that she trust him.

Her mind flew over the details. There was a match that night, an early round in the World Cup, and she knew the stadium would be packed. Not only thousands, but tens of thousands would be there.

With this in mind, Hermione flew out of bed and through her morning routine. She spelled her hair back in a braid, willing it out of her face in the least possible amount of time. She stuck her diary in her back pocket, then hurried to the kitchen where Harry was already cooking up bangers. "Hey, I have a few errands to run this morning." She grabbed a banana from a nearby fruit basket. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"What kind of errands?" Ron asked. "Want one of us to go with you?"

Ron had been rather more helpful and gentlemanly than usual over the past few days, but Hermione didn't have time to wonder why...especially when she was fairly sure she already knew and didn't have the strength to deal with it if she were right. "Nope, I shouldn't be too long. Practice silent spell casting while I'm out."

A moment later, she Apparated in a grove of trees in a park near the Order of the Phoenix Headquarters. As Hermione had rushed through dressing and dealing with her hair, she had considered whom she should speak with. Harry might not believe her, regardless of whether he knew her source or not, and there was little he could do about it anyway. He wasn't of age yet, couldn't even Apparate for nearly another month. The members of the Order respected him, but they wouldn't take orders from him. Not yet. Frankly, with his history of reacting to events, she wasn't sure they would take him seriously.

Professor McGonagall would want explanations she couldn't give. She had the clout, but not the limitless trust Hermione needed to make this go. Moody would all but torture the source out of her, given half a chance. Hermione had considered each of the Order members in turn and finally concluded there was only one option. Remus Lupin. The others would listen to him, as he was level headed, but he trusted more easily than some and could be trusted to keep a secret. He wouldn't be happy with her choosing to keep her source to herself, but she thought he would believe her anyway.

Now, if he would only be at Headquarters so she could approach him.

After Dumbledore's fall, Mad-Eye Moody had become the leader pro-tem, despite his ability to offend members right and left. The man wasn't known to be forgiving, however. He would never accept Severus back, no matter what happened. He had only tolerated Severus in the first place because Dumbledore insisted he do so. Mad-Eye had the experience of leadership and dealing with dark wizards, of strategizing that the group needed.

Hermione glanced both ways, then crossed the street. She wondered how many members of the Order there really were and how many would be involved in a battle against Voldemort?

A quiet knock on the door, and Nymphadora Tonks was leading Hermione through the familiar, dark entryway. Tonks was the youngest Auror on the squad and once again sported bright pink hair after a year of only her real, mousy brown hair color and face. Hermione smiled when she saw Tonks' bright smile, knowing it meant Tonks and Lupin had worked things out.

Remus sat in the library, a book held open in one large palm while his other hand sifted through the pages. His eyes searched the writing. He glanced up when she stopped inside the door, and surprise showed on his face. "Hermione, it's good to see you. What's brought you here? Are Harry and Ron here too?"

Hermione's eyes slid over him, noticing how ragged he was beginning to look. The full moon was only a few days away, and without the benefit of the potion Severus used to make for Remus, the werewolf would be going through a painful transformation. "Not this time. I have something I need to talk to you about. Alone." She smiled at Tonks as the older woman waved as if to say 'go ahead then' and headed toward the kitchen. Hermione shut the library door to be certain of their privacy. She locked the door, considered casting an Imperturbable, but decided that was going overboard this time.

"It must be rather serious." Remus marked the book and set it aside. "Please, have a seat. What do you need?"

Besides someone who will believe me and not ask too many questions? Hermione glanced at the seat he had gestured toward, but didn't take it. She didn't think she could sit still. "I have something to talk to you about, but there are parts I can't explain. Things I'm not at liberty to divulge. I need you to understand up front; I can tell you only so much, and no more." She turned back to him and saw him nod in reply.

Grateful he hadn't said anything that would distract her, she continued carefully. "I am in contact with someone who has access to information we need. Information about Voldemort's plans. I can't explain to you where I am getting it. I need you to understand that. I believe the person feeding me this information. At least, I'm quite certain the person is trustworthy." She whirled around and began pacing again.

"How certain are you?"

Biting her lip, Hermione turned to face him. She rubbed her thumb on the inside of her ring, taking courage from the warm metal. "I trust this person with my life, but I'm not sure I would trust them with yours. I believe this is a legitimate warning, however." Taking a deep breath, she told him what she knew about the planned attack. At the end,

she slid boneless into one of the chairs.

"And you're sure you can't tell me who it is?" Remus' face bore a serious expression. His fingers steeped before him as he considered her revelation.

"I'm sure. Perhaps someday, but not now." Hermione swallowed, trying to find the courage to say what she had to say next. "I know after what happened," she stumbled over her words; the allusion was painful enough without coming right out and saying what she meant, "it is hard to be sure who to trust."

"It could be a trap."

"Yes, but I don't think so."

He nodded, as though glad she was being honest both with him and herself. "You won't go on this one, if we choose to pursue it. You are not officially a part of the Order yet. I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention it to Harry either. We don't need him haring off to save the Muggles right now."

She fisted her hands until her short fingernails dug into the palms. "I understand; I haven't mentioned it to anyone besides you."

Remus stood and moved toward the door. "I'll have to discuss this with the others, and we'll decide how to act."

Anxious, Hermione grasped his shirt sleeve, halting him just before he reached the door. "For the time being, can you keep the fact that I provided the information to yourself? You and Tonks, since she'll obviously figure it out. I'm not ready for some of the others to begin an interrogation. In the long run it might be best."

He considered her for a long moment, then nodded. "For the time being. I hope your source is golden."

Remus walked out, and Hermione whispered to herself, "Dark and broody, but golden."

The next day Hermione was eating breakfast with the boys when an owl came to her tent. It landed in front of her and lifted its leg for her to retrieve the letter. It was from Remus.

Thanks for the tip. All went well, six in custody, look for the Prophet this morning.

R

Filled with relief, as Hermione had spent half the previous night lying in bed, wondering if the attack against the Muggles had been thwarted, she tucked the note in her back pocket. She supposed she could have asked the Dursleys if she could come in and watch the evening news with them, but after Harry told her how they had reacted when he had tried to do so a couple summers before, she had decided to wait and watch.

"What was that?" Ron asked, noticing her stash the note.

"Nothing much, just a response to a question I asked. Do we want to work on Occlumency this morning, then do some silent spell casting afterward, or would you rather begin some reading for Charms?" Hermione knew nothing would distract Ron from the topic of her note faster than the threat of study.

Sure enough, he groaned. Harry didn't look much happier when she looked over at him. "Still a little muzzy yet for studying, Hermione. How about we take a few minutes after breakfast to play some Exploding Snap instead?"

After a short bout of eye-rolling, Hermione turned back to her meal. A moment later, an owl came to the tent entrance, and Hermione anxiously reached for her knut. After accepting its pay, dropping off the morning paper, and eating a bite of toast from the counter, the owl screeched its way out of the tent flap. Hermione forced herself to wait a moment before picking up the paper, and Harry got to it first.

"Owls flying through my yard!" Vernon Dursley's words filtered from the house, and the three teens looked at each other and laughed. Dudley was due back that afternoon from another year at Smeltings, and Petunia had been in a dither about the three of them staying out of the way, so as not to ruin her first day back with her Dinky Diddy Dums.

When Harry picked up the paper, Ron asked his usual question, "Anyone we know die?" Hearing Harry's quick intake of breath, Ron tore his attention away from the jam-slathered pancakes. Hermione carefully looked up at Harry as well, trying to look curious instead of mad to tear the paper from his hands and read the details herself.

"Death Eater attack foiled at Muggle football stadium," Harry read the headline, then continued on with the story.

"After an anonymous tip to Auror headquarters last night, six known Death Eaters were captured in the act of preparing to raze a Muggle sports stadium with 26,000 Muggles inside. All six men were taken into custody." Harry continued reading aloud, detailing the events of the night and the charges laid against each man. Lucius Malfoy was returned to Azkaban along with a few Death Eaters who had managed to escape capture when their master disappeared sixteen years earlier.

Ron's mouth was hanging open when Hermione turned to gauge his reaction. She was disgusted when she saw the half-masticated pancake in his mouth and reached out to lift his chin, snapping his jaw shut. "Really, Ron, that is so revolting."

"Sorry," He finished chewing and swallowed the food, then began spitting questions at Harry. Since Harry only knew what appeared in the paper, however, he couldn't answer any questions. Even Hermione, who knew more than either of them, couldn't have answered more than the directionless query of who must have tipped off the Ministry.

As soon as breakfast dishes were done, Hermione hurried to her room to check her diary to ask if Severus had heard about the capture. Surely he would have by now. His place in the inner circle was solid since he had taken out Dumbledore. When they wrote the previous night, she had mentioned her meeting with Remus and the fact that the final Marauder was going to discuss it with others. Now, she knew she had succeeded in convincing Remus, and he would be more willing to accept any tips in the future.

There was no new message, but she left a note about the events in the paper, then returned to the living room to start prodding the guys into searching the textbooks she had bought in hopes of finding some spells that might prove useful in their preparations. She pulled out the Half Blood Prince's sixth-year potion book herself. Considering how well Harry did the previous year, there must be some seriously great tips in the margins, and she would need all the help she could get.

Tuesday afternoon arrived, and Hermione arranged with Mrs. Weasley to bring Harry and Ron 'home' for dinner that evening. Harry had grown noticeably anxious over the passing days, and when they held their Occlumency practice that afternoon, he had been worse than ever. Half his memories were of himself and Ginny, despite the fact that such a relatively short percentage of his life had been spent with her.

Hermione held back a smile when she caught a scene of them kissing passionately on the school Quidditch pitch.

Harry had pushed her out of his head pretty quickly after that and was cute enough to blush. She decided to remember to tell Ginny about it someday, but wisely refrained from commenting on it to him.

"That was better," she said, "but you're going to have to do better yet if you're going to go up against Voldemort or Snape. They would both have most of your secrets out

of you before you closed them off." She was testing him, pushing him, though she knew it would anger him.

His fingers tightened around his wand, and he took a calming breath, mastering his anger with surprising control. "I don't want to talk about that traitor."

"Me neither, but you have to be honest. At some point you're going to face him. And seriously, Harry, I know all the reasons you hate him, but try and keep your eye on the main issue. If you can avoid confrontation with Snape, do. Just keep your focus on Voldemort. He's public enemy number one here, not Snape."

"How can you say that after..."

"Yes, yes," Hermione cut him off, then sighed. "He's a surly bastard, full of hatred," *incredibly talented with his hands and mouth and tongue*, "and I know you'd send him to the devil at the first opportunity. But please try to remember he is secondary in your pursuits. If faced with both Snape and Voldemort, I'm afraid you'd take on the minion instead of the master." *And frankly, I'd prefer if you left my husband intact.*

"Are you telling me I should shake hands with the git and become his best friend if I run into him?" Harry was still defensive. Ron looked as though he agreed with Harry, but didn't want to get in the middle of the argument.

Limited in what she dared say, Hermione rubbed her forehead, feeling a definite headache coming on. "I'm just saying to keep your eye on the prize, and the prize is Voldemort. Snape is only a minion, a follower, not the leader. Not the one who has made it his life's work to kill you and take over the world...both Wizarding and Muggle."

Harry huffed, but the conversation came to an end, along with the Occlumency session. He was far too upset to even attempt any more work that night. Besides, they would need to begin the walk to Mrs. Figg's house to Floo to the Weasleys' soon, and she'd just as soon he had a few minutes to calm down first.

As she whirled into the fireplace at the Burrow twenty minutes later, Hermione wondered how long Harry could hold off before establishing some kind of physical contact with Ginny. She was betting it took fifteen minutes or a little less.

She was wrong. Not three minutes after they arrived, Ginny appeared. After a brief hesitation, Harry brushed an invisible bit of dirt from her arm with forced casualness. Next he brushed the hair from her face, she placed a hand on his chest, and then they were hugging and sharing quick kisses, and Harry didn't seem to be fighting against the sensation of rightness anymore. Though he stepped away from her almost guiltily a few moments later, he and Ginny seemed to gravitate toward each other throughout the evening.

Everyone was home for dinner, and Molly used the evening meal as an opportunity to discuss wedding plans and make assignments among her brood. Fleur put in her two cents worth whenever she could tear her attention away from her intended, but it was clear she had already gone over everything with Molly.

Bill was healing up well and was moving around that night, though he complained it was the first time he had been allowed out of his sick bed. He seemed a bit looped up on pain potions. The scars running across his face were still a bright pink, but with the aid of magic the scabs had already healed up and disappeared. He had come home the previous Saturday afternoon after Hermione picked up the tent from the Weasley home.

"So, Hermione? What's up with Fred and George's freckles, anyway? You gonna tell us why they're multi-colored?" Charlie slid an arm behind her on the chair and turned his whole body toward her from his seat to her left.

Hermione had to admit to herself that had she not already established a relationship with Severus, and her past interest in Ron notwithstanding, she would have a terrible crush on the man. He was hot. "I'd just as soon not get into it tonight."

"I know," Bill said with a somewhat loopy grin, and Hermione doubted he had heard her response. "Seems they helped her way to a soul mate with their chocolates, and she's not too happy about it."

"Not Ron or Harry then, huh?" Charlie's smile became a bit forced.

Hermione glanced at where Harry and Ginny sat side by side on the opposite end of the table, their conversation only for each other. "Doesn't look like it, does it?"

Ron sat on the other side of her, his mouth hanging open in shock. "You've, you've got a soul mate? No, it must be a mistake. It can't be." He looked totally crestfallen.

Hermione felt a touch embarrassed when she realized she hadn't been imagining his interest in her lately. She had once thought they might get together some day, but that time was well past now.

"Who is it? Why didn't we know? I never saw you with a guy." It seemed Harry had been paying a bit of attention to the table conversation after all.

Squirming a bit in her seat, Hermione tried to smile. "Well, just because I didn't go around snogging him in front of the entire common room doesn't mean we didn't spend time together."

"That's a ruddy big secret, if you ask me. Kept it from your best friends. We never saw you with anyone." Ron turned to Harry and Ginny for reassurance, and they both looked as blank as he did. "Are you sure it wasn't your imagination?" Ron seemed more angry than hurt now, and Hermione was afraid this would be the cause of one of their famous blow ups. "How long have you known?"

Hermione averted her gaze to the plate before her, not wanting to admit.

It proved unnecessary anyway, as Fred had no trouble recalling the event. "Remember when you were in the hospital wing from that poisoning, Ron? That's when we gave the chocolate to the house-elves to put in the biscuits."

"You did what?" Molly Weasley blew her top, and the attention at the table turned from Hermione, to her great relief. Fred and George frantically tried to back pedal out of trouble.

Charlie's voice beside her brought Hermione's head up. "Didn't tell Harry or Ron? And they never guessed?"

"It's all Quidditch with them, and with their own girlfriends and Harry's, um, projects with Dumbledore," Hermione's heart pounded as she realized she nearly told Charlie what was going on, "we've all been awfully busy."

Bill called over to her, "So, are all their freckles multicolored, or just the ones we can see?"

She had to smirk; it was impossible to hold back. "All of them. And they glow in the dark."

Ron stood and stormed out of the kitchen. Hermione's eyes followed him.

"Doesn't look like Ronnikins is too happy about it," Charlie said.

Hermione turned back to Charlie. "Guess I better go have a chat with him." It was one chat she had not been looking forward to. Still, she rose and followed Ron out the door.

She found Ron out by the chicken coop, collecting eggs. She knew he had never really enjoyed the chore, so she had been surprised when she saw the coop door flapping closed behind him. She stood at the entrance to the run around the coop and watched him for a long moment without speaking. She didn't know where to start or what to say anyway.

Finally, he spoke first. "Couldn't tell us the truth, could you? Had to string me along."

"Ron, things were a little complicated at the time, and you were dating someone. And things are even more complicated now. I'm sorry you got your feeling hurt. I didn't realize you felt," her voice faltered, "that way. You dated other girls."

There was a long pause during which Hermione began to worry he was just going to ignore her, as he had in the past when angry with her. But then he spoke, "I guess I always figured it would be me and you someday. You know? We've been together forever, even if it was just as friends." There was a long pause. "So who is he?"

Now came the sticky part. "I can't tell you."

He whirled around, his face as red as his hair and his eye flashing. "What do you mean you can't tell me? Am I one of your best friends or not?"

"You are. I would tell you if I could, but as I said, things are complicated."

"That's a lousy excuse. I can't believe you can't tell me something like that. It's not like I'm going to go looking for him to kill him." But the anger was there in his voice. And the hurt.

Actually, you might. Once you picked yourself up the floor from your dead faint. He's already number two on Harry's short list. maybe he's number two on Harry's short list. "I can't for the same reason I couldn't tell you during the school year. And it's a good thing you don't intend to kill him, as no person affected by Amoriata has survived more than a few years after their soul mate died. And that few years was plagued with madness. A huge madness and growing need for the lost love. This is a war, Ron, and if one of us dies, the other won't be far behind."

His eyes widened as he recognized what that meant and worry filled his face. "It would kill you too?" He set the basket of eggs to the side and leaned against the wall, the anger drained from him. "This is madness. Is he at risk? Is your danger more because of your relationship with him?"

There was no easy way to explain it. She threaded her fingers together behind her back. "Yes and no. We're working to minimize that risk, but there is some extra there."

"No wonder you hexed Fred and George. You have to stay safe, Hermione. And he has to stay safe for you. Who is it? The Order can protect him if you tell them."

She closed her eyes; her chest filled with pain when she thought of the danger Severus faced every day. "The Order can't protect everyone."

He turned away for a long moment, then his voice croaked out. "I just, I love you, Hermione."

"And I love you too, as a *friend*. If this hadn't happened, you and I might have gotten together this summer, and we might have done OK for a while. But face it, Ron, we fight too much. Our priorities...our personal priorities...are in different places. We'd never have gone long before deciding it wasn't working. And at that point we might have gotten in the middle of a big row and made everything worse for Harry. We both need to be there for him. That means you have to deal with the facts. I'm beyond your reach now. But I'll always be your best friend."

There was a long pause in the conversation. "I need to think about it some. You and Harry head back to the Dursleys; I'll spend the night and be over in the morning." Ron resumed collecting eggs, and Hermione let out a low breath of air. There was nothing more she could do about it.

AN: Sorry about the terrible delay on this chapter, RL has been insane lately. Thanks to all my reviewers; you are fabulous people who brighten every day! Also, I'm looking for a new beta, as MaevePotter has grown too busy to help me out. If anyone is especially good with punctuation, I could use your help.

And a huge thanks to Angel Mischa for correcting my frequent punctuation errors.

20: Searching for RAB

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Chapter 20: Searching for RAB

The rest of the evening at the Weasleys' after the revelation that Hermione had a soul mate was awkward. Ron came in only a few minutes behind Hermione and sat by the twins on the opposite side of the living room. Though she was acutely aware of him in the room, and she knew he was of her as well, they mostly ignored each other, which she figured was better than the alternative. Hermione saw Ginny slip outside, then Harry followed several minutes later. No one commented that they were missing for some time. She hoped they were behaving themselves, more or less. Ginny was still the better part of a year away from being of age.

When Ginny and Harry returned some time later, they both looked a bit mussed. Hermione made a mental note to speak with her friend that night before he went in to bed.

The Aurors on duty in Little Whinging that night included Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt, so before Harry and Hermione prepared to Floo to Mrs. Figg's house, Mr. Weasley sent the Aurors a message by Patronus to be ready on the other side.

Excusing herself to use the loo, Hermione took a moment to cast a spell she had been researching. It would encompass the house and grounds, and everyone inside them. Hopefully it would be enough for damage control. She really couldn't let word of her soul mate get out of the house.

When Hermione stepped out of the fireplace ten minutes later, she found Tonks smiling at her, her hair a sunny yellow this time.

"Wotcher, Hermione. Have a good time at the Weasleys'?"

Barring hurt feelings and secrets disclosed. "Yeah, it was nice. It's not often we get to see everyone together like that."

Kingsley winked at her from where he was speaking with Harry on the other side of the room, and Hermione smiled back, then greeted Mrs. Figg. After a few minutes they headed for the front door where the Aurors paused to Disillusion the teens. Hermione considered telling them she was able to cast the spell, but decided it would be better to keep some secrets to herself.

Halfway to the Dursleys' Harry asked, "So who tipped off the Aurors about the Death Eater attack on the Muggle football game? Do you know?"

Hermione couldn't see anyone else, as all of them were Disillusioned, though she could see a ripple in the air here and there if she looked hard enough. Kingsley's voice answered, his voice low. "It was an anonymous tip, but it sure saved a lot of people. Hope whoever it was sees fit to help us out again."

Hermione heard Tonks clear her throat; the female Auror was walking beside her, one hand on Hermione's elbow so they didn't get separated since they couldn't see each other. "Good thing someone has contacts on their side. Though it sounds like a dangerous business, and I hope our informant takes care. These are dangerous times."

The ominous words were clearly a warning for Hermione. Hermione responded by reaching over and giving the Auror's wrist a squeeze. She didn't want any trouble for herself or Severus either.

The conversation turned and soon the four of them were at the door of the tent. "Pretty good warding you've got up here, Hermione. Not bad work." Kingsley's praise warmed Hermione.

"Thanks. Is there anything else I should add? I warded my parents' place too, but I'm worried it isn't advanced enough, that there won't be enough time to get help if there's trouble for some reason."

Tonks removed the Disillusionment Charm on Hermione and nodded. "I'll be happy to swing by there and check out your wards in the morning before I return to headquarters. Then we can see if we need to add another layer or two."

Hermione smiled gratefully in the direction Tonks' voice came from. The two Aurors would stay Disillusioned until they left the vicinity. A few moments later, the Aurors returned to their duty station, wherever that was, and Harry and Hermione disappeared into the tent.

"Interesting dinner, Hermione." Harry fell back into a worn green overstuffed sofa that was covered in doilies.

"Yeah." Hermione took the matching chair nearby.

"You're one for secrets, that's for sure. How come you never told us?"

How to explain that? The Headmaster told us to be discreet? That'd go over just great. How would I explain why Dumbledore was involved in the first place, and it wasn't as though the old man hadn't told Harry to share his secret with me. So why would Harry accept mine has to be a secret? There was no easy way to explain. "Secrecy was required, still is required for various reasons. I would have told you but I couldn't."

"You mean wouldn't." His eyes grew a bit flinty.

Hermione held back a huff of irritation. "No, I couldn't. I was sworn to secrecy. It was necessary for me to keep it to myself. I have to keep it a secret now more than ever. In fact, letting word get out could cause serious complications."

"For you or for . . ." He seemed to struggle a bit, then looked at her in surprise. "How come I can't say anything direct about it?"

With a long puff of air, Hermione cast another spell that increased the boundaries of the one she set at the Weasleys' to include the tent. "Try again."

"Your soul mate. That was better, what did you do?"

"Before we left I cast a charm that made it so no one who was there except me could discuss the incident in question unless they were in the Weasley home. I just opened it to include the tent. It would be dangerous for both him and me if word got back to the wrong people. Secrecy is absolutely vital."

"Vital?" Doubt all but dripped from his voice.

"Yes, you prat. Vital. Unless you want me dead."

"Telling me is going to cause your death?" He was clearly offended that she didn't believe he could keep her secret.

Very possibly, yes. But then again, not telling you could cause my death indirectly, as well. Lose-lose in this case. "Please, just trust me."

There was a long pause while he studied her. "OK, but know you can come to me if you need to talk."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. Now, how about your long walk with Ginny? Didn't look to me like you were working on staying just pals." She allowed a smirk and managed not to laugh when he blushed.

"I didn't mean, I hadn't planned It just kind of happened. I mean, nothing much happened," he backpedaled in case she got the wrong idea. "Just, when she was standing there in front of me I couldn't help myself. I just felt, I was so wrapped up in her. Man, I sound like an idiot." He scrubbed his hands over his face.

"No, you sound like a man in love. One twisted and distracted and worried." She hesitated, but decided after that evening's conversation, she best own up what she'd figured out. "Harry, fight it all you like, she's *your* soul mate. You can't stay apart from her. She's vital to your emotional well being, and you to hers. I imagine you're feeling a lot more focused right now than you were this afternoon when we were working on your Occlumency."

"Yeah, well..."

"And you can feel her presence near you long before you actually see her. You can sense her emotions, her needs and fear and happiness."

"Yeah, but..."

Hermione didn't let him finish his thought. "And when you touch her, everything seems to fit into place."

He blew out a long breath. "Yeah."

"She's your soul mate. Your one and only. You have to face that, have to accept that she's part of you, regardless of how you might worry about her safety if you stay together. You'll both go a bit mad if you don't spend time together once in a while. Keep it clean definitely, as she's still not of age and Molly Weasley will have your head if you take things too far. But don't punish the both of you because of the desire to protect her."

"Is that how you feel about, er, what's his name?"

"Yeah. It started out as infatuation...that's all a love potion can procure, after all...but things have grown. But instead of getting simpler, easier, the past few weeks have only made things harder. I have to see him sometimes, Harry, so try to understand when I have to pop out for the evening. And try to understand that I really *can't* tell you who he is."

He nodded, then pursed his lips. "Ginny's my soul mate." He paused as though testing the thought, serious and pensive. "It feels right, but it terrifies me. I might not make it out of this alive, Hermione. I'm going to do everything I can, but I might not. Someone's got to watch out for her if I don't make it."

"You have to make it. Life won't be worth living for her if you aren't here...literally. And you have to protect your knowledge of your link to her at all costs. Now, since you're

feeling a bit calmer, do you feel up to another Occlumency session?"

Harry groaned, but sat up and closed his eyes, clearing his mind. Hermione smiled, proud of his determination to succeed.

Ron returned to the tent at the Dursleys' the next day with a container of fresh eggs for their breakfasts. He found Harry still asleep on the sofa, where he had crashed the previous night while Hermione studied the illicit potions manual again. Though Ron and Hermione pussy footed around each other awkwardly, there were no blow ups as they both tried to find a way back to their friendship.

Harry redoubled his efforts at Occlumency, with Ginny's protection in mind, and seemed to improve by leaps and bounds. Much to Hermione's great satisfaction. Telling him the truth seemed to be exactly the motivation he needed. Ron still struggled, but made some improvement too, and Hermione devoured every bit of information she could find on her potion project.

The next afternoon Hermione went out to the nearby grocery store for a few items, grateful for a break away. She knew she shouldn't be walking alone, but it was broad daylight and she had to get out of the tent for a bit. They worked on their daily Charms study earlier that morning, and Ron and Harry were enjoying a game of chess while she shopped. She didn't mind handling the task while they relaxed as it gave her time alone to think. Even with all of the other students surrounding her at school, Hermione had more privacy and room to breathe at Hogwarts than she had since moving into the tent.

She was nearly back to the Dursleys' when she heard footsteps behind her. She turned, fingers on her wand tip, when she looked in the face of someone near her own age. He was built like a mountain, with a broad, somewhat vacant face and his resemblance to Vernon Dursley told her right away who he must be.

"Hey there, Chickie, I don't think I've seen you around before. Did you move here lately?"

Keeping a wary eye on him and considering her options, Hermione stood still, looking him over with a cold eye. He reminded her a bit of Gregory Goyle, to be honest, both in build and in the intelligence...or lack thereof...that she saw in his face. The thought that he would turn and run when he realized who, or rather, what she was, made her smile. "Just visiting in the area for a while. You?"

"My name's Dudley, but my friends call me Big D." He ran a meaty hand down her arm in a way that was just a little too friendly for Hermione's taste.

"Big D, huh? I understand you've been away at school this year."

His grin widened. "Yeah, I'm the boxing champion of the school." He moved in closer...definitely closer than was strictly polite. "You free tonight?"

Arrogant prat. "Sorry, but I'm not free any night. I'm taken."

He fingered her rioting curls and leaned in a little more. "A pretty girl like you is bound to draw attention, but you're far too young to settle. What did you say your name was?"

"Hermione Granger, perhaps you've heard of me, I'm a great friend of your cousin's. Harry and I met six years ago on the train to school, in fact." She took great pleasure in seeing him drop his hand from her hair and step back in horror.

"You're one of *them*? Stay away from me, you freak."

With an eye roll, Hermione turned back to the Dursley home, heading to the tent again. "I'm not the one who started the conversation, Big D. And if you stay out of our way, I'll stay out of yours."

He hurried after her. "I should have known you were *different* when I first saw you." He kept his voice low, nearly to a hiss.

"I don't know why: I grew up in a quiet Muggle neighborhood too. Went to primary school like everyone else you know. My parents are both dentists. I tend to blend in easily enough."

She was surprised when his hand wrapped around her upper arm and he turned her to face him. "You're awfully pretty for a freak. Maybe I'll let you come around anyway."

"In your dreams." She held her head high, but she was uncomfortable about the way he looked at her with an unholy gleam in his eye. "I told you I'm involved with someone."

"Don't be like that. What has he got that I don't?"

Besides a brain? "A wand and a very nasty temperament. Then again, those are traits I share with him." She brought the tip of her wand out of her shirt sleeve and poked it in his side.

He flinched, but his hold on her arm tightened. "You don't scare me. I know you can't use that outside of your freak school."

"You're right about the use of underage magic, but I've been of age for nearly a year now *Big D*. I've learned some wicked hexes that would make that tail you sprouted some years back seem tame. I wouldn't push my luck, if I were you." Just for good measure she gave him a very small stinging spell.

He dropped her arm and backed away. "They'll chuck you out for that. You'll never go back now."

"Hadn't planned on it anyway. Get lost, Dudley, before I start to get inventive. You should see what I did to Ron's brothers when they crossed me. And I actually like them."

Dudley's eyes widened and he turned, all but running away from her.

Letting out a sigh of disgust and relief, Hermione continued around the side of the house and into the tent.

After their encounter, Dudley went out of his way to avoid the three friends...a fact for which Hermione was grateful.

The Auror protection Mr. Weasley had indicated was around had stayed invisible so far, and all but undetectable. Hermione only saw minor indications of their existence from time to time. One day she found a note from Tonks at the opening of her tent when she got up in the morning. True to her word, the female Auror had added another couple wards to the Granger home...to Hermione's relief. Apparently they were keeping a close watch on her shelter.

There was only the slightest thread of annoyance that they felt her incapable of taking care of herself running through the huge wash of comfort. Getting away undetected, if she needed to, wasn't any real trouble. Between her Animagus form and her ability to Disillusion herself, she knew it would be possible, even if they were watching closely. Since her wards on the tent allowed her to Apparate in and out of it, no one need know she'd left.

The three teens were in the midst of their afternoon silent spell practice a couple days after her run in with Dudley when Hermione felt an urgency in her chest. It was followed shortly by a warning ward from her diary saying that there was something new written in it. She called a ten-minute break, then returned to her room while the

boys sunk down on the sofas. She pulled the diary from her pocket and returned it to normal size, flipping it to the latest page.

The Creeveys have been chosen as examples. Get them out of their home right away.

It took no more than that to react. Hermione called to the living room that she was going to pick up some milk at the store, the first things she could think of, then Disapparated to the clearing near headquarters. She all but ran across the street, anxious to get to Remus before too much time had passed.

When she hurried into the home, breathless, she found Tonks sitting in the library. "Is Remus here?"

"No, he's with the other werewolves this week. What's going on?" Tonks looked tired, and as she had been working the night shift lately, Hermione didn't blame her.

"You've got to get word to someone. The Creevey home is going to be attacked any minute now. You have to get everyone out of there...the parents are Muggles. I know Colin said they live just outside Surrey."

Tonks took only a couple seconds to throw her a speculative glance, then tossed a pinch of powder in the fireplace and relayed the message to Auror headquarters. By the time she pulled her head back out, Hermione had collapsed in the nearby chair, her heart still pounding from her adrenalin rush.

"Care to share how you're getting your information? I know you've done this a couple times before." The ever affable Tonks stood with her arms crossed over her chest, her eyes focused and her expression stony. Hermione had never seen her look so serious before, and for the first time, she could see there was something Aurorish under the ever-changing façade.

"I'd like to, but can't. It's good enough the information is valid, isn't it?"

"Is it? What have you got yourself mixed up in, Hermione? I know you've got a..." Her throat moved as she tried to speak it.

"You can't speak of it anywhere but the Weasley home. It's dangerous for word to get out, even among friends."

Tonks's hot pink eyebrows lifted. "OK. He's not mixed up with the Death Eaters, is he? No. School kids aren't recruited to that, except Malfoy. At least, that was the only one Snape mentioned." This last was spoken to herself as she wandered across the room.

She continued, "So far Remus and I've been keeping our mouths shut about where the information's coming from, but there's been more than a little pressure on Remus to tell who his contact is. I'd feel better about this if I knew who you were in touch with, Hermione."

Hermione bit her lip. She wanted to tell, wanted desperately to talk to someone about her situation. Wanted to share her confusion and worry, constant fear for his safety. She touched her thumb to her ring for reassurance. Knowing she couldn't afford to tell, and that knowing the truth wouldn't reassure Tonks, she shook her head. "I can't. Not yet. When or if it becomes feasible, I will. I want to, you have to understand. I'm unable to tell you, it could ruin everything. It's really too dangerous."

"Hermione, the Order can help protect him, whomever he is." Tonks voice was wheedling.

"Strangely, that's what Ron said."

"And what did you tell him?"

Looking the older woman in the eye, Hermione sighed. "The Order can't protect everyone. And Tonks, if he's in a position to give us this kind of information, trying to protect him could be fatal...to both of us. I can't tell you. Please be happy with whatever information you can gather. I'll do my best to continue providing what I can glean. Know that I'm not in any more danger at the moment than anyone else. I've not put myself at risk. Not any more than I would have been already."

"So you say. I suppose you gave the boys some made-up excuse for running out?"

"Yes, I really better get to the store and get that milk before they start to wonder what happened to me." She stood and prepared to walk to the door.

"Be careful. You tread on dangerous ground."

"I will."

"So R.A.B could be Regulus Black." Hermione all but slapped her forehead in disgust. How did she not realize that sooner?

"That means it could be at headquarters. I wonder if we saw it when we were cleaning out all that junk a couple summers back." Harry tapped his fingers on the tabletop and exchanged glances with Ron.

"How do we go out there and start searching without drawing attention to ourselves?" Ron asked.

"There's no way. But maybe if we just split up and each take a room, we could say there's something of Sirius's we're looking for. Or maybe we're doing an inventory before Mundungus is allowed back in," Hermione suggested.

"That's actually not a bad idea. It would help if he knew we had catalogued everything." Harry's look was black.

"Yeah, but once we find the locket, how do we denature it? I've been through scads of books. Even searched the library at Headquarters and came up with nothing." Hermione rubbed at the tension in the back of her neck.

"How do you kill a soul? It's not like we can just go up to someone and ask, though, is it?"

Severus might know or be able to find out. Too bad I can't bring him into this!"I'll keep looking. We have to find the objects first."

"But I don't figure on hanging onto the Horcruxes for months until we find a solution, so let's try and get something worked out soon, OK? I'd hate to find one of them only to have someone take it away from us."

Hermione nodded, agreeing with Harry. It was paramount that they find a way to denature the objects. If Dumbledore all but lost a hand in the process, it couldn't be easy. Again, she wondered if Severus knew. He had helped the Headmaster stay alive during the past year after the wasting disease started. She turned her head back to the conversation in front of her. Ron and Harry were just agreeing to Floo over to Headquarters to check things out.

The day's search was fruitless.

They checked the entire main floor: Every cupboard, every drawer and behind every piece of furniture. Ron even wondered if it might be in Kreacher's cupboard, but as it had never belonged to his mistress or the Black family, it hadn't seemed likely. Wherever the locket might be, it wasn't in any of the rooms they'd checked. Of course, there were still two more floors to cover, but as an Order meeting was about to begin, the trio decided to put off the rest of the search until the next day.

"I don't know where you get your information, Tonks, but you were right." It was Mr. Weasley's voice echoing up the stairs from the hallway. "They caught the Death Eaters

red handed at the Creeveys'; any longer and the whole family would have been killed."

"He doesn't mean Colin Creevey, does he?" Ron asked no one in particular as they hung over the railing to listen in.

"I think so." *I mean, I know so, since I'm the one who indirectly sent the Aurors over.* Hermione had been wondering about the confrontation all afternoon; her mind kept wandering back to it when she was searching the library. Though their search hadn't turned up the locket, she did find a couple books she hadn't seen before which seemed promising.

She was starting to feel overwhelmed with the responsibility placed on her shoulders. Between researching the objects and a way to removed the soul, training Harry and Ron for battle, searching for ways for Harry to do the deed when they did finally meet up with Voldemort, and passing information from Severus, she was beginning to feel worn down. Then there was the question of her special potion, for which she still hadn't found a brewing location. Worrying constantly about Severus wasn't helping in the least.

"Kingsley said they got the whole family out, shaken, but with only moderate wounds. They'll go into hiding for a while until a more secure arrangement can be made for them," Arthur continued.

Hermione started down the stairs and entered the kitchen right behind Tonks and Arthur. "Hey, I couldn't help but overhear the conversation out there," she started.

"Right, especially since you were all but hanging over the railing," Tonks said. She lifted an eyebrow at Hermione, who felt herself color slightly, but didn't bother to deny it.

"The Creeveys were attacked? Do you think other Muggle families might be attacked as well? I mean, if my parents are at risk, I'd like to be able to protect them a bit better. Maybe my wards aren't enough."

It was something Hermione had been considering all afternoon. She had all kinds of wards on their house to protect them and alert the Aurors if anyone attacked, but a very accomplished wizard could get through. Malfoy Junior might have trouble, but Severus would probably find and release every ward before she had an inkling he was there. After all, Hermione might have been the smartest witch of her age, but she was still only seventeen, and still had to take her N.E.W.T.s.

"That's a good question; I'll have to see what other methods can be taken to protect Muggle-born families. And the wards I added to yours are quite difficult to remove without tripping them. Anyone magical but not related to you will set them off." Tonks gave her a shrewd look, then turned back to the group for the meeting.

Hermione felt a bit better, but still worried.

"You kids go on upstairs. I think Ginny should be here any moment with Molly."

"She's here now," Harry muttered under his breath. And though they hadn't heard their arrival at the front door, when the trio walked into the entrance again, Molly and Ginny were just taking off their rain gear.

"How'd you know that, mate?" Ron asked in surprise.

Harry shrugged, then took Ginny's hand in his. Hermione held back a grin.

Over the next two days, the trio scoured the rest of the house, but it wasn't until they decided to investigate the attic room where Buckbeak had stayed that they found the treasure tucked in a corner with a pile of old Hogwarts yearbooks.

Seeing the dates on the covers coincided with Severus's years at school, Hermione was tempted to sit down and look them over. Harry looked a bit longingly at the books as well, but set them aside to check out the locket instead.

The front was just right with the intertwined snakes in the shape of an S, and the locket wouldn't open. There was no reason to know whether that was because the soul was contained in it, or because it was just unopened so long, but none of them felt like trying their luck.

Hermione was so excited, turning the locket over several times to see this piece of history. "You'll have to keep it in your pocket, Harry, until we find a way to destroy the soul in it."

"Great, that's exactly what I was hoping to hear." His response was more than a bit sarcastic.

"Unless you want Dung to get a hold of it..." Hermione held the locket out to Harry, who slid it into his pocket.

"I'd rather not have to search for it again, thanks."

As they walked back down the stairs, they heard Remus come in the front door.

"Hello, Love," Tonks greeted him.

"Hey, hon. Anything interesting come up while I was out of touch?" Remus sounded tired, and as Hermione reached the bottom of the stairs, she could see he looked in a bad way.

"Well, Hermione...is standing behind you with Ron and Harry. They've been searching the house for something. Don't know what, they wouldn't say." She leveled a gaze at them, with special emphasis on Hermione. It was clear to the younger woman that Tonks had planned a different comment all together. Before she saw the boys.

"Well, we've scoured the place now, so I guess we'll be on our way," Harry said, hurrying toward the door.

"Not so fast." Remus's hand shot out and grabbed Harry by the neck of his jumper. "What's going on, Harry, Ron, Hermione?" His eyes moved from one to the next, then back again.

"It's my house; I just wanted to see what was here, you know? Besides doxy droppings and dead spiders, that is."

Ron shivered at the word 'spiders', and Remus's mouth twitched.

"You're a very bad liar, Harry. But you have a point: it is your house. Just remember there are plenty of Order members who want to help you out with your mission, whatever it may be. We're here to see Dumbledore's work through, and I hope you'd avail yourself of our assistance, if you need it."

Harry shifted on his feet, then looked Remus in the eye. "If we really can't handle it, I'll ask for help. But if we can take care of this ourselves, that's my job. It's what Dumbledore wanted me to do."

"Fair enough. Now, if you don't mind, I could use a hot bath, a good meal and about a week's worth of sleep." Remus wiped a hand over his eyes and Tonks patted his shoulder.

Hermione figured the young Auror would make sure Remus got all of those things in short order. "We'll be going. Talk to you when there's anything to report."

She figured he would understand the double message.

AN A big thanks to my reviewers, and an extra big one to RobisonRocket for fixing all my punctuation errors.

21: Dates and Animagus Unveiling

Chapter 21 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 21: Dates and Animagus Unveiling

With the aid of an advanced glamour, Severus walked down Diagon Alley, his mind on the few remaining errands on his list. He had already picked up ingredients for his oft-used Cruciatus Calming Potion. His supply was getting dangerously low, and he knew he couldn't put off starting another batch. Still left on his list were a new pair of boots and some foodstuffs for his place at Spinner's End.

Over the past twenty or so years, he had carefully put by most of his income, needing little to live on since his room and board were supplied at the castle. Still, his savings were not sufficient for a lifetime, not by any means, and he would need a fair chunk of money to start up somewhere else. There was no way out of this war except Azkaban or death...not that he could see. As he had no desire to cut his time with Hermione short, he must make provisions for the future.

That meant his current financial situation was precarious at best, and he must cut costs everywhere he could. He passed a wizarding travel agency and saw posters in the window of white sand beaches and luxurious accommodations with an enormous hotel complete with lake-sized pools and waterfalls wider than the Knight Bus was long. One poster read *"Isn't it time you took a trip to Paradise with your someone special?"* Another touted a magically hidden building on the black, lava-encrusted shore of Hawaii as the perfect honeymoon getaway: *"Behind the impervious wards lies peace and solitude,"* with a picture of a witch and wizard strolling hand-in-hand along the hidden beach. He could all but smell the salt tang in the air.

He paused to look at the pictures and felt a twinge of guilt. True, he hadn't chosen to end up in a relationship with Hermione. Marrying her had been more or less forced on them. That didn't mean she didn't deserve a honeymoon, that she shouldn't have been given a special time with him to feel loved and cherished...even if it was only a facsimile of love that held them together. He thought of the cottage that had been waiting for the new owner to claim it for several months now. It wasn't impressive or luxurious, though it had its advantages, as it was quaint and somewhat charming. With the added advantage that no one would go looking for him there, or knew he had any ties to it, the little building was a useful hideaway. It even had a variation of the Fidelius Charm attached to it, making it a safe place for trysts. His other option might have been more impressive, but far less cozy.

He turned from the window and continued down the street. There were a few things he would have to work out if he wanted her to meet him there tonight. Details, preparations, a visit to see if it was possible to have the place in readiness.

His mind set, and plans percolating, he ignored the world around him.

That night, Hermione met Severus at a tiny cottage on the edge of Bradford, Yorkshire. When he wrote that a friend had lent it to him, she wondered if it was safe, but then decided it must be, or he wouldn't have suggested it. It had been almost a week since she had been able to meet with him last, and she was anxious to see him. She could feel his anticipation as well.

The cottage was sweet, surrounded by rambling roses, huge stalks of hollyhock, and spikes of Lupine. The area outside the fence was a bit overgrown, and the main road was so far away, she could only hear the occasional passage of cars. It seemed perfect.

She walked through the white picket gate inside a flower-covered arch and down the stone walkway. Evening had fallen, and the walkway was lit with half a dozen little lamps, adding even more charm to the yard. The wooden front door stood ajar and Hermione lifted her hand to knock, feeling foolish and unsure of protocol. Wanting to be certain she had found the right place, she closed her eyes and felt him drawing nearer. When she opened her eyes, he came into view on the far side of the room, and a slight smile crossed his lips. She watched him glide across the room until he opened the screen door.

Every move was like a subtle enticement, and she had to shake her head, trying to clear it a little. They had been separated for longer periods since events at the school, but tonight his appeal was far greater than before.

"Hello, Wife. Glad you could make it." He drew her inside, then cupped both her shoulders, pulling her close to press a soft, lingering kiss to her lips. One hand slid up into her hair while the other lifted to trace the curve of her chin, the length of her neck.

She had never asked for romance, never expected it, but the way he was treating her was drugging. She wondered if there was some charm on the cottage, or if it was just the magic of cricket music in the moonlight with the scent of roses wafting around them. "Hello, Husband," she said when he drew his lips away from hers.

He took her hand and pulled her into the cottage, shutting the heavy wooden door behind them and leading her through the candle-lit interior. The furniture was somewhat worn, but not shabby. It was old looking, comfortable, and...after the almost obscene proliferation of doilies she had been living with in the tent...the rare knickknack or bit of lace made the room feel charming but uncluttered.

He pulled her through the room into the tiny kitchen, then down a short hall to what should have been a speck of a bathroom. But when he pressed the door open, she saw a large counter with two sinks, with a mirror covering the whole wall above it, and a shower big enough for four with several heads coming out of the wall at different angles. The thing that really caught her eye, however, was a bathtub that would compete in size with a Muggle hot tub, big enough for three with room to spare. And the water was steaming with flower petals floating across the top of it.

"Oh, this is lovely." She walked over to touch the water, just this side of too hot...her favorite temperature for a good long soak.

"I realized we never had a real honeymoon, and we probably never will, so I wanted to make tonight special."

Not sure what to make of that, she turned to face him and saw how worn he was. She lifted a hand and carefully traced his features with her fingers. His face was well lined, but the lines seemed more pronounced than usual, and his eyes were tired. "The night is special anytime you're nearby. But thank you. It's wonderful."

A house-elf flashed into the room, a large tray of finger food held high above his head. He set it on a small table beside the tub, then snapped his fingers and a bottle of

wine and two tall flutes appeared next to it. "Is sir needing anything else?"

"No, thank you, Twinkie. That will be all for tonight." Severus nodded to the elf and it disappeared.

"House-elves?" Hermione asked, surprised such a small place would have one.

"Please don't try and give him clothes, the owner claims he can't do without him." Severus touched her cheek, then began to unbutton her blouse.

"Twinkie? He's named after Muggle junk food?"

Severus grimaced. "It wasn't my doing. The codger who named him always had a strange sense of humor." Finishing with the buttons, he pushed the blouse from her shoulders and turned his attention to her jeans.

Hermione decided now was not the time. "Had a rough day, have you? You look tired."

"You have no idea. The Dark Lord was furious over the loss of the men who went after the Creeveys. It was practically a bloodbath. Expect a catalogue of dead or missing persons over the next few days."

"Oh, that's horrible." Hermione slipped into the steaming water and let out a contented sigh while he took care of his own clothes. "I mean, it's good we're that many Death Eaters shorter at the time of battle, but I'm sure they have families and such. And then I think...it could have been you." She had nightmares about him being tortured and killed while at one of those meetings.

"I worry about that all the time," he admitted as he dropped his shirt on the floor beside hers. "Not so much for my own sake, because my time with you is the only thing worth prolonging, but because you are far too young and innocent to die. But it is war." The last sentence was said with a heavy tone. Something was clearly troubling him.

After a moment, he slipped in beside her and wrapped her in his arms. "I sensed that something very good happened this afternoon. Care to share?"

"Um, it was good, great, really. But I can't."

He paused for a moment, but Hermione couldn't see his face, so she focused on his emotions and sensed indecision. "It wouldn't have anything to do with the Horcrux search Dumbledore has you out on, would it?"

Hermione turned her head in surprise, blinking as she tried to figure out how he knew. But of course, he would have had to know what had damaged Dumbledore in order to treat it, and as Madam Pomfrey wasn't an Order member, Severus was the most likely candidate. "I, um, can't confirm or deny that issue."

"Good. Have any idea how to destroy it?" He seemed completely unperturbed by her answer.

"Um, working on multiple projects at this time." It was clearly pointless to try and lie, though she couldn't come straight out and tell him anything.

"I'll lend you a book that may prove helpful. Just be careful." He lifted one of her hands from the water and pressed a kiss to her palm. "I would hate it if you lost one of these precious hands. Come to me before you do it, and I may be able to help you contain the problem. You're a very powerful witch, but there are many things for you to learn yet."

"Um, hmmm." She didn't want to commit, but she didn't want to cause trouble between them, either. She would have to think this over, decide what she dared share, even in a round-about manner. Harry would hex her for even thinking about verifying Severus's theory of their activities.

His hand tightened on her wrist, and his eyes bored into hers. "Promise me you will discuss your strategy with me before you try putting it into practice. For your own safety. Promise."

His fingers hurt on her wrist, and she gasped in surprise. "I promise to discuss it with you in advance of whatever it is we have to do."

After a moment, his fingers loosened around her wrist. "As much as I hate admitting it, you are the only good thing left in my life. I cannot lose you." He kissed the skin he had just bruised. "I'm sorry. I should be more careful with you."

She slid her lips across his in acceptance of his apology, and they didn't speak again for a long time.

When Hermione received the book by owl the next day, she wasted no time in beginning her search. Thankfully, Severus had marked a couple places he thought might help, and she was able to cut through the useless spells right off.

Harry and Ron were working on the Charms assignment she had given them when the owl flew into the tent and were both using great concentration as they attempted to make the spare bedroom pillows float over to them without speaking the words aloud.

Looking up at them, Hermione noted they were making some headway and each had a couple pillows sitting nearby. In a few more minutes she intended to have them send the pillows back. She couldn't be happier with the progress the two of them were making, and she hoped the kinds of things they were focusing on might come in handy.

"How come you aren't doing this too? It's your assignment." Ron's voice was frustrated.

She lifted her wand without taking her eyes from the book. One of his pillows came soaring at her. When it hit the base of her chair, she flicked her wand again, and it floated back to his feet. "Any other questions?"

"How do you do that? It's not fair."

"Calm down, Ronald. I couldn't handle a broom in a million years of practice and get it to respond as well as you did at three years old. We each have our strengths. Besides, I've been practicing the daily assignments when you've gone back inside for the night." Her eyes focused in, and she reread the sentence she had just skimmed. "That's it!" She sat up straighter in her chair and studied the words a third time. "I found the spell we need to destroy the Horcruxes!"

Grateful for the interruption, both boys forgot what they were doing and hurried over to where she was studying the procedure. "It's wicked difficult. We'll have to set up a containment field if we don't want to repeat what happened to Dumbledore. And I'll have to get some pointers." At this point she began writing notes to herself on everything they needed to prepare to get ready.

Harry put a quelling hand on her arm. "We can't tell anyone about this. No one is supposed to know. It's my project."

"Our project, and I'll keep things neutral; I just want to make sure I get things exactly right. It's tricky and dangerous." A feeling of elation filled her chest. Maybe they had a shot at this after all. If only they knew how to take down Voldemort when it was all over.

"Hey, Harry, I was wondering, didn't you say something about love being the answer to killing Voldemort? What exactly did Dumbledore say?"

"You know how funny Dumbledore was, really cryptic. But he said Voldemort didn't understand love and that it was the reason he couldn't stay inside me in the Ministry of Magic, because I can love. And you know, it was really strange, but a few nights ago, I was remembering everything about the night in the cemetery when Voldemort came back. Afterward, when I told Dumbledore what happened, he got this funny look in his eyes, like a look of triumph when I told him Voldemort had taken some of my blood

into himself. Like it was an advantage or something. But he didn't say anything about it."

"That is strange." Hermione made some more notes and bit her lip. "Well, best get back to your Charms. As soon as you can call and send back the cushions easily, we'll move onto Transfiguration."

Both boys groaned.

Hermione grinned, "Oh, but I think you'll be plenty excited about this assignment. Or at least in the end result," she amended. Seeing their identical looks of disbelief, she decided it was time to reveal her own little project. Since she had moved into the tent, Hermione had taken a few minutes most nights to practice changing forms and felt like she had it down now. She felt confident enough she thought she could help Ron and Harry begin working on their own Animagus forms, if they wanted to.

"Right, Hermione. Since we always loved the class, and changing cows into writing desks is going to help us a bunch in the last battle." Harry crossed his arms over his chest. And Ron's look was more than a little disbelieving.

Letting out a sigh of disappointment, Hermione stood and turned toward them. She crossed her own arms over her chest and sent them a withering look. "In all the months I worked with McGonagall on my special project, you never once asked me what I was doing. You weren't actually thinking I was turning cows into writing desks or something equally inane, were you?"

"No, of course not," Harry said, his shoulders shrugging slightly...a classic tell of his that he wasn't being completely honest.

"Well, yeah, we did, actually." Ron said. Harry scowled at him.

"I did bring the subject up on numerous occasions. I always wondered how you could have so little interest in something that obviously excited me. You never asked what it was...not even half-heartedly."

Ron scratched the back of his neck and tugged at the neck of his shirt. "We were kind of afraid you'd go off on some long-winded explanation we wouldn't understand anyway, so we didn't ask."

"Thanks for your honesty." Hermione knew her voice was far from sincere, but she was glad Ron had bothered to tell the truth, even if she didn't like hearing it. "But you're going to wish you bothered to humor me." With that she transformed to a starling, jumped and spread her wings, soared through the air. She took a moment to relish the feel of flight, the buoyancy and rush of excitement. She may not be any good on a broom, but she understood the boys' fascination with flying when she did so under her own power. After a minute she came to land on the table in front of Harry. Then she hopped to the ground, transforming back into her own shape as she landed.

"Bloody hell, why didn't you tell us sooner?" Ron's eyes all but bugged out of his face.

"You're one for secrets, aren't you? Any others in there we should know about, besides the name of your soul mate?" Harry sat in a nearby chair looking a little stunned. "How long have you been doing that anyway?"

When Ron had taken another seat, Hermione returned to her overstuffed chair and pulled her legs under her. "I began transforming the end of April, but it took a while to get it right. Then when everything happened at school, I was nearly there, but I've worked on it since I came here. Don't tell anyone; I've decided not to notify the Ministry until after the war is over."

"And you want to teach us to be Animagi? I say let's get to Transfiguration." Harry pushed a hand through his messy hair and leaned forward.

"Not until you can call those cushions to you and send them back silently and consistently. Consider it motivation."

Both boys grumbled, but within fifteen minutes they were doing a good job at the silent charms, so Hermione gave them each a book to read on getting ready for becoming Animagi.

"Reading," Ron grumbled. "I want to be *doing*."

"Yeah, well, you'll be more likely to be *doing* it safely if you know what you're about first. When you finish those books, switch. Then we'll start preparing ourselves for the change."

Hermione had never seen the boys so enthusiastic about homework assignments before. Ron actually took notes. It made her laugh to herself when she caught him at it, but she didn't comment. By the end of the week, they had finished both books and were ready to begin some practical work.

Hermione promised to start with them the next morning after they returned from Headquarters. They had been asked to mix a batch of healing potions the Order needed for their stock.

After their brewing was finished, Hermione sent Harry and Ron into the house so she could prepare herself for her date with her husband. Not that she mentioned the bit about the husband...the resulting discussion would certainly have made her late to meet Severus.

It had been five days since she had seen him. Though it had been difficult when they were at school, at least it seldom went more than three days between trysts, even if said visits tended to be shorter in duration and far too often included little more than stolen kisses.

This time they were meeting at a Muggle fast-food restaurant and had plans to take in a movie. Severus had grumbled when she suggested the activity, but acquiesced when she said she wanted him to understand something of her other world, since he'd been out of it for so long. Besides, it was the best place to hide in plain sight.

They agreed to go to Dover for the date, but Severus still planned to wear a glamour for the evening. Even in Muggle areas of the country, there was a slight chance he might be recognized.

Hermione popped into the out-of-the-way alley and then walked around to the front of the fast food stand, the air redolent with the scent of hot peanut oil and frying meat. She could feel Severus's presence, but knew he was in disguise, so she focused on him internally and began walking toward him. After a moment she was able to pinpoint him. He was disguised as a twenty-something brown-haired man with a mop not unlike Harry's...a fact she decided to neglect mentioning. He was a bit taller than in real life, and though the glamourised face was more handsome than his own, she decided she preferred the way he looked without the glamour. His eyes were on her, as if he had been watching for some time to see if she could pick him out of the crowd.

"Hello," she said, taking his hand in hers.

"Hello. I was wondering how long it would take you to find me." His face might have been different, but his voice was the same silky tone that always gave her goose bumps.

"I could find you anywhere. Anytime." She stepped closer to him, only inches from his chest.

His free arm went around her back and pulled her close until they were chest to chest. He swooped down and took her lips, lingering over the kiss, but keeping it reasonably low key since they were in public. "I like knowing that. And I guess I'd better stay on your good side because it means you could find me if you ever wanted to hex me into next year."

"Or if you ever stayed away too long, and I wanted to see you." She pressed her face into his neck. He smelled like himself: lemon soap and male musk.

"I could live with that." She felt him smile against her forehead before he released her. "I suppose we should get something to eat."

"I suppose." Hermione drew away, but kept hold of his hand. She led him toward the counter where she ordered fish and chips for each of them.

When they sat at a nearby table, Hermione cast a silent Muffliato and asked how things were going.

"Your silent spell casting is improving. Are you using it for everything now?" He asked instead of answering her question.

"I'm trying. I'm also working on some rudimentary wandless magic. It's a lot harder though, so it's still a struggle. Ron and Harry are really improving too, but Harry's Occlumency is making leaps and bounds."

Severus looked pleased, a real smile on his glamourous face. If his hand weren't still in hers, verifying who he was, she would have wondered if she had the wrong man. "How did you ever manage that?"

She smiled secretively. "It just took the right incentive...one you didn't have at your disposal."

"Very good. Keep it up. Have you had a chance to look at that book yet?"

His words of praise warmed her, especially as they were so few and far between. She knew he meant every word, and possibly more than he said. "Yes, I wanted to talk to you about that tonight. I think I've got everything figured out, but I want to run a couple things by you." She took a big bite of her fish, closed her eyes in ecstasy, and let out a low moan. "I really need to come here more often."

"I'll have to bring you back, then."

"We could make it a regular date. Every Tuesday night you could bring me for Muggle fare, and I could introduce you to Muggle culture." Hermione didn't think that was really the best use of their time together, though she was enjoying the time spent out in public together. Still, she couldn't help pulling his chain some. "Then we could have in-depth discussions comparing fish and chips with hamburgers and pizza. And maybe..." Her words were muffled as he kissed her.

Hermione smiled against his lips and enjoyed the lingering, teasing pressure of his mouth against her own. When he finally pulled back, she felt her head spin a bit. "That was interesting."

"Only way I could shut you up. If I thought for a second you were serious, I'd pop us both back to the cottage right now and remind you what we could be doing." He ran a finger down the side of her face, flicking the tip over her ear lobe and causing shivers of delight to shoot across her shoulders and along her spine.

"Who says I wasn't serious?" she asked with a grin.

He leaned in and kissed her again, though briefly this time. "Eat. You'll need your strength later."

Grinning even more broadly, she picked up a piece of fish and took another bite.

When they finished their meal, they walked hand-in-hand down the street to a nearby theater and got tickets for a movie Hermione had never heard of.

When the movie ended, she couldn't say she had more than a vague idea of the storyline, since they sat in the back row and kissed through most of it. She grinned to herself as they walked out of the theater after dark, thinking how *normal* the whole evening had been. Not normal for her, necessarily, but normal for a young adult date.

When they reached a quiet alley, he pulled her into his arms and Apparated them back to the cottage.

AN: A huge thanks to my new beta, countrymouse, whose suggestions were really spot on and incredibly prompt.

22: Making Memories

Chapter 22 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 22: Making Memories

Hermione woke in her husband's arms to the sound of bird song. It took only a moment for her to determine Severus was already awake. As he didn't say anything, she decided to enjoy his embrace in the silence for another few minutes.

It never ceased to amaze her that being in this man's arms made her feel utterly safe, utterly cherished...even when he fought the enchantment on them both. She rubbed her cheek over his chest, loving the feel of the crisp hairs moving against her skin.

"Ready to face the day?" His voice was low, rough from sleep, and his chest rumbled beneath her fingertips.

"Not remotely, but I suppose we can't stay here forever."

"No matter how we might wish it." One of his arms swept possessively along her back, but he made no move to extricate himself.

Another long moment hummed between them before she spoke, "I was wondering..."

"Of course you were."

She pinched his chest lightly in rebuke. "You were creating your own spells from scratch when you were still a student, right?" She didn't wait for him to respond, as she already knew the answer. "How much theory did you have to study before you were able to do that? And do you still create your own spells?"

"A lot of the theory is not covered in the Hogwarts curriculum until seventh year. Even then they don't cover enough for really complex spells. I did most of my study on my own time during fifth year. And yes, I do occasionally create my own spells still. Is there something in particular you want to create? What you need may already exist."

Hermione bit her lip as she considered what she should tell him. She didn't want to cause any trouble for him, but there was no one else she knew who was so suited to her question. She didn't realize she had been stroking his chest with her fingertips until he put his hand over hers.

"You'd better stop that if you wish to continue this conversation," he warned.

"Oh, sorry." She paused to thread her fingers through his. "Well, suppose I wanted a spell that could use a blood bond, or rather, shared blood to transfer an emotion from one person to the next. Would something like that already exist? If not, what would it take to create something like that?" She figured he might guess where she was going with this, but she didn't say right out what her purpose was. She knew he wouldn't ask.

There was a long pause before he answered. "I doubt such a spell is in existence. After all, why would someone normally want to do that, especially as it's a rather unique set of circumstances? Something along that line might be possible. I'll have to consider it."

"One other spell I was thinking about was maybe finding a way to harness a specific emotion of those around them. To magnify it, then direct it. Specifically through the bond. But maybe that would be just one spell, not two." Hermione licked her lips, but as her cheek was pressed so closely on his chest, she caught the tangy, sweet, salty flavor of his skin on her tongue. She felt a slight peak in desire from both of them.

"I imagine it's a particular emotion you're seeking to magnify. Something very specific? Those are both going to be incredibly complex spells to create, but I think they're possible. I could play around with them for you, see if it's better to run them side by side or together as one. Should I focus on hate?"

Hermione wondered if he were playing devil's advocate or if he was thinking about Harry needing to hate Voldemort to cast the killing curse. She was unable to determine his emotional response to her question as he had begun stroking her back with his long, skilled fingers, which distracted her.

"I was thinking of something a bit more positive. Hope, determination, but I suppose you could hypothesize using love as the basis."

His fingers stilled on her skin, and she knew she had caught him off guard. Several seconds passed as he seemed to be trying to figure out why she would need a spell like that. "I could. It might be hard to try out as there is little love between Wormtail and myself. I'd have to work on it in my spare time. On a scale of one to ten, how important is this spell to you?"

"Twelve. It could be pivotal."

She sensed his confusion. "All right. Are these spells to be used independently, or in tandem? Who casts them, the recipient, the person sending the emotion or a third party? There are many variables I need to understand."

Biting her lip, Hermione looked him in the eye. "How much do you need to know? How much do you feel it is safe to know?"

"It might be safer if I didn't know what I was creating, but then, it would be far more difficult to make the spell succeed if I don't understand the intended application."

Harry would be livid when he knew she had brought Severus into so many aspects of the fight, but Severus was completely right. He would need to know nearly everything. And she had some questions about destroying the Horcruxes. She took a deep breath and began explaining.

When he had a clear idea of what she needed for the spells, Hermione began asking general questions about the process of destroying a Horcrux without destroying the object itself. They never spoke of what the end goal was, but danced around the edges of the subject for some time. It was amazing that they could have an entire discussion on the subject without bringing up the word Horcrux once. Hermione gleaned a great deal of information while asking hypothetical questions about theoretical events. He pretended to not understand what she was referring to as he answered her questions, but from the detail of the answers she knew he understood it perfectly.

"And now," he said when the topic was played out, "we need to let the Dark Lord know I've finally manipulated you back into my pocket."

"You have a pocket?" She ran her fingers along his bare skin in a manner she now knew would tickle horribly. "Where is it?"

His hand stopped hers when she felt his sides twitch from being tickled, and she looked up into his eyes, smirking. "I was convinced some time ago, in case you've forgotten."

"But the Dark Lord doesn't know it. And we have to make it look as though I've been trying to convince you, manipulate you into believing me despite everything that has happened...without telling you much of the truth."

"Particularly since manipulating, by definition, includes the use of lies, or the twisting of truths until they look like something else entirely. What did you have in mind?"

Severus filled her in on the general idea, and Hermione added a suggestion or two. When they had finalized their plans, both dressed, and Severus made it look as though it was evening in the room instead of several hours past daybreak.

Hermione stepped outside the door, took a deep breath, then knocked timidly on the front cottage door. When Severus opened the door a moment later, she noticed he had returned the furnishings to perfect organization. She bit her lip and hesitated before greeting him. "Hello, Severus."

"Hello, my pet." He took her hand and drew her into the room. Hermione followed, filling her face with both excitement to see him and hesitation as she remembered their first post-Hogwarts meeting. This time, instead of swooping down on her immediately, however, he sat her on the nearby loveseat. This was to be a carefully choreographed seduction.

She fidgeted a bit, then looked him in the face. "I want to believe in you, Severus, but I'm not sure I can. You k...killed him. Please help me understand."

He knelt before her on both knees and took her hands in his. Hermione knew he was already in acting mode...she couldn't imagine him debasing himself so much in real life. Then again, if he were working to manipulate her, she supposed he might do so. "My pet, you know I've been spying for Dumbledore for years. Since before you were born. He knew about the vow I made to Narcissa. I told him, and he made me promise to follow through. He felt his spy was necessary to the eventual overthrow of the Dark Lord."

Hermione managed to look confused and infused her voice with a thread of doubt. "But why would he want to die? How can I believe you? He was just a man; maybe you tricked him. After all, he didn't know about the Dark Lord being in Quirrell's turban in my first year. He wasn't infallible."

Severus let out a low chuckle. "Of course he knew about Quirrell, my pet. Dumbledore was always one to keep his enemies close so he could keep an eye on them. If he had Quirrell in the school, he could monitor his activities. You may have noticed that I kept a close eye on him that year."

It was a skillful blend of truth and lies; Hermione knew what was true and what was not, both because she knew the truth and because the bond made it clear. And she wondered, if she hadn't felt this inner confirmation from him, would she have known what was true, or what was not with a man like this? "Really? I mean, Professor Dumbledore knew all that time?" She did her best to sound awed and dumbfounded.

Her let out a low rumble of silky laughter that would have turned her into a puddle of lust if it didn't have such a cold edge to it. "Of course. Didn't you say Dumbledore made some cryptic remarks about my trustworthiness?"

"Well, yes. Of course. But you know how he was. He always said things like that with a twinkle in his eye, like he knew things we didn't and he was having a good joke by

keeping it to himself." She made the comment sound exasperated and just a touch petulant. They had decided it would be best if she appeared to be questioning her loyalty and support of Dumbledore's tactics.

"There you go." He skimmed a finger over her cheek and looked at her intently. His desire grew in her, and she realized they were going to take things much farther in this memory than she had been prepared to do. The thought of making love for the Dark Lord's eyes to see made her extremely uncomfortable. "I've missed you, you know. I've missed our talks, your brilliant mind, your kisses, and more." During all of this his face grew closer as, hypnotically, his eyes trapped her and his lips dropped to hers.

It didn't take much effort to put up a token struggle with herself and him when he drew her into his arms. Nor was it impossible to let herself be drawn in after a time. The whole experience was different than usual, however. She could tell the experience was made to look as though he was continuing the manipulation. It wasn't loving. Though it was gentle, it catered more to his enjoyment than hers.

The whole experience left her feeling almost dirty, but she knew that might have been because she remembered throughout the encounter that Voldemort might see her with Severus. When it was all over, he held her in his arms for a long time. Then he rubbed a long stroke along her back.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I know that was far from pleasant for you. I hated to ask it of you. I promise to try and stop the memory as early on as I can. I don't want to share that with him." He pressed his lips to her temple to seal the promise. "If I had a choice I wouldn't share any of my time alone with you with him."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and breathed deeply of his scent. "It's getting late. The boys will wonder what happened to me."

He buried his face in her neck. "If you weren't staying at the Dursleys', I could come to you at night. We could sleep in each other's arms far more often."

She pressed a kiss to his chest, then backed away to look him in the eye. "If I weren't at the Dursleys I would have to be somewhere equally secure, if not more. Then I would have to explain my absences to more than just Harry and Ron. We each have our responsibilities. I have to be near Harry for me to carry out mine. But I want you to start looking into more permanent living arrangements. Somewhere we won't be touched by all of this. Somewhere we can go when it's all over."

His fingers brushed the hair from her nape and caressed the skin there. She still didn't feel settled after their acting job, but his touch was slowly wiping that dirty feeling away. "A life on the run: is that what you want?"

"Of course not, but unless you have other ideas, it's the best I can come up with. Please, I don't want to live without you, not even for the short months I would stay sane after they locked you up in Azkaban." She felt tears welling in her eyes, and her voice hitched on a sob.

"Shhhh, it's all right. I've already begun. I'll tell you more when I have details."

After another moment, he turned her chin up to face him. "How long since you took the potion last?"

"Nearly a month. I'll get to the apothecary in the next day or two and pick something up before we meet again." Hermione blushed, knowing the person who helped her at the shop would wonder what a young girl like her needed birth control for, and whether she was some loose woman.

"No, what they stock isn't always effective, and you'll be open to scrutiny. I'll make up a batch and bring it with me. There should be enough to last several months, and I won't have to worry about bad brewers." His hand caressed the back of her arm, before he pulled away. "We'd best get cleaned up."

Less than an hour later, Hermione was popping back to the tent. It was considerably later than she had ever stretched one of her visits before. When she arrived she found Tonks, Remus, Mad-Eye, and the boys gathered together in conference.

"Hermione! We were worried you'd been kidnapped or something. Where've you been?" Harry's tone was accusatory, but she saw relief in his eyes.

"I told you I had a date with my soul mate last night."

"Yeah, that was last night. What about this morning? Unless you . . ." Ron looked a bit sick and turned away.

Understanding his line of thought, Hermione fortified herself for any reaction she might get from the others. Not even the greatest prude would see anything wrong with her spending the night with her husband. If they knew about the marriage, that was.

Which none of them did.

"We've had people looking for you. You should've returned last night." Remus's tone was even, but she saw his nostrils flare once, then again. He looked at her, searching her face, then leaned in and took a less subtle sniff at her. His eyes hardened and narrowed, but he said nothing more.

"I apologize. If someone would have sent me a Patronus message, I could have reassured you that I was perfectly safe. I don't want people worrying about me. I know what I'm doing and take excellent precautions."

"Are you sure about that?" Remus asked, his voice as flinty as his eyes. "Are you sure you're not being just a little too trusting?"

"Constant Vigilance, Miss Granger. We can't afford to lose you now, and taking risks is dangerous in these difficult times." Mad-Eye's magical eye focused in on her, then wandered the tent again. His other eye stayed peeled on her. "It's too dangerous for you to keep this boy secret. We can't keep you safe if you're off in some unprotected location. Not to mention any, er, activities you're involved in that you shouldn't be."

"He's not dangerous, we're very careful in every way, and the location is protected. I'm not sure exactly where it's located, but it is secure. I assure you." Hermione resigned herself to placating and calming though she still felt a bit off from her encounter with Severus that morning. Today was certain to be a very difficult day.

That afternoon Severus appeared before the Dark Lord, his enacted memory ready for viewing. The leader was holding court with several of his minions, planning something with Bellatrix Lestrange, which Severus was able to extract from her mind as she passed him a few moments later. He made a mental note to have Hermione warn the Longbottoms ASAP, then turned his attention back to the gathering around him.

One by one the others reported, received responsibilities, or simply listened to propaganda before being dismissed. Well into his second hour, and after watching more than one Death Eater punished for not completing their assigned task in the manner their lord saw fitting, Severus was nearly alone with him. When he was called to the front, Severus bowed low and kissed the hem of the Dark Lord's robe. "Master."

"Severus, I hope you have useful news to report."

"I have gained the girl's trust once again." He spun out the memory, pulling out of it before things grew too intimate. He was relieved when the Dark Lord didn't ask to see more.

"Very good, Severus. Very good. I am pleased with your progress, and with the preparations you made in case of Malfoy's failure. You are well placed to receive information for me from the chit."

"She is weak and naïve and right in the middle of the Order's loving arms. She'll be a useful contact."

"What news of Potter?"

"He's spending a lazy summer with his friends, playing chess and Exploding Snap." Severus curled a lip in derision. "The girl complains of his and Weasley's lack of interest in anything but entertainment, and that when they aren't playing games, he drops into melancholy over the loss of his mentor."

The Dark Lord wore an evil grin as he chuckled low in exultation. "While he wastes his time, we will prepare to end him once and for all."

Severus held back a shiver at the pronouncement. *Not if I have anything to say about it.*

"I know Muggles take things easier in certain areas than wizards, but gees, Hermione." Harry was helping her set the table for dinner. Ron had popped back to the Burrow for a few minutes to pick up a book of Bill's on curse breaking that Hermione wanted to borrow.

Though Hermione had thought Ron was nearly over his interest in her, his finding out she had spent the night with her soul mate had thrown him again. She hated that, but nothing was going to change, so they would both have to live with it. If she dared to tell him she was married, it might go a way toward lulling him, but that still wasn't an option.

"It's not like you're thinking."

"Oh, it isn't? So you sat and talked all night, never doing more than holding hands and kissing? After the times you hinted that I be careful not to take things too far with Ginny, it's hypocritical, that's what." He set the glasses on the table with a little more force than necessary.

"If this were just some bloke I was dating you would be right, absolutely, but Harry . . . the situation is different. I'm nearly two years older than Ginny, and don't wave that away as unimportant, in a few years it won't matter in the least, but right now it's significant. And, well, we have a commitment. We're soul mates; that means there will never be another man for me. Never. Not just because I only want him, but because though I may find another guy attract-TIVE, I will never again be attract-TED. He's it for me. I didn't choose it, that's just the way things are. And our relationship has progressed to an adult commitment. Ginny's not any more ready to do that than you are."

"So are you talking marriage here? I mean, come on, you're only seventeen."

"I know. I figured I'd at least go another fifteen years before I settled with anyone. But things aren't always what we expect, or what they seem. And magic has a way of making things take on a life of their own." As illustration, she nudged the drying towel with her wand and it floated up and did a pirouette in the air before dancing across the room to the side of the sink. "If it weren't for the war, you might have witnessed my binding by now." It was a very careful obfuscation of the truth, and she held her breath to see his reaction.

Harry watched the performance, then shook his head in resignation. "I still say, be careful."

"I'm very careful, don't worry."

AN: Huge apologies for taking so long to get this posted up. I take fully responsibility for being so slow this week. A big thanks to my beta, countrymouse, for taking such a quick look at it, and to RobisonRocket for catching my remaining errors.

23: Seeking Assistance

Chapter 23 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 23: Seeking Assistance

The next evening after dinner, Hermione finished mapping out her plans in her head. Ron was speaking with her again, though things were fairly awkward between them yet. She could sense the occasional irritation from Harry. Since it had been too long since he saw Ginny last and she knew it was becoming a strain for him, she tried to overlook it.

She cast an extra Silencing Spell on the tent, then turned to the boys. "About the Horcrux issue, I think we might have to bring someone else in on it."

Harry shook his head. "No, it's my assignment. I'm not bringing anyone in. It's to stay between the three of us."

"He's right, Hermione, you have no right to change things without his permission." Clearly Ron was angrier with her than he admitted to. His response showed he had only listened to part of her words.

"Did I or did I not just bring up the subject with him, Ron? And, Harry, I think we have to. I've found the right spell to destroy the bit of soul." She shivered slightly. Even knowing it was the right thing to do, it gave her the creeps to think about destroying a soul. "I think I've worked out the details and safety issues, but someone is going to have to look at the items first, to make sure they aren't booby-trapped like the ring was. Bill's back home and doing well, I wondered if maybe we shouldn't tell him at least some of what's going on. He is an experienced curse breaker, after all."

"I don't know." Still, Harry did seem to be considering her suggestion, a fact for which she was grateful. He sat in an easy chair with his feet up on a blue velvet ottoman that was ringed with gold fringe. After a moment he shifted his feet, then tipped his head. Ron was unusually silent while Harry worked things out.

After a long pause, Hermione spoke again. "We can tell him as much or as little as you like, but before we kill ourselves, it might be good to have the objects checked for curses. And if he was there when we cast our own spell, he might help us contain any negative reactions better than we could do ourselves...or at least give us some extra pointers."

"She has a point, mate." Ron's voice was subdued, his admission grudging.

It made Hermione's head pound when she thought of dealing with Ron in a sulk for the rest of the summer. He was being a bit more reasonable than sometimes in the past, but his attitude toward her was frigid and thoroughly irritating.

"I'll mull it over tonight and we can talk about it tomorrow. So when are you going to let us actually try changing into our Animagus forms?"

She had to hand it to him, he knew how to change the subject. "As soon as you two are ready, and I say you aren't yet. So let's get there." She set about helping them prepare for their eventual transformations.

The next morning at breakfast, Hermione kept darting her eyes over to Harry, exchanging looks with Ron. Harry was eating his toast, well, shredding it was more like it, but some of the bread was making it into his mouth. He sat pensively over his plate, elbows on the table, and staring at his food. Somehow Hermione doubted he saw it at all.

After they had finished eating and Ron was zapping the dishes clean with his wand, Harry finally looked at her. "I admit we're in over our heads. We should talk to Bill, but only to help us with the spell parts. We're not telling him anything about the Horcruxes themselves. I don't want one of you killed over this, and he does seem the most likely candidate to help. I hate to say it, but it may be unavoidable to ask for help in other areas, as well."

So after breakfast and their daily Charms assignment...which the boys grumbled their way through, the trio walked to Mrs. Figg's and Flooed to the Burrow. Mrs. Weasley greeted them all with big hugs and invited them to stay for lunch. "You all look like you're losing weight taking care of yourselves over there. You must stay for lunch. It'll be an hour or so, and maybe you can take a ride on your brooms for a bit first. Ginny's already out there."

Though Hermione didn't want to lose the work time, she knew the boys were getting worn out by her study schedule, so she agreed with their enthusiastic thanks. "Is Bill up and around," she asked when Ron and Harry rushed outside to collect a couple brooms from the family shed and hit the skies.

"He'll be up for lunch, but he's still recovering. What do you need him for?" Mrs. Weasley's question was innocent enough, but Hermione wondered if it was an act, or if she really was only marginally curious.

"Oh, you know me. I just had a couple questions about something I read in a book and wanted to pick his brain. How are things coming along for the wedding?"

She couldn't have come up with a better distraction than the wedding if she had tried. Mrs. Weasley immediately launched into a full account of everything they had accomplished that week and what was still ahead of them. Fleur had gone home for a little while to work on her preparations with her family, and Ginny was running errands like mad for her mum. Between the wedding and Order duties, the family was extremely busy.

"So when do you leave the Dursleys'?" Mrs. Weasley asked when lunch was nearly on the table and the wedding discussion had been thoroughly canvassed.

"A few days before Harry's birthday, I think. We haven't set a final date, but we want to be out before he comes of age, since that's when his mother's protection ends. I was thinking about throwing him a little party, since he's never had one."

Mrs. Weasley turned and looked at Hermione in shock. "You're right, those Dursleys probably never gave him a real party before, and he's always been at their place for his birthday. We'll have to have one here. That's a week after the wedding. It won't give us much time to prepare, but I'm sure everyone will be happy to help out."

"Oh, you won't have time to put it together, I'm sure. I mean, the wedding is going to take time to recover from." Hermione would love to have some help in the planning, but she knew Molly Weasley already had her hands full, and she didn't want to add another burden to the woman's already full shoulders.

"Nonsense, there will be plenty of time. I say we make it a surprise and invite everyone he knows from the Order. Nymphadora will help me get the word out, and with your help we can certainly throw something together. He'll be of age, after all, and there's no better time for a celebration than when one's young man becomes an adult." Mrs. Weasley wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron, her emotions overflowing.

It made Hermione a bit uncomfortable and excited to be part of putting it together. "I appreciate it. I wasn't sure where to do it, or who to invite, and you know we're kind of living off Sirius's money right now so buying food and everything. . . ."

"Don't you worry over it. I'll take care of everything. Now, I hear Bill coming down the stairs. Best catch him and get to your question before the boys come back in and monopolize his attention." She touched the apron to her eye again, and Hermione turned toward the stairs where Bill was stepping on the floor.

"Hi, Hermione. Hadn't expected to see you today. Where are Harry and Ron?"

"On brooms...where else?" Hermione smiled and moved over to allow him past. He was looking a little better than last time she saw him, but he still looked pretty worn out.

Bill laughed and moved to the living room, where he took a seat on the sofa. "You have a great deal of patience to put up with their flying when you don't enjoy flying yourself."

I love flying, just not on a broom. If she thought she could have disappeared for half an hour without anyone noticing, she would have transformed and gone for a flight now. It was a beautiful day outside, and the soft summer breezes beckoned her. "I had a couple questions about that book you lent me and wondered if we could get a hand with some things. Your mum said you need a few days yet."

"I feel nearly back to normal, but the Healer said I have to take things easy for a bit longer yet. By Tuesday I should be back up to speed or close. I'll go back to work Wednesday, even if the Goblins won't let me do anything dangerous for a couple more weeks."

"As well they shouldn't." Mrs. Weasley's voice came back to them from the other room. "You're still recovering, it was a serious bite and you don't get over those in one day. You should still be in bed."

Bill winced and Hermione laughed. "Well, how about if we come by Tuesday afternoon and pick your brain some, then?"

"That would be fine. What is it you're doing?"

The back door slammed open, and Ron came in crowing about a new move he'd tried out in the paddock while Harry entered with his arm around Ginny's shoulders. Hermione smiled at their impeccable timing, and the way Harry and Ginny glowed when they were together.

"You should have been there, it was great. A perfect day for flying." Ron dropped a hand on Hermione's shoulder and gave it a squeeze, his animosity toward her temporarily abated by his enjoyment of the outside air. "Bet even you could enjoy soaring through the trees and feeling the wind on your face."

"I'm sure even I could enjoy that. I'll have to take a spin later." Hermione stood and straightened her clothes. "I guess I better go help your mum put lunch on the table. We'll be back to talk then Tuesday."

Bill nodded, then turned his attention to Ron, who was describing the pitch-and-roll move he'd managed on the old broom. Harry and Ginny were nowhere in sight. That realization made Hermione grin.

The three friends Flooed over to the Burrow to speak with Bill on Tuesday afternoon. The weather was cooler than usual and a storm was expected before the afternoon melted into evening, but Bill agreed to take a stroll in the yard with them.

"So what is this about, exactly?" he asked when they had put some distance between themselves and the house.

"We have something we need you to take a look at," Harry said. "We're concerned it might be cursed. We can't tell you what it is, what we're doing with it or anything like that. And you have to keep the fact that you know anything at all about the situation to yourself...not even Fleur can know we brought this to you. But we wondered if you could help us a bit."

Bill ran a finger across one of the scars that slanted over his cheek, taking the moment to look at each of them in turn. "You want my help, but you won't tell me why or what you're doing? Do you know what you're doing? I mean, this is serious stuff you're getting involved in...especially if you're handling cursed objects."

"We know." This time it was Ron speaking. "We promised everyone we would turn to the Order for help if we needed it. The quest is still secret, and you can't tell anyone anything about what we show you or what we need you to do. But we know things are a bit over our heads right now, and we're trying to be careful."

"You three, careful?" He lifted his eyebrows in mock surprise, then glanced at Hermione. "Sorry, I didn't mean to include you in that. I'm sure you're very careful, Hermione. It's just these two gits I'm talking about."

Hermione smiled. "Well, hopefully I'm wearing off on them some. Heaven knows they're wearing off on me a bit."

He tucked his hands in his pockets and let out a long, low breath. "That's not reassuring, you know? So what is this object you've got that I can't tell anyone about? It's not dangerous, is it?"

They approached a bench on the other side of a large shrub, and Harry pulled a kerchief from his pocket and uncovered the locket. Bill's eyes grew wide, and he tipped his head, taking a closer look. He paled.

"Sit down, Bill." Ron, nudged him toward the bench, and Bill sat as he took the locket in his hand.

"This is dark, mate. I can feel it without putting any spells on it. There's something evil in here." He studied it, flipping it over, then back to the front again where he ran a finger over the intertwined snakes. "Did it belong to Salazar Slytherin or something?"

"Yeah, it did. Can you check it for any curses?" Harry's matter-of-fact response made Bill gape at all of them.

"OK, I have to ask again. Do you kids have any idea what you're getting yourselves into? Even if we had half the Order dealing with this, it could still be pretty dangerous."

"We've been handling dangerous since we were eleven. Come on, can you help us or not?" Hermione felt her palms turning damp and sweaty. If he refused, they would be at a standstill. She knew a lot about Charms and Transfiguration, but there was still too much she didn't know about curse breaking. They couldn't move forward safely without Bill's help. She didn't trust anyone else to be discreet about the locket or the curses. He had to say yes.

"I want to know what you're going to do with this locket. What is your quest?"

Harry passed a hand over his eyes and sighed. "If we tell you everything, we'll have to *Obliviate* you afterward, and none of us are really that advanced with that particular spell. Just trust that it's necessary and is pivotal to succeeding against Voldemort once and for all."

Bill looked back at the locket again and finally shook his head. "I can't believe it, but I'm going to help you, under your own rules...on two conditions."

"What's that?" Ron asked.

"You be very, very careful with this even when I've taken any curses off of it. And you promise to bring any other items of significance to your search to me for the same treatment."

Relief was the major emotion Hermione felt when she heard his words. He would help them. And maybe she could still get him to help her with details on constructing protective wards when she cast the spell to do away with the Horcrux.

The three of them sat back and watched while Bill pulled out his wand and began circling the locket with the tip, muttering words Hermione couldn't quite catch. She wondered if that was because he was so focused or because he didn't want her trying to do the incantations on her own without proper instruction. She grinned at the thought.

More than half an hour passed while they watched and waited. Hermione heard birds chattering in the trees, the wind blowing through the green leaves. Then the sound of a starling hit her ears, and focusing on the sound, she was able to understand its mournful song not the words, which she could only understand while she was a starling too, but the emotion behind them. Its mate had died, and she felt the pain of separation the bird expressed. When she imagined her life without Severus, she understood the mourning sound completely.

Finally, Bill nodded, tried one more incantation, and returned the object to Harry. "There's still something in there, but it isn't dangerous by itself. At least, it looks benign as long as you leave it alone...it should only be a problem if you try and remove it. You aren't planning to hit the thing with any other spells, are you?"

None of them answered and he looked them each in the face, then let out a huff of irritation. He zeroed in on Hermione as though figuring he'd be most likely to get a straight answer from her. "What are you planning to do to this locket?"

She intertwined her fingers behind her back and fought the desire to roll forward on the balls of her feet like a guilty four-year-old. "I can't tell you."

"Do you know the proper shielding spells for anything that might jump out at you when you attack this thing?"

She wet her lips and held her breath. "I was hoping you might help me refine that a bit."

He fingered the dragon's tooth that dangled from his ear as he closed his eyes in resignation. "I'll help you with anything I can. Just, don't get yourselves killed, OK? Mum will hex me to Hungaria."

AN: Again, thanks to my beta, countrymouse, who got my new few chapters back to me so quickly, and to Southern_Witch_69 for her time to validate this chapter. I wish you all a Happy Christmas!

24: A Little Shopping

Chapter 24: A Little Shopping

After spending more than an hour hashing out details on the containment charms, and taking a few tries with Bill there to correct them if they did it wrong, Hermione felt confident they were ready to take on the Horcrux. She and Ron would work together to cast and hold up the containment shield as their combined effort would make the shield stronger and less likely to waver.

Over the past few days Harry had been practicing the spell needed to denature the locket, so now they only had to decide where to do it. Several locations had been considered and rejected from the Forbidden Forest near school grounds, to the Weasley paddock, to Stone Henge. It had to be somewhere they wouldn't be happened upon accidentally, it needed to be large enough to contain any possible backlash and . . . The list of requirements was so long the three of them hadn't been able to agree on a single location.

After Flooing back to Mrs. Figg's fireplace, the three of them headed back to the tent. "So now we just need to figure out where," Ron said.

"Any new ideas?" Hermione asked, mentally thumbing through the possibilities again.

"Maybe." Harry ran a hand through his unruly hair, but said nothing more.

Hermione eyed him up and down, waited for him to speak, then grew irritated when they reached the tent and he still hadn't said anything. "Where is it?"

"I'm not sure. I mean, I haven't seen it, so I don't know if it will fit the bill or not, but I guess it's mine, so we could do as we pleased if it fits the criteria." He muttered under his breath, moving around the living room, running his fingers over the binding of the scrap book of his parents' pictures that Hagrid put together for Harry during his first year at Hogwarts. "It might not work at all...it depends."

"What is it?" Ron asked with a huff of irritation.

"We were going to go there anyway. It'll just be a matter of moving the time up a bit, and not all that much either. If not, we can always look at other places."

Though he was still speaking to himself, muttering in a barely understandable volume, Hermione thought she knew what he had in mind and appreciated the poetic justice. But as they had no idea what the place looked like, it would be best to take a look around before making any firm decisions. "Do you know where it is, what the boundaries are, or should we ask Remus to take us out?"

"Better get Remus to take us for a quick jaunt. Just a friendly visit, mind...to get some closure, take a look around. If we're going to do it there, we'll want to go back alone." Harry sat in an overstuffed chair and ran a finger over his scar. "And it might not be suitable at all. We'll have to see."

Ron looked back and forth between them as if waiting for one of them to clue him in. "Did I miss something? Where are you talking about?"

"Godric's Hollow." Harry stood and walked over to the ice box, pulled out a bottle of butterbeer and returned to his seat. "I guess we'll need to write to Remus and see if he's available."

"The full moon is past, so we should be able to get him to take us fairly soon." Hermione grabbed her own bottle of butterbeer and one for Ron, tossing it to him.

"The sooner the better, I say. It gives me the screaming abdabs just knowing Harry's carrying a bit of that ruddy git's soul in his pocket." Ron twisted off the cap and took a long draw from the bottle.

"Tell me about it." Harry sat up when Hermione brought him a parchment and quill to write to Remus with.

"Then get to it."

It was the next morning before they received a written response from Remus. He didn't have time to spare until after Bill and Fleur's wedding, but promised to take them out the day after. He set the time for one in the afternoon, and Harry was quick to write back that it would work great for them, even though all three would rather get it over before then.

"Well, since we won't be heading out there today, how about a trip to Diagon Alley? I have a few things I need to pick up." Hermione's suggestion was met with enthusiastic approval from the boys, who were anxious to get out of their scheduled study time and stretch their legs in the wizarding world.

When breakfast was cleaned up and Hermione had made Harry and Ron help her straighten things up around the tent a bit, she grabbed her list of potion ingredients and they headed out to Mrs. Figg's to Floo over. Hermione cast Disillusionment Charms on them before they left the tent, not wanting an entourage of Aurors following them along.

When they reached Mrs. Figg's back door, Hermione was grateful to find the old woman gone, probably out buying more cat food. She tapped her wand on the back door and chanted the password to open the door, then led the boys in. When she was sure the door had sealed behind them, Hermione led them to the Floo, and then to the Leaky Cauldron.

Despite the waves of fear that had flowed through the magical community after the attack at Hogwarts, there were still plenty of people walking through Diagon Alley. Fewer than usual, but it wasn't deserted. Pedestrians kept close watch on their surroundings and traveled in groups of two or more now instead of single people wandering around for a casual afternoon of shopping, but they didn't stay holed up in their homes like Hermione had feared.

Before making a trip to Gringott's for funds, Hermione allowed the boys to drag her to the nearby broom store to look at the newest models and check out the latest Quidditch gear. Hermione kept a close eye on the boys, noticing what each of them exclaimed over, making mental notes for future birthday and Christmas presents.

This mental note taking was the only thing that kept her from getting bored in under two minutes. Still, she was ready to leave the store at least ten minutes before she could drag Ron and Harry out. She figured it would be more than compensated for when they reached the apothecary and she began picking out potion ingredients.

Speaking of which. "Hey," she began when they were once again on their way toward Gringott's and there was some space between themselves and others along the street. "I've been working on details for this Potions project." She stopped when they both groaned aloud.

"Come on, it's bad enough we're stuck making healing potions while everyone else is in meetings without doing more in our spare time. How is studying Potions going to prepare us for battle?" Ron rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, it's a waste of our time, that's what."

Glaring at the two of them, Hermione let out a huff of irritation. "Well, in case you've forgotten, Ron, it was *apotion* that kept the two of us, and Ginny, Neville and Luna from being hurt or even killed in that battle at the school."

Harry stopped and turned to look at Hermione, disbelief on his face mingled with admiration. "You're going to try and make..."

"Not so loud, will you?" Hermione interrupted him.

Ron stepped up so they were in a little huddle on the side of the street. "You're gonna make Felix Felicis? But I thought that was supposed to be bloody difficult."

"And dangerous, yes," Hermione answered, wondering what kind of spectacle they were making for everyone who could see them. "But then Polyjuice was about three years too advanced for us in second year and it turned out fine. I need to do a tiny bit more research." Asking her Potions-expert husband could be considered research, right? "And we have to find somewhere to make it where it won't be interrupted. I would say Headquarters, but there are far too many people running in and out of there. Unless we can find a place where no one else goes." She nudged them both and they began walking again.

"That could be a trick." Harry stuffed his hands back in his pockets as they walked up the steps to the bank and got into line.

By mutual silent consent, they didn't speak of the potion any more while they were waiting for their turn on the roller coaster-like carts. There were still a couple people ahead of them in line when Bill hailed them from the side. "Ron, Harry, Hermione, you didn't mention you were heading into town."

The three of them turned and looked, smiling as Bill approached. Hermione noticed a woman flinch when she looked at Bill's once-handsome face, which now had several long scars running diagonally across it. Inured to the surprise of his scars now, Hermione only smiled and greeted him back.

"Hadh't planned on it. Just decided spur of the moment this morning," Harry said, clasping Bill's hand.

Bill gave them each a serious look. "Give your watchers the slip, or did they follow you here?" He glanced around the cavernous building nonchalantly, and Hermione knew he was looking for their guards.

Busted.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know where they are, but we Flooed straight to Diagon Alley from Mrs. Figg's, and we'll return the same way without leaving the area. We'll be perfectly safe."

Bill nodded but he didn't look convinced. "I hope you're keeping an eye out. Following Moody's creed."

"Constant vigilance!" Ron said in a low, but firm voice.

"Hey, Griphook." Bill looked up and called to one of the goblins, who came over, looking the three teens up and down, a sour expression on his face. Then again, Hermione mused, she didn't recall seeing a goblin look any other way. When the goblin arrived, Bill leaned in, lowering his voice. "Hey, can you help my kid brother and his friends. I hate to ask you to move them up in line, but they need to get back home where it's safe. Soon." He eyed them all seriously. "And come get me when they're done before they leave the building."

Hermione felt a bit guilty again and a bit irritated. They weren't children anymore, and while she appreciated everyone's concern for her, she didn't like being coddled. Then she paused and turned back to Bill, read the stoney-faced expression on his face and realized his plans. "Oh, no, you aren't sending for our babysitters."

Bill gave her a dark, angry look. "You're not walking around out there alone."

"We're not alone, there's three of us," Ron pointed out. "And we're adults."

Fuming, Bill grabbed the two boy's arms and pulled them closer to Hermione, lowering his voice to barely more than a hiss. "One of you isn't, and might I remind you, he's the bloody Boy Who Lived. The biggest target Voldemort has."

"Gee, thanks, I hadn't cottoned on to that fact." Harry shook his arm out of Bill's grasp. Bill let his arm go, but didn't back off any.

"You can't go haring off anywhere you please without backup. You're still damned kids."

"Kids who managed to defeat a troll when we'd been at Hogwarts barely two months," Hermione whispered. "And we can't have an Auror or three following us around. We've purchases to make, and Kingsley or whoever will feel it their responsibility to pry."

"What kind of purchases?"

Hermione debated answering him for a long moment. "Potion ingredients."

"Well, hell, I'll pick up whatever you need tonight before I go home from work."

"No. I have to pick them out myself. You know Potions was never your strongest subject." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Hermione wished them back. Severus had been the one to tell her that.

Bill's eyes narrowed. "How did you know that? Never mind, it's beside the point."

"Fine. If you don't let us take care of this today, we'll just sneak out another time. We can't have everyone knowing our business." This time it was Ron.

Bill grimaced. "Look, I'll meet you all after you get back up here, take you down to get your ingredients with my back to you and facing the door. Then we can meet up with some backup for the rest of your shopping. Can you live with that? I already know some of your secrets. I hardly think one more will make much difference, especially since I'm so lousy at Potions. Thanks for the reminder." He shot a comparatively mild glare at Hermione with that one.

It was with some difficulty that Hermione managed to keep her smile to herself. She wouldn't have to speak the names of all the ingredients anyway, as they were written down. This may work reasonably well as a compromise. At least Bill wouldn't feel it necessary to alert the authorities if an ingredient was mildly shady. "That sounds doable. Harry, Ron, what do you think?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair, then looked self conscious and patted it back into place. He had been doing that a lot lately. "That sounds OK."

"I can live with it, I guess." Ron rolled his eyes.

"Done." Bill backed away from their little scrum and nodded to Griphook, who stood impatiently to the side. "Let me know when you get back with them."

Griphook nodded, then led them to the carts heading down to the vaults.

Ten nauseating minutes later the cart came to a halt outside Harry's vault. Hermione stood uncertainly from the cart and held her stomach, grateful when Harry offered an arm in support. She had always hated that ride.

When the vault opened, Harry stood blinking at the huge stacks of gold that filled the vault to the ceiling. "Is it bigger then it used to be?"

Griphook nodded. "Had to do some enlarging to include the Black vault into yours. Then you've had an extra deposit or two. I'll give you a list when we reach the main floor if you like."

"Bloody hell, Harry. How much do you have in there?" Ron stood in open mouthed shock.

"No idea." Harry shook his head, then began gathering fistfuls of galleons and stuffing them into the money bag he'd brought along. "How much are ingredients going to cost, Hermione?"

"Um, I brought some money, I don't have a lot, but I figured it would be enough for a first batch."

"Sirius would want his money to be used to," he slid a sideways glance at Griphook, "accomplish our objectives. How much?"

Hermione calculated the total for the ten batches she thought she would need to make, then told him. Ron gasped in shock. Harry simply grabbed a few more fists full of galleons before pulling the drawstring closed on his bag, stuffing it back in his pocket.

A hellacious ride back to the main level and Hermione exited the cart, her knees feeling weak and her stomach churning. She was glad Harry had grabbed so much money, she didn't want to do that trip again anytime soon.

"We'd better get some changed to pounds to buy food with." Harry led the way to the changing counter, and Hermione forced her rubber legs to make her follow.

Then she realized part of why she felt like she had heartburn. The tug of the wards she put on the diary had been working on her since partway through the ride back up from the vault. Plus, her husband was very angry about something. Noticing the line was plenty long, she pulled the diary from her back pocket and grabbed the Muggle pen she carried around with it.

She flipped it around to the most recent page and lifted her eyebrows at his venom.

Bloody hell, what do you think you're doing running around Diagon Alley unescorted. Even I heard about it in a matter of minutes. Get somewhere safe.

Aren't you going to answer me?

These last words arrived as she read the ones above.

I was on the goblin cart and just barely cracked open the diary. Everything's fine. We're all safe.

Stupid woman, don't you know how many people are out to get that boy, and yet you run around as though you haven't a care in the world. How am I supposed to protect you? At least in that flimsy tent you're just inside the protection ward and you have a guard. But going around without your guard is just plain stupid.

*I believe you mentioned the stupid part more than once. And we're not going to wander off alone. There are three of us*She couldn't help baiting him, he irritated her with his nasty disposition. Besides they already had Bill breathing down their necks without having to deal with her husband in a snit.

Do I need to send a note to tip off Mad-Eye Moody about you three? He and Molly Weasley will have you so firmly affixed to Headquarters you won't get out again for ten years.

Which will allow the Dark Lord to grow stronger and stronger and will undoubtedly kill you and me. Don't worry, Bill Weasley is being every bit as protective as you. He won't let us leave the bank without him, and as soon as I finish my one important stop, he'll make sure the Aurors are there to baby-sit us through the rest of the trip.

That reminds me, which is the best place to buy potion ingredients?

What are you making?

*A little of this, a little of that. None of the ingredients are absolutely controlled*She added that last bit just to irritate him.

What are you making, wife?

You really don't want to know. And if I don't find somewhere secure to make the stuff, I won't be brewing anything. Any ideas of where I can make something where others won't get into it? The tent in the Dursleys' back yard is definitely out.

We will be discussing your illegal potion brewing when next we meet face to face.

She could feel him seething. Though she considered needling him some more, she decided she didn't have a death wish, so she relented*It's not illegal, but I did want to discuss some techniques and things with you before I begin brewing anyway.*

That seemed to placate him a bit, but he was still seething when he put plume to parchment again***I need to see you again. Immediately, if possible. I can put on my glamour and meet you somewhere.***

I have errands to run today, things to do. I want to see you, of course, but I need to get things done as well. Starting with potion ingredients. You never said where the best place to shop is.

Burton and Barton. It's only a few doors down from those Weasley twits' place. Don't go to the little shop everyone takes their children to buy ingredients for school. The man has no discretion. If there is anything telling about the particular items you are buying, the whole wizarding world will know by nightfall...including the Dark Lord. Besides, Burton's stock is superior, and he tends to keep some of the more legality-skimming ingredients on hand. Though I don't believe he stocks anything that's absolutely illegal either. If you need anything like that, I'll have to pick the items up for you since you aren't going into Knockturn Alley...baby-sitters or no. But then you'd have to justify your reason for making such a potion, if that were the case.

So it's near Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes?

Yes, I imagine you're going there anyway, aren't you?

While I'm with Harry and Ron, how can I not? I'm also hoping for a trip to the book store.

Fine, you will not go anywhere in Diagon Alley without a competent adult wizard by your side today. You are my wife. You may not have chosen that state, but you will follow my orders when they are for your own good.

Why Severus, I never knew you cared.

There are bits of you I would miss if you were killed, my pet.

Her eyes narrowed when she read that, and she all but stabbed at the paper with her pen in her fury. How dare he use that term with her? How dare he ~~he~~*promise I will personally give you a full frontal lobotomy if you ever call me that awful name in our diary again. It is only for the Dark Lord, and I refuse to be belittled that way when it isn't for his benefit.*

There was a bit of a pause. *I think I believe you. You can be a raging harridan when you want to be, my dear.*

Hermione would have taken offense, but then she realized she felt little shoots of amusement and...was that lust...coming through their bond. Had her comment actually excited him?

Now I definitely have to see you. Expect to run into me in Flourish and Blotts. Shake your babysitter for a few minutes if you can, and come find me. I'll be waiting for you.

Hermione felt a shiver of anticipation run down her spine, then knowing he had closed his diary, she closed her own and looked up to where Harry was making his money exchange. Thank goodness they would be leaving soon.

She couldn't wait to slide into her husband's arms.

AN: Again, thanks to countrymouse for betaing this for me, and thanks to all my reviewers! Also, as always, thanks to the Admins for all they do, especially Soul Bound who worked on this chapter.

25: Scenting The Truth

Chapter 25 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 25: Scenting the Truth

When they emerged into the sunshine a few minutes later, Hermione was glad to see both Ron and Harry keep their wands in hand. Though with Harry only days from turning seventeen, she hoped he wouldn't have need to use it in public, as that was just one more headache for them to deal with. Severus seemed to think they would be relatively safe in Bill's company, but Hermione wasn't about to be taken by surprise.

Bill began leading them toward the nearest Apothecary, but Hermione redirected him. "Not there. Burton and Barton, close by your brothers' shop."

"That's a lot further away. Besides, this one has most anything you could need."

Time to hedge. "I've been told not only are Burton and Barton's ingredients superior to this Apothecary, but that their discretion is far better. And since you wouldn't want your mum to find out you took us to a shop to buy some, er, difficult to acquire ingredients. . . ."

Groaning, Bill glowered at her. "Difficult to acquire? You don't mean illegal, do you?"

"There's nothing absolutely illegal about anything I'm getting." It was the truth, but the more she hesitated in telling him the whole truth the fewer questions he was likely to ask...out of self preservation if nothing else. "Just one or two things are more unusual. The Aurors won't haul me off to Azkaban, just question me a bit if they find out. But I'd really rather not go there at all." Hermione finished her whispered discussion.

Bill closed his eye in resignation again. "Now I'm wishing I just let you go shopping on your own. I didn't need to know even that much about your activities. I hope this doesn't blow up in my face." But he led the way down the street toward WWW, and Hermione smiled at the boys, following along.

Harry looked a bit surprised and concerned about her revelations, but Ron only grinned. Part way down the street, Harry leaned in and whispered to her. "You weren't serious about some of the ingredients being dodgy, were you?"

"Dodgy? Who said they were dodgy? No, just more rare. If there were illegal ingredients in here, do you think Slughorn would have waved the vial of elixir in front of the whole class? Honestly." Not that she wouldn't have been willing to get some items that were slightly over the legal line if she needed them, but it was a lot nicer knowing even the Aurors wouldn't bother her over anything she was buying. OK, so maybe Tonks or Kinglsey would since they knew her. Tonks seemed willing to get involved wherever she saw a need.

Another good reason they had lost their trackers for a while.

When they entered Burton and Barton Apothecaries ten minutes later, Bill still hadn't spoken to the trio. Not that Hermione minded. She knew Bill had gotten in over his head, especially as he wasn't being invited into their secrets. She couldn't blame him for being wary considering what little he knew about their activities. In his place she would be more than a little concerned.

The shop smelled like part herbalist, part chemist with the acrid scent of preserved bug and animal bits permeating the dried plant matter. Hermione was excited by it and wished she had time to really browse the shelves. A stooping man with graying hair but an expensive taste in clothes came out of a back room when the bell rang on the door and took a look at the four of them. "Hello, I'm Mr. Barton."

With a smile, Hermione stepped forward and pulled out her parchment. "I have a number of items I need to pick up, if you could assist me." Unrolling the page, she made a couple of quick reductions on amounts and then handed the paper over. She would only buy enough for four batches today, at least when it came to the rarer and more expensive ingredients.

To give him credit, he didn't so much as lift an eyebrow when he saw the list. Lowering her voice, Hermione leaned over the counter, "You came highly recommended by someone who has done a large bulk of shopping here over the years. Not only because your quality and, shall we say, variety, of ingredients is superior to many other shops, but because you are known for discretion."

He met her eye, studied her as if considering her. Then he glanced at her male companions, lingering on both Bill and Harry, and nodded. "Of course, Miss. We take great pride in our superior service. I'll be the soul of discretion. Give me a few minutes, would you?"

Hermione nodded and turned around to face the boys. Bill was determinedly turned away, facing the door, his wand drawn. Harry and Ron alternately watched her, the man collecting ingredients, and the strange items on the shelves. Despite their apparent distraction, neither of them put away their wands.

As Mr. Barton added items to the front counter, Hermione checked the ingredients for quality and freshness. Most of the items she approved of, but there were a couple things she set aside to ask him about, and when she finished reviewing everything, she turned to his expectant face. "Don't you have any Welsh Green dragon scales that are fresher than these? They look a bit old, and I wouldn't want to spend so much for items that might have lost some potency, as they are very important to my project. Also the lacewing needs to be in larger pieces than this for the particular potion I'm working on. And I'm not certain what this stuff is," She tipped a tube of white powder toward him, "But it's definitely not ground bicorn horn. Or at least not unadulterated." She pinned him with a glare that would do her husband proud.

To her surprise the man perked up and chuckled. "You do know your way around a cauldron, then." He pulled another tube of white powder, definitely bicorn horn this time, from a coat pocket and placed it on the counter. "I had intended to give you the correct ingredients, but I wondered how easily you could be fooled. The dragon scales will work fine, but they may have lost a bit of potency. With what I expect you intend to create, I suppose that small loss may make a minimal difference."

He moved around, collecting the new scales and larger lacewing pieces for her. When he returned to the counter, Hermione inspected the ingredients and nodded. "I had a very good Potions master, you know, and I'm one of the best in my class."

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "So I've heard. Miss Granger, isn't it?"

Hermione blinked. "Er, yeah." She fingered her wand, putting it at ready access. How did he know who she was? Ron appeared at her side, his wand pulled out and at the ready. He didn't lift it threateningly, but its visibility was a low-level threat as it was.

"I do read the *Daily Prophet*, and I doubt anyone in the wizarding world wouldn't recognize your companion." He nodded to Harry. "Which makes this young man Ron Weasley, right?"

"Yeah," Ron's answer was wary, and he didn't return the store-owner's smile.

"Hermione stayed poised for any attack on his part. Severus said the man was trustworthy, but he may not know everything in this case.

"Looks like we've got company," Bill said from the front door, swearing low. "Do you have a back exit? Or can we use your Floo?"

Hermione turned and saw a gaggle of reporters crowding around the shop doors. This was one of the reasons they hadn't gone out in the wizarding world much. It was bad enough dealing with owls from all of the magazines and newspapers without having to put up with them in person. Perhaps they should have camouflaged themselves before leaving the bank. Too late now.

"Of course. Ward the door until we're through, would you?" Mr. Barton returned to adding up the cost of everything and quoted a price.

Harry turned and stared at Hermione. "I thought you needed more than that?"

"I'm only buying enough for a couple attempts right now. I'll get more in a couple months when I need them. It's best not to let some of the ingredients get too old as they have a short shelf life."

"She's right, of course." The man took the money from Harry and returned their change to him. "There's Floo powder on the mantle. Would you like me to deliver these items, or would you prefer to take them along?"

Hermione considered her options. The bags were fairly bulky, but then she wasn't entirely certain he wouldn't substitute the old dragon scales given half a chance. She cast a charm on the package to turn any bags inside stiff so her lacewings wouldn't be crushed before she could get them home. "We'll take them along. Thank you, and I hope to be returning again soon."

"Any time, young lady." The man patted her on the arm, then motioned toward the Floo. "It's nice to do business with one who knows their potion ingredients.

A moment later Hermione was spat out of the fireplace at the Weasley shop, greatly relieved to be away from the reporters and to have the ingredients in her possession. If the store owner was trustworthy, it might take a while before the reporters found them at the joke store.

"Hermione." Fred pulled her to her feet and cast a cleansing charm to remove the black and gray smudges from her face, hair and clothing. "What are you doing here?"

Harry came through the connection, followed shortly by Ron and Bill before they could explain. "Just decided to go out to do some shopping," Hermione said when everyone had arrived. "We couldn't leave Diagon Alley without visiting your store, though."

Bill grunted and touched a scrape on his elbow where he must have bumped it in the Floo. "You three stay here until Kingsley arrives to escort you wherever else you're going. Promise me." He held his wand in a semi-threatening manner.

Though Hermione wasn't the least concerned that he would hurt them, she didn't doubt he would tie them up in magical cords until the Aurors could arrive if he thought they wouldn't comply willingly. "We'll stay here. You have my word of honor." She glanced at the boys, who were already too absorbed in the contents of the shelves to have heard the request. "I wouldn't be able to drag them out of here in under thirty minutes anyway."

That, at least, brought a twitch to the side of his mouth. "I'd like to take a good look around myself, but I've already wasted most of my lunch break with you lot, so it'll have to wait. I'm counting on you to be the level-headed one, despite what you said about their bad influence gaining hold on you. Please, be careful."

"I'll do my best. You aren't the only one nagging at me to be vigilant. If I have to put them in a body bind, none of us will leave the premises without our babysitters."

He eyed Ron, and a mischievous light entered his eye. "We've already paid for Ron's dress robes for the wedding, and it would be a shame for them to go to waste if he didn't survive that long." His words may have been cold, but there was a hint of fondness in his voice that belied them. With a nod, Bill headed back for the Floo, grabbed a pinch of powder from the pot and called out, "Gringotts." Then he whirled away in a flash of green flame while Ron protested his brother's comment.

Harry came over after a few minutes, tugging Ron along with him. "I think we need to enlist some help with our search," Harry said when the customer near them moved on to the next aisle. "I've been thinking about this for a while. At the rate we're going it could take us years to figure out what else and where. The way the twins are doing financially, it would be believable if they decided to start collecting things. They might be able to get information we can't...in the interest of Hogwarts antiquities, of course. Anyone who really knows them won't buy it for a second, but if they worked things right, they could learn some useful things."

"We're going to have to start asking discreet questions anyway, and they might be able to get more information than we can without lifting too many eyebrows." Hermione thought it a smashing idea, if anyone could pull it off, it was the twins. And that would be one more bit of responsibility off their own shoulders. Not that they wouldn't continue to search, but knowing they weren't the only ones taking care of this aspect would certainly ease the stress some.

Of course, at the current rate, half the Order would be in on some aspect of their plans before this was all over. But as they individually promised to keep their parts to themselves, their full plans should be safe enough.

"OK, mate. Sounds good. I'd like to get it over with myself," Ron said. "You gonna ask?"

"Let me," Hermione said. "I've already scanned most of the shelves, you two will want at least twenty more minutes, and no one will think it strange if I melt into the background."

"Fine." Harry wandered off again, Ron following behind.

Kingsley didn't arrive alone ten minutes after the trio's arrival Remus was by his side. They stood by the front door and kept track of everyone coming and going while Harry

and Ron continued to inspect the merchandise. Hermione felt and caught Remus's gaze on her several times and noticed he seemed to be glaring at her. Surely he wasn't that mad just because she had spent the night with her soul mate. The others had been a bit shocked, but they didn't continually glower in her direction over it. She hated that he was so disappointed in her, but could hardly change the situation and wouldn't even if she could.

When Fred came within reach of Hermione, she grabbed his sleeve and pulled him into the back room. "What? You aren't going to hex me more, are you?" he asked. "I mean, I can live with the spots for a while, when you show us how to do it we can call it advertising for our newest product, but"

"Oh shut up, will you? I'm not going to hex you again. At least not unless you've been passing out more of those soul mate chocolates." Hermione lifted an eyebrow, and Fred shook his head, clearly frightened of her. "Fine then. We...Harry, Ron and I...wondered if you could put out a few feelers...very subtle feelers...for something we've been looking for. If you can get your hands on it, great, if not, just get us whatever information you can and we'll deal with it from there. We're not sure exactly what we want...something of significance to the Four Founders of Hogwarts. Probably metal, but it wouldn't have to be. Though not much else would have survived after all these years."

Fred's brow furrowed. "You don't know what it is, just an artifact from one of the Four Founders? Do you care what it is?"

"Yes. It needs to be very significant, it need to be something...well, I better not say that much. It's highly confidential. You can bring George into it, as I can't imagine you keeping a secret from him for anything, and you may need to work together for this. It's part of our quest, but that's all I can tell you, and you have to swear not to bring too much attention to yourselves. No one can know Harry wants this kind of thing. In fact," she went on to explain Harry's idea of the twins pretending an interest in antiquities.

Fred perked up at the idea and got one of those devious looks on his face that were so distinct to the identical Weasleys. "You can count on us, Hermione. The Order mostly has us making protective gear and stuff. We don't get any of the interesting jobs. This could actually be fun."

Hermione nodded, then slipped back into the front of the store. Fred followed a minute later, his arms laden with package. "Oi, Ronnikins, you think I could get a hand over here?"

Ron glowered at the nickname, but headed over. When he spoke, his tone was belligerent. "Yeah, what do you want?"

Hermione headed to the other side of the shop to check out the few shelves she hadn't seen before. Some of the things were truly ingenious, she had to admit to herself. The twins still stocked the Peruvian darkness powder, but now there was a large disclaimer above the shelf saying they reserved the right to refuse sales to anyone, at anytime. She grimaced, remembering how Malfoy had used it against Ron and Ginny at the school.

Finally, the boys were ready to leave, Harry with a few items stuffed in his pockets, Ron with a huge grin on his face. Kingsley Disillusioned the three of them before they stepped out into the street, and they huddled together, elbows bumping so they didn't get too far apart when they couldn't see each other.

In a low voice, Ron spoke to his two friends, his voice bursting with excitement, "So Fred said they need some extra help at the shop and want me to come in sometimes. I'll actually have my own money." Hermione knew if Ron's face could be seen his eyes would be glowing. There was little her friend hated more than not having any money of his own.

The London heat was stifling, so Hermione was glad they had become individually invisible instead of trying to cram all three of them under Harry's invisibility cloak as they had the previous summer when they followed Draco to Borgin and Burke's.

When they reached Flourish and Blotts a few minutes later, Hermione could feel Severus's presence radiating through the building. She couldn't quite summon the strength to be disgusted by the feeling of butterflies pounding against her stomach walls. It hadn't been more than a few days since she had seen him last, how could she feel almost giddy about his presence?

Once Kingsley had made them visible again, she split off from the boys, wandering down the aisles as if she had no specific end point, but heading ever closer to Severus with each move.

Then he came into view, his glamour from their movie date in place. Hermione glanced around her, then stepped into his open arms, planting kisses against his jaw.

He let out a low groan. "I've missed you. I've missed this." Then he took her lips with his and backed into a niche in the wall so they would be less visible to passersby.

Hermione speared her fingers through his hair, wishing it were his own long locks, while his hands made a slow, possessive glide down her back from shoulders to hips, pulling her even closer. She shuddered when his lips left hers and slid down to the underside of her neck. She panted, trying to catch her breath even while his tongue, swirling against the sensitive flesh below her chin, drove all thought from her head. Fervently, she wished they were at the cottage in privacy instead of sequestered in a corner of a public place.

"Back away, Hermione." Remus's voice behind her was little more than a growl.

"Bugger off, Remus," Hermione didn't turn to face him, but she refused to let go of Severus, even if he had tensed up and stopped his ministrations on her neck. She was sick of Remus's attitude since he learned about her soul mate and wasn't about to end her kissing just because he had a bug up his rear end. This was none of his business.

"No way am I letting you continue your relationship with that traitor, Hermione. You might have been duped by him, but it's not going to continue." His voice was thankfully low so as not to attract any attention from those in nearby aisles.

Oh, shite, how did he find out it was Severus?

Thanks to countrymouse for her beta work, and RobisonRocket for catching the remaining errors.

26: Facing Off and Finding Space

Chapter 26 of 51

See Chapter 1

Thanks to counrymouse for her beta work and Southern_Witch_69 for catching my many punctuation errors.

Chapter 26: Facing Off and Finding Space

"What are you going to do, Remus, kill him?" Hermione asked the werewolf as she stood intertwined with her husband in the back corner of the book store. She refused to let go, though Severus was trying to nudge her arms away.

"It's crossed my mind. He killed Dumbledore, or are you too in his thrall to remember that?"

"I remember perfectly. It tore me apart to hear what happened, not knowing what to think, what to believe. It tore him apart too." Hermione turned to face Remus, keeping Severus in the niche behind her. "He didn't have a choice."

"He didn't have a choice? What is that supposed to mean? Either you choose to kill someone or you don't. There's always a choice." Remus's eyes were feral, his gaze hard and angry, his teeth all but bared as his animal instincts pushed him on.

Severus didn't like Hermione standing in front of him and pushed her out of the way, his charcoal gray eyes piercing her. "You will not stand between me and danger. Never."

The man is such an idiot sometimes. "What good is it going to do me if you're dead? How long do you suppose I'll live to help Harry? Just how long will I be able to think straight enough to be useful against the Dark Lord before I'm too mad with grief to do anything at all?" Though the look she was giving him would have had Ron begging for leniency, Severus didn't respond. If it weren't for the slight fluctuation in his emotions, she wouldn't know her words had made any impact at all. Unfortunately the fluctuation was so fleeting she hadn't been able to identify it.

"What are you talking about?" Remus asked. He still held his wand firmly on Severus, though his eyes shifted between the two of them.

Huffing in irritation, Hermione cast a silencing bubble around them so they wouldn't attract attention.

"First, how did you know?" Severus asked.

"I was there when she came back from your arms. I could smell your stink on her. I am a werewolf, remember." Remus glared and kept his wand trained on Severus.

"How could I possibly forget?" Severus asked with a sneer, though his sneers weren't nearly as effective in his current body. "Why didn't you say something at the time?"

Remus's cheek twitched, his jaw was clenched so tight. "I couldn't say anything in front of everyone else. I was the only one who knew she had been passing information on Death Eater activity to the Order. If I had considered things a little more I would have realized it was you. I planned to pull her aside to talk first. Then I was going to squish the miserable life from your body for even thinking of touching her. You are her *teacher*. How despicable can you get?"

"I assure you, it would never have crossed my mind without the little potion the Weasley twins exposed us to. If you have to blame anyone, blame them, but leave me out of it. Having her in my life has seriously complicated things."

"You're intertwined in it though, Severus. I can't leave you out."

Disgusted by the way they were speaking over and around her as if she weren't there, Hermione nudged her husband none-too-gently with her elbow. How nifty of him to tell someone else she had complicated his life...even if it was the truth. "Remus, if you knew about all those Muggle lives, and the Creeveys, Longbottoms and whomever else were saved only because Severus is in his position to spy, how could you not wonder if maybe, just maybe, there was ample explanation for what happened? Did it never occur to you that perhaps the Headmaster may have been human, but he wasn't a fool? That maybe he required more proof of Severus's loyalty than a few tears? And that maybe he didn't feel it necessary to share his reasons with Harry? Or you? Or Mad-Eye, or even Professor McGonagall?"

Severus opened his mouth to say something, but feeling the venom that threatened to shoot from him, Hermione nudged him even harder with her elbow. His mouth snapped shut and he glared at her instead. Remus blinked in surprise at seeing their interaction. The tip of his wand lowered a fraction of an inch.

"I want a full and detailed explanation," Remus said after a long moment.

"You will get as full and detailed an explanation as I deem necessary." She elbowed her husband again when he started to protest. "Hush. But in exchange I require your solemn promise that you will wait until I've had a chance to speak with you in private before you mention what you've figured out to another soul, dead or alive."

Severus rubbed his side. "Quit elbowing me, woman."

"Then keep your mouth shut and I won't have to." She didn't take her eyes off Remus for more than the briefest second.

"I have a responsibility to protect you," Severus protested

"The responsibility is mutual. Now hush."

Remus's eye narrowed as he looked between them for a long moment, then his wand lowered even further. "I can't believe ~~he~~ just stood there and took orders from you."

"He's my...soul mate." She had almost said husband, but thankfully caught herself in time. "I'm currently the only person who trusts him. Well, the only sane person who trusts him," she added when she thought of Voldemort.

"That's debatable. Your choices lately don't appear too sane to me."

Hermione glared at Remus. "Do you want to hear the truth or don't you?"

"Yes, but there's no way anyone is going to let him back into Headquarters again."

"I don't want back into Headquarters. It's best if I know as little of Order business as possible, as then the information can't be taken from me by force." Severus straightened his shirt in a distinctly Snape-ish move, and Hermione really wished Remus would leave them alone so she could return to snogging her husband.

"So you say. Fine. Finish your chat and we'll talk about this more, young lady."

That was all the encouragement Hermione needed. She turned to her husband, threading one arm over his shoulder and pulling him close, planting her lips on his. His hands rose to her hips, then slid slowly up the length of her back, molding her to him on the way up. Several lingering kisses passed before Hermione heard Remus clearing his throat behind her. "What are you still doing here, Remus? Go away, would you?" Hermione held in a whimper when her husband took the opportunity to run soft kisses along her jaw line and down her neck.

"No."

After placing one more pant-inducing kiss on her neck, Severus tipped his forehead to hers and they stopped to breath. "No privacy in a public place, I suppose. Meet me tonight?" he asked.

She grinned and her answer was barely more than a breath. "Yes."

"Goodbye, then." He kissed her once more, then stepped back and Disapparated.

Hermione stood for a moment, licking her bottom lip, tasting him there still, then turned to face Remus, whose face was hard and angry. "I do have a book or two to pick up. I'll make it quick though, since we spent so much time arguing with you."

"Where are you meeting him tonight?"

She lifted an eyebrow at him. "I wouldn't tell you even if I could. And I can't...it's Secret Kept." She knew there was a bit of triumph in her face, but she didn't really care. Running her hands through her hair to calm it in case their little snog messed her up any, Hermione walked past him and down a few aisles to the one she needed, then took a few minutes to browse through the stacks.

After a moment, she saw Remus walk back down the center of the store toward the area where Hermione had seen the boys standing, clearly bored already. Again she licked her lips, though her husband's unique flavor was gone, her mouth still tingled from his kisses. Grinning, Hermione sighed and pulled a book she needed from the shelf, then moved on to the Arithmancy section.

When they arrived back at the tent again, Ron and Harry hurried inside to stash their purchases, but Remus grabbed Hermione's arm much harder than necessary and kept her from stepping in the tent. "Hold on just a minute." He turned toward Kingsley. "I just need to speak with Hermione for a few minutes."

Hermione tried to shake his grip off, but Remus only tightened his fingers around her arm. She sucked in a breath of pained surprise, but refused to complain aloud.

The large black man nodded, tapped his head with his wand and melted into thin air. "I'll head back to my post."

Remus waited for several seconds while Kingsley moved away before turning back to Hermione. He let go of her arm and nodded with his head toward the far side of the yard, then turned and walked in that direction without glancing back to see if she was following.

Hermione gritted her teeth and ignored the pain still throbbing in her upper arm. When she met him on the other side of the lawn, she carefully kept her hands down by her side, wanting desperately to tell him where he could put his hands.

"Before you go to see your lover, I need to speak with you about your activities with," he darted a glance at the tent as if to be certain the boys hadn't come looking for them, "him."

Putting her hands on her hips, Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Funny how you couldn't be bothered to take us to Godric's Hollow for the better part of a week, but you could spend half the day with us in Diagon Alley and take the time to interrogate me about my relationship."

"Priorities, Hermione."

"Right, you would far prefer to stick your nose in my personal business instead. What Harry needs or wants is unimportant, but knowing every detail of my love life is absolutely necessary, huh?"

"You're playing with fire and your safety is a serious matter. Harry's sudden interest in seeing the place he was born is not." Remus's face was hard and angry, but his voice was low, if edged with ice. His eyes strayed to her shoulder, then back to her face.

Not willing to argue with him, Hermione shook her head. "That just goes to show how little you understand what's going on. I'll meet with you tomorrow. We have things that need to be done tonight, and we both need to calm down. Remember that open mind that caused me to come to you with the tips he fed me in the first place? See if you can figure out where you put it by morning, will you? I'll swing by around eleven if that works for you."

"Is that so you can spend the morning in bed with him?"

"If I so choose. Goodbye, Mr. Lupin." Hermione turned on her heel and stalked back toward the tent. She hadn't used his last name and title since the Order had reconvened, and he had been more of a friend than anything over the past couple years. At the moment, however, she wasn't feeling very friendly toward him. Before she headed into the tent, she heard the crack of Disapparition. She took a few long, deep breaths to calm herself, then entered the tent with a smile on her lips.

After all, they'd had a productive morning between their shopping and enlisting the twins' help and best of all, she was going to spend the night with Severus. How could she let anything else get in the way of that spot of happiness?

She should have known better. Mere seconds after she entered the tent, Ron glowered at her. "Where was he? Did you meet him in the stacks at the book store? I don't appreciate waiting for you to 'pick out books' while you were snogging someone."

Hermione blinked. How did he know?

On one of his rare shows of perception, he answered her unspoken question. "Go take a look at your neck. Next time you want to get together with the git, don't waste my time." He turned on his heel and stalked out of the tent.

Hermione watched him go, then turned back toward the living area where she had missed Harry sitting in a corner while she dealt with Ron's ire.

"He has a point, you know. You won't tell us who the bloke is, then you meet him while we wait nearby, thinking you were doing something important...like searching for a book to help us. I understand your drive to spend time with him, whoever he is, but your timing could be better. And it would help if he didn't leave love bites on you in plain sight." Harry stood and walked over to the ice box, pulling out a can of Muggle soda.

Hermione clamped a hand over her neck, realizing that must have been what Remus was staring at as well, but Harry shook his head. "Other side. Better check it out in a mirror." He waved toward the restroom and she hurried over to take a look.

It wasn't a particularly dark spot, or terribly large, but it was unmistakable. *Severus, you prat*. There was no doubt in her mind that he left the mark for Lupin's benefit, but that didn't change the fact that he had caused rifts with Ron and Harry over it. His timing could have been better.

When she turned back around, Harry was picking up the Charms book they had all been using. A second can of soda was in his other hand. "Ron and I'll go do some work inside. It's too hot out here."

A cooling charm would have solved that problem almost instantly, but Hermione didn't bother to argue. Apparently they all needed some time to cool off.

By the time she arrived at the tiny cottage that night, Hermione was thoroughly ready to sink into bed and pull the blankets over her head.

Animagus training hadn't gone as well as the boys had hoped, and they were all frustrated and discouraged when it was time to cook dinner. Her reminders to Harry that the Marauders had taken several years to become Animagi didn't seem to lull him at all, even when she pointed out that they were making great headway.

The tent was hot and even cooling charms seemed inadequate to keep it livable for more than a few minutes at a time. To top it off, she burned dinner when she got distracted by one of her new books.

When she told the boys she was going out for the evening and may not be home in time for breakfast, Ron shot from his chair and rushed out of the tent.

It was enough to make any girl want to sink into oblivion. And she wasn't completely sure she wanted to forgive her husband for his part in the day's stress.

The cottage door opened before she reached it, and Severus stood in the doorway, a glass of what looked like red wine in his hand. "It felt like you could use a few minutes to unwind," he told her as he pressed the long stem into her hand, then used a finger under her chin to bring her face close for a gentle kiss.

When he pulled away, she took a sip of the smooth, fabulous drink, then pressed her face into his chest. "A few minutes, a few hours, a few months. This afternoon has been a nightmare."

"Lupin give you more trouble?" He pulled her into the cottage with her free hand and with a flick of his wand, widened the sofa. He settled himself into it, then pulled her down between his spread legs.

"Some, but that was only the tip of the iceberg." She took another sip of the drink, then set it aside for a moment, turning in his arms so she could see his face. "Was that really necessary?"

"What?"

She studied him, then decided he really didn't know what she was talking about. She pointed at the love bite on her neck. "That."

He grinned evilly. "Oh, yes, it was absolutely necessary. Drive Lupin out of his gourd did it?"

"There's no arguing with you. Yes, I'm sure it angered him, but it also angered Ron...you know the person I would have been dating if it weren't for you, my best friend whom I have to deal with every day? It also irritated Harry that I was kissing you while they waited at the front of the store."

"Ron needs to accept that you and he aren't ever going to get together. He can't have you because you're mine." He slid his hands up the length of her arms in a move that was all male. He didn't bother to respond to the part about Harry. She wasn't really surprised.

She flinched when he reached her upper arm where Remus had grabbed her outside the tent and realized she must have bruises. It had been more than simply uncomfortable when it happened, but she didn't expect this.

"What is it? You're in pain." He lifted the sleeve on her shirt and checked out the bruise blooming across her skin. The heat of his anger flooded through her so fast Hermione could hardly breathe. "Who did this? I'll kill him."

"No, you won't, I'll kill him, if anyone is going to." She tried to brush his hand away from the bruise and roll down her shirt sleeve again, but he wouldn't be dissuaded.

"I'll say it again, Hermione. You are my wife, your safety is my responsibility. Who was it?"

"That doesn't matter."

"To hell it doesn't." His eyes bored into hers and she could feel him trying to read the truth in her mind, but she kept him firmly shut out. The battle of wills continued for a couple minutes while they both seethed.

"I'm not going to tell you. We don't need any more bad feelings around here." She tried to pull out of his arms, but though he didn't hold tight enough to hurt her, he didn't let her up.

"If you refuse to tell me who did this to you, to let me set them straight, then I'll have to take matters into my own hands."

Hermione expected him to cast Legilimens and push even harder, and was therefore surprised when he whispered some other words in a language she had never heard. The tingle of magic slithered across her skin, but when it dissipated, she felt no different than before. "What was that? What language was it in?"

"Greek. Any man who touches you in any but the most brotherly way will find himself with a bit of a shock from now on. The spell will be activated by romantic interest in you, not intent, but simply interest. It will also be activated by anyone touching you while angry or with intent to do you harm. Except myself. I could beat you bloody and it wouldn't affect the spell at all." His finger trailed down her arm, bringing shivers to her skin.

Fear raced through her, but he calmed it after the first burst. "Luckily for you, I prefer your skin perfect, unmarred as it usually is." He dipped his head down and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to her shoulder. This time the goosebumps on her skin were from straight pleasure. The fear she had felt melted away under the insistent pressure of his mouth on her skin, and the reassuring emotions she felt through the bond. His mouth moved gently over the bruise and she heard him mutter a healing spell while his lips caressed the spot. When his teeth slid across her skin in that place a few seconds later there was no discomfort at all.

"So it's a protective spell?" she managed to ask a long moment later.

"That's one of its functions. I've been looking at protective spells for some time, this is the one that seems most appropriate at this time. There are also other advantages to it. But we'll have to discuss them later." He turned her head with the tip of his finger and covered her mouth with his. Then they sank onto the sofa.

They rose sometime after midnight and walked through the kitchen and into the bedroom. Severus grabbed some round crackers, a block of cheese, an apple and a knife as he passed through. Then he joined her on the bed. "Hungry, my dear?"

"Starving. Things were a little melodramatic at dinner, took my appetite away." She tipped her head back against the pillow, but didn't take her eyes off him. He sliced the cheese with exactness, his movements fluid and full of grace. "It didn't help that I got distracted and burnt the food, so I only picked at it."

"Can't have that, can we? Too many other things to work on. You'll need your strength." He shot her a lascivious smile as he handed over a few slices of cheese and a stack of crackers.

Her face heated, making her berate herself for her foolishness. They had been married nearly four months. It was ridiculous for the subject to still bring heat to her face. But then she figured the heat was probably only part embarrassment. To change the subject, she began asking round-about Potions questions, things she needed to clarify before starting the Felix Felicis. He answered with great patience as they munched their way through the impromptu meal, a calm sense of camaraderie overcame them. Hermione began to relax even more, leaning back against the headboard of the bed while he occasionally fed her bits of cracker or apple, kissing her softly in warm, lingering tastes in between.

If she ever told anyone from school that he could be like this, sweet, attentive, relaxed, they would laugh her out of the room. This was a side of Severus she figured no one else knew. Oh, he was still a snarky git most of the time; possessive, demanding, arrogant, but he didn't have to be that way all the time. It was almost drugging knowing that no one else on the planet could make him open up and be vulnerable the way she could. His trust in her was unbelievable.

When Hermione had all of her answers, she smiled up at him, her stomach comfortably full, her body warm and lax, nearly ready for sleep. That was when he chose his moment.

"So how long have you been planning to make the Felix Felicis, my dear?"

Hermione looked him in the eyes, her surprise at the undercurrents of anger inside him preventing her from brushing the question aside. Not that it would have done any

good; he could tell if she lied. "I've been considering it for over a month. I've done a lot of reading and picked up some ingredients today. I thought it would be a useful study for me to know if I could do it."

He leaned close, his face only an inch from her own, and venom in his eyes as he slowly enunciated each word. "Do not lie to me."

"Every word I spoke is the truth." That was true, of course, but she felt her insides quiver slightly at his anger. She had left a fair bit out.

"What are you keeping back? What did you think you could withhold from me?"

Debating on what to tell, what more to keep to herself, Hermione took a sip of the wine Severus had accioed to them after they had settled onto the bed.

"What kind of rules are you planning to break...damn, I'm not a teacher anymore. I still want to know what you plan to do with the golden liquid, should you be able to create it. It is a rather sophisticated and dangerous potion."

"If I could make Polyjuice Potion by myself properly in second year, surely with your tutoring tonight and what I've studied, I can make this correctly. If I can ever find somewhere safe and appropriate to put the lab."

Severus studied her for a minute and she could feel his inner debate, though she didn't know what the debate might be about. "I know you too well to think you will cease your plans simply because I ask you to. If I told you I had a secure lab where no one would interfere with the brewing, and where most of the appropriate equipment was already in place, would you tell me why you wish to make it?"

Hermione was stunned. Did he just offer her a lab? And was that a...no, it couldn't be...but it sounded almost like *polite* request, even a compromise. Not a demand, not an acerbic dressing down, not even an irritated query. That was the reason she decided to answer his question in full. "Did it never occur to you to wonder why it is Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna and I didn't sustain so much as a singed hair that night on school grounds? It was because Harry told us to share the Felix Felicis Slughorn gave him on our first day of class."

He seemed to consider her revelation for a moment. "I did wonder how you seemed so incredibly lucky that night. I was concerned when I realized you were in the thick of things, but I couldn't get distracted; my role was too important. So you think the same thing might work again?"

"If we could tweak the timing, have some notice of the confrontation, even a minute's notice if we kept the stuff on us at all times, it could make a decisive difference."

He stared at her for a long moment, then moved in and kissed her breathless. "You are amazing. If our side had thought of that all those years ago, the Dark Lord might be nothing more than a memory now."

Hermione knew that was an exaggeration since there were too many pieces that hadn't been in place during Voldemort's first rein. Still, she appreciated his admiration and respect, held him close, stretched out the kisses for a long time until she finally pushed him back. "About that lab."

He groaned, then allowed a half-smile to slide onto his face. "Yes, well, it's currently in use, but we can squeeze out a bit more space." He stood, took her hand and helped her from the bed. Seeing her shiver, he slid her robes over her shoulders, but didn't fasten them. He pulled the robe sides closed by hand, then used them to pull her close for another lingering kiss. He released her and led her back into the kitchen to a spot of wall sporting a painting of two trolls in combat. Severus placed his hand on the wall beside the painting and clearly enunciated, "Manticore venom."

When he removed his hand, the wall seemed to melt away, exposing a set of stairs descending into a cellar of some kind. Hermione studied the walls and stairs with fascination. She heard him speak a lighting charm, which brought torches on the wall flaring to life. He went down before her, opening a heavy wooden door at the bottom, then ushering her through.

The walls and floor were solid rock, the room was cool, but not overly chilly, far drier than she expected. The thing that drew her gaze was the full array of potion-making equipment. A cauldron bubbled on the far end of one table, a large selection of ingredients spread across a narrow table along the wall, along with stirring rods, knives, more cauldrons and some advanced equipment she had never seen before.

The air was redolent with potion ingredients, and Hermione could have sworn she was in heaven, even if the set up wasn't what Muggles would consider state of the art. "This is perfect. And I can make it down here?"

"Under my guiding eye for the first few batches, it is dangerous if you make any mistakes."

"And you take my safety very seriously." Her answer held only the slightest touch of irony in it, as she was too focused on the equipment to pay much attention to the conversation. Besides, it suited her well enough to have help with the potion. She didn't fancy poisoning anyone or killing herself in the brewing process.

"Do you not remember?" he asked her, gaining her attention by running his finger along the long line of her neck and shoulder. "One of the items I swore to in our binding was to protect you...a rather ingenious addition of the Headmaster's in my opinion, since it means I can't place myself intentionally in harm's way."

Hermione shivered at his touch, turned and focused on him. "Are you saying you'd rather be dead?"

"Than live with the fact that I killed Albus Dumbledore?" He looked uncomfortable with the conversation, uncomfortable with the truth. "There are days when I would gladly take my own life if it would bring his back. But then, I have a responsibility to you and it wouldn't help anyway, so that's not an option." Pain flashed in his eyes, then disappeared.

Sympathy swarmed her. She had no idea how it must have felt to be responsible for the death of one of the few people who had given him a chance. And knowing that his only real ticket to freedom had died by his hand. Who had the clout to protect him now? Who beside herself would want to? Remus knew something of his current role, and he certainly seemed disinclined at the moment. She lifted a hand and ran her fingers over his cheek.

"I don't need your pity," he said roughly, turning away from her.

Grasping his shoulder, she turned him back to face her. She was surprised when he didn't put up any resistance. She lifted his hand in hers and brought it to her chest, between the swells of her breasts, and pressed it to her skin. "It isn't pity. Focus in, feel what I feel for you and you'll know." Then she focused on her love, admiration, understanding. Every warm feeling she could conjure for him entered her heart and mind. When he lifted his eyes from their joined hands to look into her face, tears clouded his eyes.

He lowered his head into the crook of her neck, and his free hand wrapped around her inside the cloak, running along her warm skin and pulling her close to him. He said nothing, just held her. Hermione focused in on his emotions, sensing warmth, gratitude, disbelief, and a bit of something that appeared to be love-like despite his protestations.

Soaking up the feeling, she held him until he managed to collect himself. When his lips began to move over the sensitive skin of her neck and shoulders, she knew the moment had passed.

"Bring the ingredients here and we'll begin your project as soon as we can manage some time together," he said as he led her back up the stairs. When they reached the top, he said the password again and the wall returned to its place. Then he lifted her into his arms and carried her back to the bedroom.

I admit, the scene in Flourish and Blotts was one of my all-time favorites to write. I have a few scenes in this story that I feel that way about. Now you all will have to wait

with bated breath for several chapters to learn anything more about the spell Severus used. And it does have properties he didn't bring up with her.

27: Coming Clean

Chapter 27 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 27: Coming Clean

When she entered the library at Headquarters the next morning, Hermione saw Lupin already seated on the sofa. He looked up when she shut the door behind her, warded it, then did a spell to verify she and Lupin were the only people in the room. She placed an imperturbable charm on the door to make sure no one could hear in and then set the rucksack on a nearby chair.

Now that she was facing him, Hermione wasn't sure what to say. How did she explain about her and Severus? Would he believe her? Though she hated to admit it, she didn't blame him for reacting the way he had; under different circumstances she would have acted exactly the same way. She wished she could put the whole confrontation off for another decade or so, but didn't have much choice in the matter. She wet her lips, then straightened her shoulders. "I suppose you want it from the beginning?"

"That would be helpful, yes. Though you shouldn't count on my seeing it the way you want." His eyes were hard and wary, and frown lines bracketed his mouth in addition to the furrows in his brow. He looked like he had hardly slept the previous night.

Hermione ran a hand through her unruly curls, not sure how to deal with all of this. Their relationship wasn't supposed to come out this way. None of her life was supposed to turn out like this. "If you aren't willing to listen with an open mind then there's little point in my being here."

"There's plenty of point in your being here. I have questions I need answered. Just start at the beginning and work your way forward. Be sure to include who and how much they know about your relationship. I want it all."

Hermione settled on the sofa and clasped her hands in her lap. "If I'm going to answer all your questions then we'll have to go back much farther than this past March when we were dosed with the potion. Do you remember the conversation we all had in the hospital after the Headmaster was attacked? How Harry said Dumbledore trusted Severus because he was sorry about the Potters' deaths?" He nodded sharply, and Hermione continued on, "That wasn't the only reason he trusted Severus."

Casting back her memory to the things she and Severus had discussed that morning, the details he had left out of his original recitation, she carefully put it together, laying it out for him. "When he approached the Headmaster about switching sides, the Headmaster required him to take an Unbreakable Vow to follow his orders and to be completely honest with the Headmaster about his movements in relation to the Order's objectives."

"Well, obviously he left a few things out."

"If that were true, Severus would now be dead. Last summer he was approached by Narcissa Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange where he was cornered into taking a second Unbreakable Vow. In it he was forced to agree to protect Draco, assist him, and to complete the task Voldemort had given Draco if he was unable to complete it. Draco's assignment was to kill Albus Dumbledore."

Remus's face twitched and his hands clenched until they were white. "You are only taking his word for it, like the naïve, love-sick child you are."

"Taking pokes at me isn't going to get you your answers, Remus." It was all Hermione could do not to retaliate about how hard-headed he was being. "There are a few things you need to understand about the soul mate bond, but we'll get to those in a minute. Shortly after his conversation with the Black sisters, Severus visited the Headmaster and told him what had happened. The Headmaster considered his words, calculated the odds and then ordered Severus to carry on with his vow."

"He's a liar. You have only his word for it. How could you know?" His agitation was only increasing.

"I know because *I know*. Part of the bond between soul mates is that I can feel his emotions, and he can feel mine. I know when he is prevaricating, if he's being untruthful or hiding something from me. And he can tell the same for me."

He lunged forward to grab her arm when she rose in irritation. Before his fingers had a chance to clamp down, he released her and all but fell back with a gasp of surprised pain. Hermione felt only the slightest ripple of magic swirl over his skin. "What was that?" he asked, looking at his hand, which was red as if it had been exposed to extreme heat.

"He was a bit put out that you left bruises on me yesterday, so he ensured it wouldn't happen again. I didn't tell him it was you or you would undoubtedly be dead now." Her eyes narrowed on him. "Obviously you aren't willing to listen to the story with an open mind."

"I couldn't have left bruises on you," he said, sitting back on his sofa with a blink of surprise, or maybe it was self-denial.

Wordlessly Hermione lifted her sleeve and showed him the livid marks his fingers had left on her the previous day.

"Hermione, I'm sorry, I would never..."

"Right. Can we get on with this? I really don't have all day, and I don't want to hear your excuses. If you aren't going to listen with an open mind, we're both wasting our time here. The only reason I came to you with his messages was because I figured you would be the most open minded of all the Order members. Perhaps I was wrong." She stood to leave and he jumped up. She wondered if he would have lunged to restrain her if he hadn't already learned his lesson. When his voice called out and a flash of orange light hit the door, locking it from her exit, she supposed she shouldn't be surprised.

"I'll try to be open minded about this, Hermione. Please, if nothing else, I'd like to understand your relationship with him better and to understand this bond between you. I gathered the Headmaster was upset about the Weasley twins putting that stuff in the biscuits, but there was little explanation of it at the time. None of my books had a reference when I started looking into it after your evening with Severus the other week."

Turning, holding her face as impassive as she could while she was tempted to do a jig that he was finally ready to listen, she nodded, then returned to her seat. He sat across from her, and Hermione continued. "I can feel all of his strongest emotions, as well as a ghost of any severe pain he experiences. When he receives the Cruciatus Curse from Voldemort I can tell. The pain isn't severe for me, but there is significant discomfort. More than once he has tried to tell me a half truth, or lie outright and I have

called him on it. I know his feelings."

"Do you feel everything?"

"When we're touching, I can feel everything with little effort. At our current distance, I can feel his strongest feelings without effort, and his more middle-strength feelings with a fair amount of focus. I'm not sure I catch all of the minor currents at any real distance though. And I wouldn't trust myself to be sure of his honesty or lack thereof at any great distance.

"There are real advantages to this emotion sharing. It means I really know what he's feeling, he can't pretend or falsify them. That has demanded a fair amount of honesty and directness from him. It also means I can't hide from him. If I'm angry or upset I can't hide it away; he knows about it, and if he hurts me with something he says, he knows it right away. It takes away a bit of our autonomy. That's not always an advantage." She scrubbed the hair back from her face with both hands, trying to find the right words to convince him.

"There are times I wished I could have my feelings to myself, and I'm sure he would say the same. Most of the time, however, it's nice to know I'm not misunderstanding his feelings because of a visual wall. Severus is just full of visual walls...fronts he puts on to hide what he really thinks or feels. It's a good skill for a spy, but does tend to prevent one from forming close relationships."

"So you always know how he feels?" Remus sat with his elbows on his knees, leaned in and focused on her words. Thankfully he seemed far more open to listen.

"When I'm working on something, I can usually relegate it to the back of my mind, or if he's sleeping, I don't hear him most of the time. But for the most part he's there in my head. It was really distracting at first, but once I realized what was going on, I was able to differentiate between his feelings and my own.

"The other really important aspect about it is that killing him really does mean my doom. Something in the potion ties us to each other. If I don't see him, talk with him, touch him on a regular basis, I start to get jittery, anxious. I snap at people over little things and have difficulty focusing on the things in front of me. If I can even write him letters regularly and receive his replies, I'm able to hold back these effects for a little longer, but if kept apart from him, I will eventually get desperate."

She took a deep breath and let it out long and low. She hated discussing this aspect of the enchantment as it was totally depressing. "If he dies, the bond doesn't die with him, but rather I will begin to pine until I go crazy and eventually die. Most statistics show people affected usually live less than a year. A few...very few...have survived over four years, but their last several years of life were ghastly, filled with madness and requiring restraint."

"So if I killed him you would die soon after. That was what you meant when you said you would be mad with grief if I killed him. It was literal." Comprehension seemed to dawn on him.

"Yes. Life literally won't be worth living for me if he dies. And if he goes to Azkaban, the same result can be expected. We'll both die in a short period of time." She looked away, unable to meet his eye when she felt so much pain at the thought of losing Severus. "So you understand why I was so angry with the twins, playing with my life like it was a game. Severus has promised to do his best to survive all of this, but he acknowledges freely that it's unlikely to happen. I have too many dreams to meet my end so young, but I can't imagine even trying to live without him. If Voldemort dies in the process, it will be worth it, but I'd far rather live a hundred or more years with Severus by my side."

Remus stood and walked a couple circuits of the room, his face impassive, the silence all but shouting at her. When he finally returned to his seat, he turned to face her. "So you're saying Dumbledore ordered Severus to kill him."

"For the long-term good of the Order. The Headmaster was already dying from the wound he received last summer, the one that caused his hand to wither. He figured his demise was less important than the Order continuing to receive information."

"Dobby, come here." Remus snapped his fingers and the elf appeared to the side of the coffee table separating Hermione from Remus.

"Yes, sir, what does sir and Harry's friend need?" Dobby asked.

"I believe Miss Granger and I would both like some refreshment, if you could bring us something, please."

"Right away, sir." Dobby brightened right up, his tea-cozy covered head bobbing as he disappeared.

"When did Dobby arrive?" Hermione asked, grateful for the suggested refreshment as she realized her mouth was getting dry. She didn't bother to wonder how the house-elf had made it through the combined wards she and Remus had put up...nothing seemed to keep house-elves out.

"Last week he came looking for a new home. Said he was bored at the castle without the students there, and McGonagall said he could work elsewhere for the summer and return in the fall if he liked. Besides," he put on a wan grin, "Harry Potter owns this house, and Dobby would do anything for Harry."

Hermione had to smile in return at that comment.

The elf appeared in the room again with a tray full of tiny sandwiches, tea and chocolate biscuits. "Thank you, Dobby." Hermione was grateful for the meal since her own breakfast was long gone from her system. Her stomach was tied in knots, so she wasn't sure how much she would manage to eat, but she knew her body needed something.

Dobby bowed to both of them and disappeared again. Without waiting to be invited to eat, Hermione poured herself a cup of tea and picked up a tiny sandwich.

"And your relationship, how did it come about?" Remus asked when he had poured his own cup of tea.

"That evening, after eating the biscuits." She briefed him on the basic events of that evening and their realization of what had happened. She mentioned Severus talking with the Headmaster, and after a brief hesitation, she admitted to the ultimatum that was offered to them. Severus had told her she could tell Remus if he calmed down enough to be reasonable. And, she admitted to herself, she wanted someone else to know everything. With the Headmaster dead, no one had been aware of the nature of her relationship. She figured she might need Remus's backing if others picked on her for living in sin.

"So you married him then?" Remus asked, lifting his eyebrows at her.

Hermione touched her thumb to her ring and whispered the incantation the Headmaster had told her would reveal the ring. "Have been for nearly four months. Voldemort knows about our relationship, more or less, but he can't know of our marriage, that I've been soul mated to Severus or anyone else, or that I am more than the naïve fool Severus has managed to make me appear. It would mean both of our deaths, and I mean that literally whether the evil man could physically reach me or not. It makes our position very precarious, and my place in the Order, or lack of place in the Order, difficult for him."

Lupin's eyes narrowed and his face hardened. "If you're telling me you have shared Order business with Severus Snape, Hermione, you have some serious explaining to do."

Hermione interrupted him, raising her voice to be louder than his. "I haven't told him anything about what's going on in the meetings. Couldn't have anyway since I'm not a member...yet. I haven't even told him about our special project, though he has assisted us indirectly." It was technically the truth, since she hadn't told him about the project...he'd already known.

"I just don't understand. How could you love him? I'm not sure I can believe he hasn't found a way to trick you."

"Oh, please, Remus, what choice did I have? It's not like I went out of my way to find out if he was the one. It happened, we can't change it. It's over. He could have killed

me well over a dozen times since school got out. He could have had half the Order killed off, in fact. He knows who most of you are; he was well placed to give Voldemort everything he wanted on a platter. Why do you suppose you, the Weasleys, Tonks, Moody, and everyone else, are still alive?"

"Tonks." He closed his eyes as if the thought of her being hurt terrified him more than anything else.

"In fact, instead of making sure you all die long, horrible deaths, he has given me information on several occasions that has allowed us to capture Death Eaters and save lives. How do you explain that if he's working for the other side? It took hours after Dumbledore's death for this place to be resecured, but he didn't rush off to Voldemort first thing and share that secret. He even told me to remind Professor McGonagall to make sure a new Fidelius was cast. I sent the Patronus at *his* request."

Remus threaded both hands through his hair in a look of frustration. His face was screwed up in confusion, still struggling to slot everything into place. "But he's a murderer."

"Yes, just as you would have been if you had killed Wormtail back in my third year. But the end justified the means to you, and though he still doubts whether that was true in his case, he did as he had to."

"It's hardly the same thing, considering what Wormtail did to James and Lily, Sirius, and all those Muggles."

"Granted, but that doesn't change the fact that you would have become a murderer if things had gone differently. I need you to think this over, to promise to keep it to yourself until I tell you differently. Eventually it may become necessary for us to share the truth with more people, but that time isn't yet."

Remus sat for a long moment while Hermione pretended interest in a second sandwich. She was nearly through it when he spoke. "Fine, I need some time to think things through. I won't share any of this with anyone else until I've discussed it with you."

Hermione stood, the tension melting from her shoulders. It wasn't the unequivocal acceptance she would have liked, but it was a willingness to consider her words. She took a last drink of her tea and then said goodbye.

I'm exhausted just from trying to deal with Remus. Don't worry, he seemed to calm down after a bit, and I think he's going to accept things . . . eventually. In the mean time I gave him something to think over. And I'm ready for a good night's sleep. Wish you were here to smuggle up with.

Hermione set her diary aside, still opened, and marveled that it was still less than halfway full. It must have been enchanted, in more ways than one, or she would have filled it up months earlier.

It was true that she was thoroughly exhausted. Trying to keep her emotions level when dealing with an angry werewolf and knowing that his reaction could make or break the situation with the Order was wearing on her. If Remus didn't accept her and Severus, and couldn't look past what had happened, she couldn't see how anyone else would.

Even if Remus came to her later that day and said she was brilliant and there was nothing he'd like to do more than to accept Severus back into the bosom of the Order...and that was about as likely as feeling happy around a Dementor...she still had to eventually convince the others not to hex Severus on sight.

She wasn't looking forward to the idea of dealing with Harry someday. He had hated Severus from the first day of class six years earlier. Not that she could blame him. Severus had picked on him in class for no reason other than his name. Still, she wished both wizards could put away their animosity for five minutes and work together instead of fighting each other. Until Ron found himself as wrapped up in someone else as Hermione was in Severus, she could be sure his response would be as bad or worse than Harry's.

A glance at the open pages showed new writing appearing below her own. She smiled and rolled over to look at the book.

Couldn't expect much more. I didn't expect things to go that well, actually. He's only the first hurdle, however. Wish Albus were here to smooth things over. Even if the Boy-Who-Lived didn't hate my guts, how many people will really take his word that I'm not going to blast them all in their beds? As if I couldn't do that now anyway. You seem to have gotten everyone's respect somehow. Can't figure out how, silly little Gryffindor that you are. Plenty going on here. Let me tell you the news.

He went on for several paragraphs, outlining the newest developments, then mentioning that they needed to talk face to face soon. She made notes on anything she thought might be helpful for the Order and prepared to send the information in a letter to Remus that night. Then she wrote a closing note teasing him back about his Slytherin prejudices. They had broken down the house-bias barrier months earlier. She took his comment as a form of endearment.

AN A big thanks to my beta, countrymouse, and the admin RobisonRocket for correcting my problems.

28: Hell Hath No Fury

Chapter 28 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 28: Hell Hath no Fury

Severus Snape continued to walk a fine line in the inner circle. The Dark Lord was growing ever-more desperate to gain followers, desperate to track down Potter and have it out with him before he got any stronger. The Dark Lord often asked Severus about his progress with Hermione, how she was adjusting to her new perception of him. Severus was careful to give information only accurate enough to mislead. The fact that Hermione wasn't a member of the Order yet meant she had access to only limited information at this time. Something he was grateful for.

Keeping the secret of his marriage was growing increasingly difficult as Severus had to protect more and more memories. He gleaned information about more attacks, and was careful which he alerted the Order about and which he did not. He couldn't draw too much attention to himself, so he found ways to gain information to which he would not otherwise be privy. Half a dozen attacks had now been thwarted through his notes to Hermione.

Having his plans undermined so often was a cause of great frustration for the Dark Lord, making him erratic and impulsive. Over the past few weeks he had begun to punish many in the ranks when he thought they had let their assignments slip to the wrong people...those few Death Eaters who didn't end up in Azkaban, anyway. The Aurors had managed to catch most of the aggressors on these occasions. Several followers had reached their deaths for their apparent treachery. Snape didn't enjoy watching those torture sessions, but Hermione was right, every servant the Dark Lord disposed of before they reached the final battle was one less for the Order to deal with.

It was obvious his information was reaching the Order, and they were acting on that information. He also knew Lupin's non-answer to his and Hermione's discussion of a few days earlier was putting pressure on her. She was walking a tight line, keeping him a secret while doing her best to fight for the light. He knew that she, Potter and Weasley had been doing a little poking around to gain more information about the Horcruxes. Though she hadn't come out and said so, her general comments made that clear enough.

Even after he revealed that he knew about their search, Hermione kept most of the information to herself. And though she had discussed options with him for destroying the Horcruxes...in the least specific terms they could manage and still be clear...he had heard nothing about whether she had taken action or not. He imagined he would have felt her relief and elation if they had accomplished the feat, but he'd felt nothing of the kind.

That worried him as every day that passed before it was destroyed was another opportunity for the artifact to be lost or stolen. Not that he figured the three kids were being incautious with the item, but it was still a possibility. On top of that, he worried that when the three of them did finally try to destroy the Horcrux in their possession, one or more of them might end up injured or even killed. Waiting to hear that all went well was just one more layer of frustration.

It hurt that she wasn't confiding in him, didn't trust him fully, though he understood why she felt it necessary to hide some things. It had been several days since they had managed to get together and he was growing anxious to have her in his arms again.

Weary, exhausted from a late night of standing at attention for the Dark Lord while men came and went with their reports of their duties, Severus finally decided he couldn't wait any longer to see her. If he wanted to be any good the next day, he had to spend a little time by her side.

As the meeting closed, Severus moved away from the main group, heading outside the circle of wards that prevented the Dark Lord's followers from being able to Apparate away mid-torture. While he kept his Occlumency shield firmly in place, the back of his mind worked on how to entice her out of her tent for the night.

He figured that was why he didn't see Hestia Nott until it was too late to avoid her. That and the thick canopy of trees surrounding him, giving them far too much privacy.

"Severus. You've been very difficult to track down lately." She walked over and crossed into his personal space, her breasts almost completely exposed in the deeply cut top under her opened Death Eater robes. Her chest glowed in the combined light of their wand tips.

There had been a time when the sight of those large breasts all but pushed against his chest would have done something to his blood pressure. Since the soul mate potion, however, no woman was half as alluring as his wife. She was right, of course, he had been avoiding her as best he could for the past several months, despite her many attempts to seduce him. "I've been very busy Hestia."

He considered backing away, but decided the retreat would only encourage or enrage her. When she closed the distance between them until her body bumped up against his, however, he decided he couldn't just stand there. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he gently pushed her back. "We've had a lot of fun together in the past, but that's over now."

Her blue eyes flashed with anger and embarrassment. "You've been avoiding me for months. Does that little Mudblood really make you happy? Can she really take my place?"

It was all Severus could manage not to react to her words. How had she found out? The Dark Lord wanted to keep his relationship with Hermione a secret. More importantly, how much did she know about the situation? He allowed a secretive smile to slide slowly onto his face. "Found out about her, did you? She a rather nice piece of young flesh. I was under the impression my grooming of the chit was still between the Dark Lord and myself."

She crossed her arms in front of her, lifting her breasts higher, nearly exposing the aureoles in her attempt to seduce. Subtlety was not her forte. "I have heard whispers from various sources. The Dark Lord has been far less discreet about your project than with some of the others. He seems to think you are doing your job well. I'm afraid she's making you soft. You and I always enjoyed each other before." She uncrossed her arms and reached out, running her fingers along his jaw line.

He reached up and pulled her hand away. He was taking a calculated risk, but her admission to knowing about his physical relationship with Hermione had opened the door. He had to end all hope Hestia may still harbor here and now. "She doesn't make me soft, but hard. When I have a young, nubile woman willing to do anything to please me in bed, why would I ever want a worn out, well-used vessel such as yourself?"

He squeezed all the contempt he could muster into his face and looked her up and down. She had passed herself around among the Death Eater men, not restricting herself to the single ones, so he doubted she would go long without another bed partner. They had hardly been exclusive.

Her eyes narrowed at his words and her face darkened. "You will pay for that, Severus. No one treats me with such disrespect*Imperio*."

A light, calming feeling came over him as she smiled and walked up. Her hands lifted to his neck and began undoing his many buttons. "You see, Severus, no man ends things with me. It's my choice to walk away, not yours." She pressed a kiss to his jaw line, then followed his jaw down to his mouth.

When he stood impassively, she growled under her breath, then ordered, "Kiss me."

While one part of him complied another part began to question the soft floating feeling that surrounded him. This wasn't Hermione he was kissing. He was fairly sure he hadn't wanted to kiss anyone else. Why was he kissing this woman? Then again, everything felt so calm and peaceful, a feeling he so rarely found. Only in Hermione's arms did he usually find even a portion of this peace and the woman's hands were definitely affecting him, arousing him, pushing his body to respond to her. But it wasn't Hermione. A feeling of anger managed to radiate through his chest, but he was quite certain it wasn't his own. Anger and pain so strong, even in his hexed state he realized it was coming from his wife. His Hermione.

With this thought he broke loose from the curse and pushed Hestia away. The woman stumbled, but before she could catch herself, he had his wand leveled at her. "You will never touch my person again, Hestia. Your actions have ensured that I will never want you back." He channeled the anger hurling through him, the jealous rage that his wife was feeling, and used the energy it created to focus his attention, and his hex, to best effect.

"What was that?" Hestia asked after the puce bolt of light absorbed into her body.

"Just a little something to ensure you don't forget my feelings on this matter." He leaned over until his nose was only an inch from hers, all the venom he could muster filling his face. "You won't be able to find pleasures in the flesh for at least a month...not by your hand or anyone else's. If you ever touch me again, I will ensure it lasts forever."

Still glowering, he Apparated to the cottage. When he arrived, the stress of the situation was filtered away, leaving behind only the jealous rage of his wife. "Bloody hell, I don't need this right now." What he needed was her body...warm, soft and compliant.

When he reached for the diary in hopes of setting up a rendezvous with her, he realized her distance and direction were all wrong for Harry's relatives. She was farther south than that.

Her parents' home. That gave him reason to pause. Would they find him if he came to call? Should he put on a disguise just in case? He knew his face had appeared in a few Muggle newspapers, just as Sirius Black's had several years earlier. He decided to take a chance; he could always use an Obliviate if he had to. The real question was whether his wife would hex him on sight. Maybe a note in the diary would be a good thing. She might be persuaded to meet him at the cottage.

Hermione, I need to explain to you, it wasn't what you thinkHe stopped writing because she had begun her own message.

You ruddy well didn't try to get away, did you? I could feel your arousal, the touch of her mouth on yours, her hands roaming your body. Don't try and tell me you couldn't get away. You're a ruddy wizard, surely you can take care of yourself. If you didn't want her, whomever she was, you wouldn't have been making out with her. I'm closing this diary and I'm not opening it again until I stop thinking up new ways to kill you.

That might be sometime in December.

Hermione? Come on, be reasonable. A least listen to me.

Hermione?

But there was no response. With a growl, he flung the diary across the room, then stalked to the bathroom, tossing his clothes on the floor wherever they fell. He needed to scrub the stench of Hestia Nott from his body, then he was going to make his wife listen to reason...one way or another.

Nearly an hour passed before he exited the shower, his face and body glowing red from the hot water and scrubbing he had given it. His hands were raw from the harsh soap he had used, but he nearly felt clean. Then he meticulously prepared his clothing to go to his wife.

It was nearly two in the morning when he Apparated into the back yard of the Granger home. All the lights were off and the place was silent. He felt the hum of magic in the air that said there were wards on the house. It took twenty minutes to break them before he unlocked the front door by magic and putting a cushioning charm on his feet, crept up the stairs to the bedrooms. Loud snoring issued from the door down the hall...he hoped that was Mr. Granger and not his wife. After checking for additional protective wards, Severus opened the door before him and immediately fell to a silent freezing spell.

"Lumos." Hermione's wand lit by his face and she let out a great huff of air, then whispered, "Severus, you prat." She poked her head down the hall toward her parents' room. The snoring continued on. "Best get in here before you wake them up." With a wave of her wand she magically lifted him from the ground and guided his body to lie on the bed. He heard the whisper of a silencing spell as she closed the door.

"What do I do with a traitorous jerk like you? I feel your anguish, your self loathing, but I don't understand why you let that woman touch you, whoever it was. How could you do that to me? To us?" She pursed her lips, then waved her wand, unfreezing him, followed immediately by a summoning spell to collect his wand, and another that bound him in magic ropes. "Talk."

He did, he talked as quickly as he could, explaining in detail what had happened and the way her anger had helped him break through the *imperio*. When he was done, he asked, "You could really feel her touching me? Even those light touches? I've only felt pain in your behalf before, at least when we were so far apart."

Her eyes narrowed at him. "Thinking of trying it again sometime?"

"Of course not. Even if my body responds to stimuli, my mind could never handle betraying you. The enchantment won't allow that." Severus noticed she was in a short cotton nightgown that had blood thrumming through his veins in a way Hestia had never manage to accomplish...even before he found his soul mate. "How did you hear me?"

She waved at him to be quiet, then placed a hand on the wall and muttered the wards back into place on the house. Then she modified them so they would recognize him in the future. "I know you're telling the truth. I was trying to sleep at this time of night...though I was making more headway coming up with suitable retribution for your apparent treachery and I didn't hear you," she said, then released his binding and tossed him back his wand. "The wards alerted me. What do you think, I'm going to leave the house unprotected all night so any Death Eater..." her words were cut off by his mouth as he leaped from the bed and kissed her.

With a sigh at the rightness of having her in his arms, he pulled her toward him. She slid her hands over his chest and around his neck, pulling him closer than ever, and he thought he felt his brains running out his ears.

"I missed you," she muttered.

"So why did you make me wait so long?" he backed her to the bed and they fell onto it together, his mouth not stopping in the frenzy to possess.

"I don't know. It about killed me and it wasn't that long."

He moved his mouth down to her neck, teasing and tasting her skin. "A whole slew of Death Eaters could be ransacking the first floor and you wouldn't know it."

"Oh, I'd know. You missed one of the wards. You were the only one who entered. That feels so good." He had moved to nibble on her collar bone, tasting the slightly salty spot at the base of her throat. "Contraceptive potion?" she managed to ask.

"In my pocket." He fished around for a vial, the busied his hands while she emptied it.

She took possession of his mouth again and yanked at his shirt, tearing off the last two buttons in her enthusiasm.

A couple hours later Severus awoke when Hermione stirred in his arms. He tucked her head under his chin and pulled her closer to him, reveling in the memory of the coupling. "Got your brain back yet?"

"Mmmm, questionable. You're still here, I don't know if I can think when you're this close." She nuzzled his chest with her face, running her lips everywhere.

"Did you call me a prat?" He hadn't even noticed her words at the time, but now they came back to him.

She laughed low in her throat. "Upset I'm not terrified of you anymore?"

"Well, no. Though you have been acting a bit off kilter lately, or we would have done this days ago. I want to wake up with you in my arms every morning." He swore low in her bushy hair. "Hestia was right, you have turned me soft. I can't believe I just said something like that."

"I like that you *can* be soft, sometimes, just the same as I like your sarcasm and acerbic wit. And I keep hoping some day we will be able to sleep in the same bed every night. Until then, let's do it again some time." She stretched beside him, raising his temperature another couple of degrees.

He ran one hand down the length of her, reveling in the soft skin and sweet smell of his woman. His woman...it never ceased to amaze him that he was married to her, and that she generally welcomed him into her arms...even if he did have to grovel and explain first. Her chatter and constant questions didn't even annoy him as much as they used to. "If we must, I might be able to squeeze in a little time right now."

When she woke again the sun was just hanging on the horizon and a million birds were welcoming the day outside Hermione's open window. With a fumbling grasp she picked up her wand and pointed it at the window, making it close loudly.

One of Severus's hands delved back into her bushy mane. "You know, I'm growing rather fond of this hair. I think you should keep it." His lips found the base of her throat

again and Hermione could feel her blood start to hum. Who knew she had such a sex drive?

"Yeah, good plan." She opened one eye and saw the time was six-thirty a.m. She groaned. "As much as I'm enjoying this, my parents will be up soon."

"So let them get up. I'm busy here." He moved up to her jaw line, licking and kissing a trail to her ear. "You always taste so good."

"Severus. Please stop." She gave him a little nudge, but it proved ineffective.

"Say it like you mean it and I will."

She felt her bones melting again, but she wanted to speak with him. This time she needed to get a few words in, at least. "Stop, we need to talk. Come on." Her nudges were a little more forceful and Severus conceded to her, though it was clear he would rather continue his own line of inquiry...how quickly could he melt Hermione's brain?

When he had moved away a few inches, Hermione reached out and brushed his long hair out of his face, then rested her fingers on his cheek. "You look tired. You haven't been taking care of yourself."

"I don't always get a lot of time to sleep and I've been needing you." He turned his head and laid a kiss on her palm. It was so sweet she had to wonder if he was simply trying to manipulate her into returning to their previous activity. Then again, he had made great progress in showing a softer side of himself from time to time.

Her insides melted a little more when he kissed her palm again, and she no longer cared if he was manipulating her, but she forced herself to stay focused. "The Order, Lupin is getting a lot of pressure about where he's getting his information. Eventually someone is going to insist. You'd be safer if they knew you were still passing information to me."

"They won't believe me based on your faith in me, Hermione. If we tell them, that will be the end of my being useful." He lifted a curly tendril of hair from her face. "Have I ever told you how beautiful you are? Like a desert oasis to my soul."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "Are you sure you're my snarky professor and not someone in disguise? Did someone dose you with something?"

Laughter rolled in his chest before coming through his lips. "And if it's not the snarky professor, but someone else entirely. What do you think you could do about it?"

She lifted her knee until it was well placed to do some damage. "Oh, I think I could make an imposter have his regrets. Honestly, I don't think I could mistake you. I could practically feel my blood humming through the door before I knew who was on the other side. That's why you only got stupefy and not something considerably nastier." She removed her knee from its dangerous position. "Even though I was angry enough with you to have been very, very harsh with my hexes."

"I thank you for that." He kissed her wrist, then pressed her palm to his cheek. "But if that weren't the case? If you didn't feel a reaction, how would you know for sure if it wasn't me?"

"Well, I could always ask you where your favorite freckles are." He had commented on said freckles late in the night when he had been doing some 'undercover investigating.' The memory alone made her grin salacious.

"Mmmm. That would work." He trailed his fingers along the area where those freckles existed, bringing goose bumps up on her skin. "What if you don't want to get so personal in front of others?"

"I could ask my pet name for you. Prat." She laughed when he tickled her ribs in response.

"Definitely not what I'd most like Potter to hear."

"Fine." He started nuzzling her cheek, and she had to nudge him away again before she lost track of the conversation. "How about a secret phrase. You could say that I like chocolate ice cream."

"Just out of thin air like that?"

"Mmmm," his hands were doing delightful things all over her back and stomach, and Hermione decided to let him get it out of his system so they could have a real conversation.

"Is Potter still working on his silent defense?" Severus asked some time later as he began dressing.

Hermione covered up in a robe, planning to shower as soon as he left. "He's not seventeen for another week, but I've had him working on it a bit. We've been working on his Occlumency skills still and he continues to improve. I couldn't get in at all yesterday when we worked on it. At least until I distracted him." She grinned at the memory. "I'm getting better at Legilimency, testing him most afternoons and he's improving. We've also continued our other project and might be getting close to furthering that end. I guess we'll see if we're right when we get there. I got the potion set up at the cottage yesterday, the first set of ingredients prepared and lined up, but haven't started it. We'll need to get things started on it this morning if you can spare the time."

He nodded. "As soon as you can break away from your parents. I've been checking around the Riddle house for certain artifacts of interest. No signs, but I'll let you know if I have any other ideas." His fingers busily fastened the long row of buttons on his vest.

"Even in the heat of summer you wear so many layers. Don't you broil?"

Severus looked over at her and lifted a brow in disdain. "That's what cooling charms are for, my dear. For my part, things have been moderately slow lately. I haven't been able to get close enough to overhear anything interesting in the circle in the past few days. The Dark Lord is keeping things quiet. I've been working on a couple of the others, though. We'll see what I come up with in the next little while."

When he slid on his shoes a moment later, Hermione knew their time was at an end. He slid his cloak over his shoulders, shrugged into it, then reached out and rested a hand on her cheek. "Tell me we can get together again for the night soon...at the cottage."

She nodded. "I'll work something out. Stay safe and away from that Nott woman."

That brought a twisted smile to his mouth, "I'll do my best...I'm sure she's still furious. I wish someone besides Lupin knew about us. Have you heard from him yet?"

She twisted her hands together in front of her, then decided to fess up. "Actually, about half the Order does know that there's someone. The twins let them onto it, they just don't know who...but no one can discuss it outside the Burrow, so they can't carry tales that might get back to the wrong people. And I kind of came in late after our date last week, gave them a real shock when they thought I must have been kidnapped and found out I'd spent the night with someone instead. Well, I suppose you figured that out from what Remus said at the bookstore."

He seemed to weigh her revelations, but finally nodded. "I'm glad you've taken measures to prevent tales."

She smiled to herself. "Ron's been trying to guess your identity for some time now. His most recent guess was Cormac McClaggan." She pulled a face at him. It was starting to wear her out, dodging the questions from Ron and Harry. Ron had continued to be cool toward her, but she could tell he was making an effort to pretend he didn't care. She wished he would find someone else to crush on so he could let her go.

"Death Eater. He just joined last week. It wouldn't hurt to watch out for him. Tell everyone. And Blaise Zabini seems to have made that last step as well." His lips pursed, his eyes lowered. "I was hoping . . . I couldn't save Draco, too much family pressure, but I hoped Zabini would take his own way." He took Hermione's hands in his and gave them a squeeze. "I'll be in touch."

Hermione pulled her hands away, then threw her arms around his shoulders. "Take care of yourself."

"Ditto."

After a lingering kiss she stepped back, and with a crack, he was gone.

"So it's not Cormac McClaggen," Harry began when he, Ron and Hermione sat down to eat outside a little fish and chips place a couple miles from number four, Privet Drive that afternoon. The food wasn't as good as the one in Dover that she had visited with Severus, but it was heck of a lot better than Ron's cooking any day.

Hermione shook her head. It was actually kind of funny sometimes to listen to the two boys guessing. They would never guess right. Not in a million years. Mostly because Harry hated Severus so bad he couldn't consider that the man had a single good quality. After spending the previous night with him, Hermione could attest that there were *many* good qualities in Severus Snape. She held back a grin and returned to the conversation. "Cormack's a Death Eater, just took the mark last week. Blaise too. Don't let me forget to mention that to the Order tonight. In another week we'll actually be in on the meetings for a change. That will be nice." There was another meeting scheduled at Grimmauld Place, and the kids were tagging along for the trip. Harry suggested it, but Hermione figured it was because Ginny would be going over with her parents and he wanted to spend some time with her.

Harry let the hand carrying some chips to his mouth drop in surprise. "How do you know he's a Death Eater?"

Hermione wanted to slap her forehead when she realized she shouldn't have known that tidbit of information. *The same way I knew the Creevey home was being targeted. The same way I knew Bellatrix Lestrange was looking for Neville, hoping to take out the rest of the family. I can't tell you. "Talked to Tonks this morning." Why aren't you wasting time talking about Quidditch instead? Note to self: pull Tonks aside before the Harry or Ron have time to question her.*

"You're much calmer than you've been in a few days, Hermione. Have you had a little snog time since yesterday?" Ron asked, putting on a good front of nonchalance. "I thought you were going to your parents' house?" He sounded a bit suspicious.

"I did, I spent the entire night there in my own bed. Then I had breakfast with my parents." The boys' minds always circled back to this one question: Who is Hermione secretly in love with, and why wouldn't she tell them? Hermione knew the not-knowing was driving them crazy, but she couldn't tell them. "Have you both been clearing your minds before bed? We need to work on our Occlumency before we go to battle."

"Yes, I'm working on it," Harry said. "How about you, did you work on it before bed last night?"

"Mmmm, yeah. I can honestly say my mind was utterly blank when I went to sleep last night." *Both times.*

"Don't think I want to know what that means." Ron waved a hand to dismiss it. "It's the Cheshire cat grin. What's going on with you Hermione? Why won't you tell us who this bloke is? I mean, he can't be that bad if you love him." He was trying very hard to look unconcerned in a personal way, but was failing utterly.

You'd have a serious attitude adjustment if you knew the truth. "He's not bad, it's just complicated. We both think it's in our best interest to keep things low key for now. I suppose in that case I shouldn't have hexed your brothers so thoroughly." Still, she couldn't find it in her heart to regret what she had done to them. There were times she thought she had been too nice.

"Fred has decided it's not such a bad thing after all," Ron told Harry. He turned back to Hermione. "He said he'd like to know how it was done. Maybe he could adjust it to fit in a sweet of some kind, and last only a couple minutes. It's brilliant spell work, he says."

She grinned. "When it's worn off of them, I'd be happy to share. Between now and then, they can suffer. How did your first day of work go anyway?"

Ron began speaking animatedly about working at the shop and all the people he met. Hermione said a quick prayer to any powers that might be listening that he would meet someone through the shop and take some pressure off her.

A man disguised as a twenty-something punk rocker watched the trio sitting at the table, laughing and teasing each other. He saw them in that carefree moment and decided they obviously needed a few reminders of what trouble meant. Starting with the Mudblood girl.

AN: A big thanks, as always, to my beta, countrymouse, and to notsosaintly for taking the time to slog through the line of stories waiting for validation.

29: Wedding Day Disaster

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See Chapter 1

Chapter 29: Wedding Day Disaster

After lunch, the trio went to the Burrow to help with last-minute preparations for the wedding, which would take place the following day. Hermione was helping to whip together food for the event, and Fleur had the boys hauling items around the yard, clipping the grass, fixing everything just so for the outdoor ceremony.

It was a horrendously exhausting afternoon and evening, which ended with a quick planning session for Harry's birthday...which was less than a week away. Though they had been invited to stay at the Burrow when they left the Dursley home, the three of them had decided to go to Headquarters instead for several reasons. One was the fact that they would have more autonomy at Headquarters without Molly coddling them every minute of the day. But the most important reason was Harry's fear that anywhere else he may stay could be the focus of attacks. Headquarters was simply safer for everyone.

Harry planned to take his Apparition test on his birthday, which would be followed immediately by a surprise party in his honor. Of course, she and Ginny had been whispering over it at dinner time at the Burrow. The Dursleys were happy to have him gone as much as possible and happy he spent most of his days in the tent in the back yard or away from the house.

Hermione worried that Ron may be a little jealous at the attention Harry would get, but the two of them seemed to be mostly over the jealousy hurdle since Ron became Prefect two years earlier. When she left the Burrow, she was feeling relaxed and loose, exhausted from her previous night of little sleep, and anxious to pull her diary from the pocket and write to Severus.

The morning of the wedding dawned beautiful and bright. Hermione arrived early to help with last-minute preparations. It was a lovely Saturday and she just knew the binding would be perfect. Seeing everyone arrive to share the couple's joy, Hermione felt a bit wistful, wishing she had been able to invite others to her own wedding. Wishing that if she *had* invited others, they could have felt joy at her union. Even with Albus Dumbledore's death aside, Hermione knew joy was the last thing Harry or Ron would have wished her and Severus. She wondered if the other Order members would have been much better.

When Fleur's grandparents arrived, Hermione ran her thumb over her ring, a gesture that was beginning to become habit. The ring was the silent reminder of her own marriage, the constant support that she wasn't alone and that everything that had happened between herself and Severus wasn't a dream. Not being able to acknowledge her marriage to anyone, and barely mentioning her relationship at all, had proven difficult.

Remus and Tonks arrived, Kingsley Shacklebolt brought his wife, and dozens of others Hermione recognized from the Order showed up as well. Hermione was exchanging pleasantries with Tonks and Remus while waiting for the bride to show, when she felt a twinge of warning in her chest. The same twinge Severus had set off a couple nights before when he had breached the Grangers' wards.

She grasped Tonks' hand. "My parents' house. Someone's trying to get in right now. Three people have crossed the boundaries into the house...no wait, make that five." Since the wards only responded to magical signatures, there was no question that it might simply be a few friends over for a Saturday afternoon barbeque. Everyone magical she knew and trusted was at the wedding.

Tonks whistled and Kingsley and two others hurried over.

Hermione gave the three of them the directions, and all four of them hurried to the Burrow's Apparition boundaries. "You can't come, Hermione," Tonks said when she realized the teen was right behind her. "It's too dangerous."

"I'm coming; they're my parents." Hermione reached the boundaries only a moment after Tonks, but before she could begin the Apparition, she found herself frozen and lying on the grass under a sycamore tree.

Groaning with frustration and tears pouring down her face, Hermione lay locked in place like a stone. Several minutes passed before Ginny reached her and lifted the jinx.

"What's going on? Why did Tonks hex you?"

"There's no time to explain. I have to get home." The words were barely intelligible, Hermione was sobbing so hard.

"Wait. Hermione, wait! What's going on?"

Hermione whirled on her and answered fiercely, "Death Eaters are attacking my parents." Then she focused her mind and Disapparated.

Ministry employees streamed around the house in tandem with Muggle policemen, though it seemed that the Muggles rarely saw the wizards. If they did, none remarked on their funny clothes or their presence at an official police investigation. While the Aurors ignored and waved away a couple of wizarding reporters, Hermione turned away, not wanting to get within fifty feet of them. No one seemed to notice her arrival, and Hermione hugged herself around the chest, afraid to ask someone what happened. Still, she made a beeline for the house, desperate to find her parents.

Tonks stopped Hermione when she arrived, coming around the house as Hermione charged for the back door, intent on protecting her parents if it wasn't already too late.

Tonks grabbed her by the arm and pulled her in, held her close. "They're safe, we got here in time. It's OK."

Hermione crumpled in relief, then looked up at Tonks. "Where are they? Were they hurt? I need to see them."

"There were minor injuries, nothing St. Mungo's can't fix in a trice. They're already there, and we caught most of the men who were here. There's some damage inside the house, but it's all just stuff, Hermione."

"Why my parents? They're just defenseless Muggles. It isn't like they're a threat." Tears of pain and relief, worry and fear, poured down Hermione's cheeks. She was grateful she thought to put those specific wards on her home, and that the Aurors had been so close to her when she realized something was amiss.

She covered her face with her hands when she realized she had caused quite a scene at Bill's and Fleur's wedding. After only a few seconds, she brushed the slight embarrassment away, her parents were hurt, but should be OK, and the wedding hadn't been underway, so at least she didn't interrupt the ceremony. She hoped Tonks was right about her parents' injuries.

Tonks reached out and feathered Hermione's hair back from her forehead, patted the sides. "You should go see your parents, the rest of us will get things cleaned up here. Hopefully I'll have answers for you tonight. You'll feel better once you've seen your mum and dad."

"Yeah, I will. Thanks, Tonks." Hermione wiped the tears from her face, took in a deep breath to calm herself, then Apparated to St. Mungo's.

Compared to the previous time she had been there, the hospital was fairly quiet. Of course her only other trip there had been to visit Mr. Weasley after Nagini attacked him. Then the halls had been littered with victims of family holiday fights and visitors checking in on loved ones for Christmas.

It was late morning, and Hermione imagined most people would be by to visit their family later in the day. She went to the front desk and waited behind a rotund man who was making a ruckus about some hex his three-year-old had cast on an older sister. The woman at the front counter was calm and soothing, sending the man in the right direction in no time.

When Hermione reached the front counter, she was anxious to see her parents, but had allowed Tonks' words to reassure her somewhat. "My name is Hermione Granger. My parents are the Muggles brought in here after the Death Eater attack on their home."

"Yes, of course." The woman checked a paper in front of her and smiled, then met Hermione's eye. "They should be released in a few hours. All minor injuries, easily healed. They are on the fourth floor, Spell Damage, room 416."

Hermione thanked the woman and headed toward the elevators. A moment later, she stepped out on the main floor and was making her way to her parents' room. Thankfully, the Healers had seen fit to place them in the same room. She hesitated outside her parents' room for only a moment, preparing herself in case they looked injured, not wanting to worry them if they looked worse than she expected.

She opened the door, then smiled when she saw both her parents looked pretty good. Her mother's hair was very short, less than an inch long, and her father had some funny spots on his skin. Both looked a bit wan and worn out, but other than that, everything appeared to be perfectly normal.

"Hermione, you're here!" Her mother's greeting was more than simply warm. "I'm sorry to mess up your day, to make you miss that wedding, dear. I know how you were looking forward to it."

Laughing ironically at her mum's apology when Hermione knew if anyone was to blame, it was herself, she hurried over and hugged her mother tight. "Hey, Mum, I was so worried."

"Come here, Poppet, haven't had a chance to hug you all day," her father said when Hermione pulled from her mother's arms. She switched to him and was grateful when his hug was as tight as ever.

"I was so worried. I mean, Tonks said your injuries were minor."

"Yes, the men in black, Death Eaters, weren't they? They seemed more intent on damaging things in the house and humiliating us than in causing much actual pain." Her father shifted in his bed and flinched, then touched his left side. "Well, not too much. The Healers here said we'll be right as rain and on our way home in a few hours."

"Humiliating?" Hermione looked from one to the other and back, wondering exactly what that meant.

"Well, they hexed your mother's hair off, see," her father began and Hermione nodded, understanding now why her mum's hair was so short. It would take several hours to regrow, even magically. "And they hit me with something that hurt and caused these spots on my face, but they should be back to normal soon."

"They roughed your father up a bit, but the Healers already fixed his broken bones and cleared away the bruises. If regular doctors could have access to some of the potions and things you all use, the real world would be revolutionized."

Hermione smiled softly, though inside she was groaning. The real world. The magical world had never been real to her parents, more like the fantasy realm their daughter played around in most of the time. That was one reason Hermione was reluctant to share her relationship with Severus with them. Not that they would take the age difference issue without a blink, because no matter how great they were, twenty years is still a lot of age difference. Especially when Hermione was only seventeen herself.

The real issue was that the magical aspect of the bond would be so far outside their experiences that she figured they would fight it...even harder than Severus had. Even harder than he still fought it, to be honest. She loved her husband dearly, but he could be so hard-headed sometimes.

"As you saw yourself today though, magic can be wielded for bad purposes too, so it's best we don't share it with those who aren't ready. But I'm glad it was here to help you so this won't be an ongoing problem to deal with." She almost added 'physically,' knowing the emotional repercussions for both them and herself would continue for quite some time.

She stayed and spoke with them for over an hour, until one of the Healers ushered her out of the room, insisting her parents needed a nap before they were released into the Muggle world again.

"Don't go home, Mum, Dad. Go see Aunt Edna for the weekend. Let yourselves heal completely and let me see about some more protective measures before you return."

"The longer we wait, the harder it will be to go back there," her father said.

"Yes, but I'm not asking you to wait weeks, just one night. The men who did this won't be able to do it again." *The reporter will jump on the story though, and I don't want to risk a copy-cat attack.* But she didn't dare say those words, they had to be scared enough as it was, regardless of how well they were taking it. "I want to be sure no one else can come after you either."

"We're the parents, we're supposed to protect you." Her father's voice was low, anguished and she saw him look at his wife, the love all but radiated across the space between their beds. They had always loved each other so much. "But I suppose in this case, I'll let you take care of us. I couldn't stand to lose you mother."

"And life without your father would hardly be worth getting up for each day."

As she watched them stare at each other, soft smiles of love for each other on their faces, Hermione couldn't help but smile as well. Maybe they would understand after all.

The ceremony was long past when Hermione returned to the Burrow. Everyone was enjoying the delicious food Mrs. Weasley had prepared over the previous few days. It only took a moment for Harry to spot Hermione. He stood to catch her eye and waved her over to their table under the shade of an old oak tree.

"How are they?" Harry asked when she took her seat next to him.

"They'll be fine, just fine. Minor injuries, and the Healers expect they'll be back as good as new before dinner time. I convinced them to spend the night elsewhere while we secure the home better this time."

"Bill said he'd be happy to swing over when they return from holiday and cast some special wards for you," Ron said around a full mouth.

Hermione didn't bother to ask him to swallow before speaking. If six years of nagging hadn't done any good, one more nag would surely be useless. "I'd appreciate it. I'll have to talk to Tonks when she shows back up and see what other options I have. Though the first set of wards didn't keep everyone out, at least they warned us so help could arrive quickly. The Creeveys didn't have that kind of protection on their house."

After another moment, the subject shifted until soon the conversation had moved in a completely different direction. It was actually a relief in some ways, spending a few minutes where she was not focused on the bad events of the day, even though they lingered in the back of her consciousness.

Fleur and Bill looked as happy as could be, and Hermione made certain to take a few minutes that afternoon to go over and congratulate them. Bill reiterated his willingness to help in any way he could, but their honeymoon Portkey was scheduled to leave that evening, and there wouldn't be time to do anything before that.

Hermione said she understood, and she did, but it didn't make her worry any less serious.

When most of the guests had drifted off and the others were settled around tables enjoying the evening air, Hermione felt the tug inside that indicated her diary had a new entry. She withdrew it from a small pocket in her skirt, returned it to normal size and flipped it open to the last page she had written on.

Hermione, I just returned from the Dark Lord's side. I heard about your parents. Please, write and tell me that they were stopped in time and you are all right. I feel your worry and strain. I have spent the past few hours worrying about you, despite hearing that you were not home. If I know you, you are wondering if it was your fault. Don't do that to yourself. There were five of them, all operating outside the Dark Lord's orders. Tell me when I can see you. When we get together next, I'll tell you everything I've been able to gather. Just come to our cottage as soon as you can get away.

It was more than Hermione could bear. She wondered if Severus was telling the truth. Did he really know nothing of the attack before it was over? Could she have prevented this, or was he trying to make her feel better? Would he have warned her, given the chance? Tears fell again as she remembered the guilty breakfast she had shared with her parents the previous morning.

She had a man spend the night in their house, in her bed, and knew they wouldn't have approved of him or the marriage. She kept the secret to herself. There would be plenty of time to tell her folks about Severus later, she figured. Plenty of time to prepare them for the introduction. She'd had wards up to alert her, but then they hadn't

done much good when Severus came to visit either. What if they had died and she had been left with her secret on her conscience?

She did need to be with Severus. Need to feel his arms around her.

She pulled out her pen and wrote a response. *Severus, I want to see you. I'll go to our cottage as soon as I can break away here.*

Before leaving the Burrow an hour later, she made sure there were no tracking charms on her, no one watching or skulking around her. If nothing else, the attack on her parents had made her cautious. There was no question that the attack had been meant for her. Why else would they hit her home?

The cottage looked as perfectly charming as always. She thought it a pity she rarely got to spend time there during the day. The garden could use some attention, and she imagined it would be lovely to sit in the shade with a cool drink and a long book and feel the air on her cheeks, smell the roses perfuming the afternoon air. Right now she longed to fly into the tallest tree and listen to the breeze tell stories, as it did to the birds.

But her soul mate was waiting inside, ready to offer her the embrace and support she needed.

And he still claimed he didn't love her. Stupid man.

When the door of the front room closed behind Hermione, Severus gathered her into his arms and held her while she cried. "They'll be fine," she assured him through her tears, "but I know it's my fault. All my fault. They could have been dead."

He moved her over toward the bed where they both lay down, she cried into his chest while he held her tight with one arm, and gently ran a hand over her hair with the other. He didn't offer nonsense words of comfort that wouldn't help. He didn't try to cheer her up, he only loved and accepted her. Somehow he knew what she needed most.

When a great space of time had passed, and her sobbing had melted into nothing more than hiccups, Severus finally spoke, "I was worried about you, wondering how you were, what I could do for you, wishing I could be there, knowing I couldn't."

"Who?"

He didn't need any clarification. "Rookwood, McClaggen, Malfoy Jr., Lestrangle, Zabini. I understand the attack was Draco's idea. He saw you with Harry and Ron eating downtown, laughing as though you hadn't a care in the world, and figured you needed some shaking up. He was the only one to return to the Dark Lord. I assume the others were caught?"

"Yes."

"Draco won't be bothering anyone again. His foolishness brought his end." Both sorrow and resignation sounded in his voice.

Surprisingly, a momentary twinge of regret over his death hit Hermione, then faded into the background. "It's my fault then. It really is, not some strange twist of fate. I sometimes thought he hated me more than Harry. I never let it bother me in school." The sobbing didn't return, though guilt did wrench a fresh stream of tears.

"No, it's Draco's fault. It's Zabini's and Rodolphus's and McClaggen's fault. They are the ones who have the problems. You just want to live in peace. You can't be blamed." Severus's voice was fierce, his hold on her tightened, though it still wasn't uncomfortable.

"The boys teased me about you, we laughed at what I did to the twins and teased each other. It was the first time I've seen Harry really laugh since . . . since Dumbledore died." Hermione felt Severus tighten up beneath her, felt his grief. "I wish this could all be over, that we could run and hide. South Africa sounds nice, don't you think? All that hot sun and miles of beaches. We could run off, leave everything behind."

Severus brushed his lips across her forehead and pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. "It sounds lovely, my dear. We'll have to do that some day when you are using my name. For now, however, we both have responsibilities. I must spend time with filth like those who have hurt you so much, work to bring them down. And you must help the Boy Wonder do what he must. I think you got the raw end of the deal."

Hermione chuckled slightly at this last comment: it was so typical Severus to think dealing with Death Eaters and the Dark Lord was preferable to helping Harry learn Occlumency and silent spell casting.

"There now, you can laugh."

She felt his cheek rub across her head and lifted her face to press it into his neck. "I just want to forget it all for a little while. Just a while. Please, help me forget."

With a finger at her jaw, he lifted her mouth to his and took her mind away from the pain, if only for the night.

AN The first time I wrote this chapter, I killed her parents off. When I was rewriting it to post some time later, I decided not to. This is what we ended up with. Hermione's got enough stress coming up without the loss of her parents on top of it, don't you think? lol

A big thanks to Southern_Witch_69 for correcting my story and validating it, and to countrymouse for betaing it.

30: Cleaning Up

Chapter 30 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 30: Cleaning Up

The sun was shining in the window when Hermione opened her eyes and tightened her arms around the man in bed with her. The first time they had made love it was fast and ferocious, breathtaking. Each time since then had been different. Last night it had been sweet, drugging, so right she couldn't describe it. He had filled her and emptied her, left her floating until she rolled into sleep. Now she awoke refreshed and much more capable of taking on the day.

She lifted her face to look at him and found him gazing at her, his eyes full of concern. She hadn't looked closely enough to notice the previous evening, for she had been too wrapped up in her own grief. He looked worn out, worried. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I wonder what else they will do in their haste to take you all down, to break Potter. Losing you, losing any or all of the Weasleys, would be more than he could take. You saw how he was after Black died. Breaking him so he can't fight is one of their greatest weapons. That makes your death or injury one of their greatest weapons. Even with the Dark Lord currently happy about the way I'm manipulating you, it could change in a heartbeat. His moods are mercurial: we never know from day to day what he will do or say. I worry about you constantly."

The last few words had been halting, as though they were hard to speak, and Hermione knew they must be. After all, he wasn't one given to much emotion, except that of hate and anger. Even then, his control had been amazing. When she looked back on all he had lived through, it was amazing to Hermione that he had managed to restrain himself from killing Sirius all those time he came by Grimmauld Place. A man with lesser control certainly would have given into his hate.

Not that she hadn't liked Sirius, in his own way. He certainly cared about Harry, and he could be a jolly companion, but he and James...and a host of others, should she be honest...had made Severus's life miserable. That kind of misery often created monsters. And despite all he had lived through, she couldn't call him a monster. She loved him so much. "That's why you're pretending to be manipulating me, isn't it? To make me too valuable a tool to dispose of?"

"So far your contribution has been minimal; as a school girl you don't have all the information other Order members get. That makes you somewhat vulnerable."

Hermione debated for a moment, then decided to make her own admission. "That situation should change soon. When Harry turns seventeen in a few days, he, Ron and I intend to seek Order membership. We want to be more involved in the fight. Right now nobody will take us seriously. The best way to get involved is to become members."

"You cannot join...you're too young. Still in school." His anger and worry rose inside her.

"We aren't planning on returning to school. Even if the school governors do decide to reopen, we're going to fight. It's far more important than our N.E.W.T. scores." The admission only caused her a twinge of regret now, after the past month of getting used to the idea.

"You have decided not to return to school? Miss I-Can't-Soak-Up-Knowledge-Fast-Enough-Granger, er, Snape?" He looked annoyed with himself for needing to make the correction, but didn't dwell on it. "How happy will you be if you don't get a decent job because you never took your N.E.W.T.s?"

"Tell me how happy I'll be if the Dark Lord wins and I'm dead, or turned into nothing more than chattel?"

He paused a moment, studying her, then trailed a finger down the side of her neck and along her collar bone, ending with a kiss on that sweet spot below her right ear. "As long as you were my chattel, I think we'd get by."

"Don't joke about this, Severus." Hermione was frustrated by his attitude. "I can take my tests later. You know Professor McGonagall will pull for me, as will all my other professors, to see that I get a chance to test later...not that N.E.W.T. scores are likely to do me any good in Australia. But if we don't win the war, my scores are hardly going to matter. Many of the Order members may protest, but we're going after the evil git either way, and we'll be safer with their help."

There was a long moment of silence. "You're one stubborn woman. My wife." His acceptance soothed her, his admiration cooled her irritation, and the feel of his fingers rubbing her shoulders brought her to settle more closely against him.

"How long until Potter goes to Order Headquarters?" Severus asked after a lengthy pause.

"Soon. Before the protection wears off at the Dursleys'. He doesn't intend to go back either. And you can let whomever cares know that he hates their guts, so getting rid of them would be more a favor than a heartbreak for him."

He pressed a kiss to her bare shoulder. "That's not really true, is it?"

She smiled despite herself. "No. He loathes them, it's true, but he would hate to see anyone killed. So no, he wouldn't consider it a favor."

"He'd hate to see *anyone* killed?" The words hung between them for a long moment.

"Well, maybe not just anyone. There might be one or two he wouldn't be too fussed about." The admission cost her.

"Like me."

When she finally answered him, her voice was soft, barely more than a whisper. "Like you. We have to let the Order know, have to make sure they don't attack you when it comes to the final battle. Everyone . . . they don't know . . . they don't understand. I can't bear to think of losing you too. Everyone I know and love will be at risk in this war. Everyone who is left. Though I would hate to lose one more person, just one, I don't know if I could go on without you." She rested her forehead against his chest and whispered, "I know I couldn't."

He spoke after a long moment. "I couldn't bear to live without you. There would be no point anymore. Damned potion. It's all the Weasley boys' fault." His voice lacked true anger, and he pulled her closer to him.

Hermione laughed for real this time. "And if we survive this war intact, even if we have to hide away in another continent to protect you, we'll probably want to thank them for bringing us together."

"Not that we'll do it. They can go on thinking you're ready to send hexes through the owl post at the slightest provocation."

"I wonder if their freckles will be back to normal by the final battle?"

"The way the Dark Lord is recruiting, we'll be lucky to have that much time. I'll be surprised if we see the Yule holidays before he makes his move. Potter must train. He must." There was a short pause, then Severus spoke again, his reluctance clear. "On another note, the Dark Lord has asked that I find out from you who the Secret-Keeper is for Headquarters. I really wish I could say you didn't know."

"You can. Nobody knows. They decided it was safer that way. I was shown only a note and didn't recognize the handwriting at all."

Severus looked her in the eye, and she could sense him probing to see if it was true. Then he nodded. "That's a relief. Not that it will make him happy to hear it, but at least the information won't come from me or you."

When Hermione said goodbye later that morning and Apparated back to the Burrow, she felt a twinge of guilt. It seemed Severus was telling her everything. She trusted him completely with herself; she believed he was helping her, giving her good information about the Death Eaters. Yet she trusted him with nearly none of her own secrets. Even the Horcruxes, which were not known in the Order, were not up for discussion with the man she loved, though he was already aware of her search. When did her trust win out over her worries and circumstances? Would she ever be able to share all of her life with him, or would what remained of their lives be spent under a veil of half truths and round-about questions?

Hermione spent the morning with Tonks and Remus at her parents' home, establishing new wards and cleaning up the havoc the Death Eaters had left behind. Much of the damage was repairable, but some was not. The family photographs that someone had thrown in the fire were lost, as were the Dutch figurines her great-grandmother had owned, as several chunks were still missing when Hermione tried to spell it back to its original condition. Her best guess was that shards had ended up stuck to people's

clothing and carried out of the house by Death Eaters and Aurors.

Still, the damage could have been far worse. With magic, and with help, it didn't take long to return the home nearly back to normal. When they were finished, Hermione stopped into her aunt's to see her parents and tell them all was well, then returned to the tent and began cleaning up there.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked when he saw her putting books into her school trunk.

"Are we or are we not returning to Headquarters in two days' time...less actually?"

"Well, yeah, but we can do all that packing tomorrow. No reason to worry about it yet."

Exasperated, Hermione turned and looked at Harry, who smiled, but kept his eyes on the book in his lap. "Not only do we need to get our things packed, we need to leave this tent cleaned up properly before your father returns it to Perkins. Also, I promised Petunia I would make sure the yard was in good repair when we left, which means a bit more work tonight under cover of darkness."

"Don't you think the nosy woman in Number Five wonders how it is we manage to keep the yard in perfect shape without ever seeming to do any work in it?" Harry flipped the page of his book.

"Or how we manage to move the tent at night, in the dark?" Ron stuffed another Chocolate Frog in his mouth, then looked over the notes he had taken on becoming an Animagus.

"Or how about the fact that the three of us practically live here, but it looks barely big enough to fit someone like Professor Flitwick comfortably for a single night?" Hermione packed away a few more books, then checked under the table next to Harry to see if she missed any books there.

"Good thing you put that Muggle distraction spell on the tent, Hermione. Otherwise more tongues would be wagging than ever...and my incurable criminal behavior has long been a favorite topic of conversation in the neighborhood. Can you imagine the rumors about the kinky activities we involve ourselves with here?" Harry grinned when Hermione looked up at him in surprise at his suggestion.

"Especially with all the colored lights flashing everywhere when we cast spells," Ron added.

"Spells, what spells?" Hermione asked innocently. "You and I cast a few here and there, Ron, but Harry's still underage. I swear I never saw his wand in his hand once the whole month. And we would hardly cast a spell near a bunch of Muggles like this. Honestly, you're full of wild stories today."

This time both boys looked up at her, and they all grinned at each other.

"That's our story and we're sticking to it," Harry said, then closed his textbook. "I'm done, let's get back to Transfiguration."

Ron set aside his notes and stood to join them. Hermione shook her head, but put away her own tasks for later. Transfiguration it was. She wondered if either of them would manage feathers or fur this time around.

Ron was starting to get a strange pattern on his arm, and Harry seemed more, well, hairy than usual when an owl came through the tent opening an hour later. Both boys lost their focus and returned to normal when the owl screeched as it landed on Hermione's lap.

Viktor's owl grasped her jeans with its claws, but managed not to scratch her skin too much, then held out the note attached to its leg.

"What, again? He's been keeping you rather busy, hasn't he?" she said to the owl. "Well, take a rest, if you like, and I'll take a few minutes to send a letter back with you." It was the third letter she had received from Viktor since school got out. Hermione lifted the owl on her arm and carried it over to the table. She fed it some bread and water, then turned back to the boys, who were watching her.

"It's not Viktor, is it? I mean, you know, *him*. He wasn't around or anything," Ron said.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Of course it's not Viktor. We're just friends. Now get back to work; I can see you're both making progress. I think you might have scales like a snake or lizard, Ron."

"Really? That'd be brilliant." He seemed to perk up at that and immediately closed his eyes to try and focus again.

When Harry joined him, Hermione unrolled the scroll of her letter and began to read.

Dear Hermione, I read about the attack on your parents, though the paper didn't give many details. I hope all is well with them and most especially with you. I hope to meet them when I am down next month to visit.

He continued on with more specifics about his plans, then closed the letter. It was shorter than usual, but it had only been a couple weeks since he wrote last, and she would see him in a little more than a fortnight.

Hermione pulled out a quill and parchment and sent a brief reply, apologizing for the length and saying that she looked forward to the visit, and that Harry and Ron looked forward to talking Quidditch with him. After some brief consideration, she decided she ought to prepare him for the fact that she was involved with someone else, leaving only a general mention that she was seeing someone, rather than the fuller explanation of a soul mate that Harry and Ron had. It was impossible to know if the letter would be intercepted, after all.

After she tied the letter to the owl's leg, she looked back over at Ron and Harry and grinned. Ron was definitely developing scales, though he hadn't gotten any further in changing shape or size yet. Harry's increase in furriness was not her imagination, as most of his body was now covered with the stuff, though it was the same color as his regular mop. Still, things were coming along nicely.

Cleaning out the tent and getting everything settled at the Dursleys' was every bit the headache Hermione had expected. Petunia sneered at the teens, Vernon told Harry never to return and Dudley tried to cop a feel. Of course he got zapped...sometimes Severus' spell came in handy. When Ron questioned Hermione's zapping of the youngest Dursley, she only gave him a mysterious smile and continued walking.

Returning to the House of Black was rather depressing, though with the advent of Dobby into their household, the place was sparkling up nicely. The house could still use new carpets and a good coat of paint, new, lighter drapes, fresh furnishings, and the list went on, but clean was a nice change by itself. Hermione figured Harry might get around to brightening the place up sometime in the next ten years...if he didn't burn the place instead when the whole war was over. Fire might be the only way to permanently shut Mrs. Black up, after all.

The three of them had settled into the house in their regular rooms when Fred and George arrived that evening after closing their shop.

"Hey, what's brought you here?" Hermione said when she answered the door.

"Figured we were due to give an update. Anyone else here?" Fred asked.

"Just the three of us. Remus should be in later, but not for hours. Ron and Harry are in the kitchen; we were just getting around to pudding."

George patted his stomach. "Well, if you insist that we join you, I suppose I wouldn't want to offend."

"I'm sure." Hermione smiled and led them through to the kitchen. It took several minutes for greetings and servings of trifle to be passed around the table. Fred arranged a work schedule with Ron, and George showed off some of their newest products while Hermione dished out the extra servings.

When the food was nearly gone, Fred finally got down to business. "So we've been checking around, popped into Borgin and Burkes...you were right mate, the place is downright creepy..." this last he said to Harry, "but if he's got anything interesting, he didn't tell us."

"Checked into an antique store that's a bit more choosy with their clientele, but he didn't have anything either. We found some other interesting things, though." George began cataloguing some of the bizarre items they had bought to furnish the apartment over their store. Some were far from bizarre, but some couldn't fit any other descriptor.

When the twins left, the evening had definitely been more interesting than expected, but Hermione found herself even more frustrated than before their arrival. Some of her best guesses as to location and specifics for the last couple Horcruxes had come up empty.

As she settled into bed that night, pulling her diary out to write a message to Severus, she contented herself with the idea that the twins' search could still come up with something. She just didn't know what.

AN: Thanks to RobisonRocket for taking the time to validate me, to countrymouse for her beta work, and a big thanks to all my readers. I got tons of reviews on the last chapter, with plenty of blush-inducing praise. Also, the list of people who have this story as one of their favorites more than tripled! You all made my day.

31: Visiting Godric's Hollow

Chapter 31 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 31: Visiting Godric's Hollow

The morning after the trio moved to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, Remus joined them for breakfast. Having decided they wanted Dobby to focus mainly on finishing the household cleanup, and since their previous housekeeping arrangements had worked quite well, they decided to continue with them, so Harry was standing at the stove, manning the bacon and eggs. Hermione had toasted up a stack of bread, and Ron set the table.

"I guess you still want to see Godric's Hollow then?" Remus asked when he was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee.

"Course," Ron said around a mouthful of toast. He swallowed his food, then continued, "We've been meaning to go since school got out."

"Thanks for agreeing to take us," Hermione said with a nod. Though Remus had helped her with warding her parent's house a few days earlier, he managed to avoid speaking to her directly most of the time. He hadn't made eye-contact with her since their discussion about Severus, and his attitude was really starting to irritate her. "We know how busy you are." Her words would have been perfectly polite if she hadn't emphasized 'busy' a bit more than the others, alluding to their discussion outside the tent.

Remus finally met her gaze, and though he said nothing about her comment, Hermione knew he caught her point. He gave a slight nod in her direction. "Someone probably should have taken Harry there years ago. Who better than me?"

"I'm sure you would have if I'd thought to ask earlier." Harry brought over the pan of eggs he had finished cooking.

The conversation turned to other subjects while they ate. Though Hermione felt Remus's eyes on her several times during the meal, there were no more allusions to their private conversations.

When breakfast was cleaned up, Harry turned to Remus. "So how are we getting there?"

"Since none of you have been there before, and Harry's still slightly too young to Apparate, I procured a Portkey." Remus pulled a glove from his pocket.

Ron's eye widened. "I thought they were supposed to be hard to get a hold of."

"Yeah, well, keep it to yourselves, all right? It's not exactly sanctioned, but it's too close to the full moon for me to do side-along Apparition with Harry, and there isn't a nearby Floo connection." Remus made the comment matter-of-factly, as though carrying around illegal Portkeys were a matter of course.

Once a Marauder, always a Marauder. Hermione smiled despite herself. She supposed members of the Order of the Phoenix tended to blur the edges of the law to do their jobs sometimes, so she shouldn't be surprised. "Let's go to it then."

They gathered around the old glove, each of them taking a finger, and Remus activated the Portkey. Hermione felt the familiar yank behind her navel and the whirling, bumping and spinning this type of travel was known for.

After a long moment the group landed with a lurch in a copse of trees. Hermione felt her stomach turn over in complaint, then begin to settle down. She rubbed her side where Ron had jabbed her with an elbow in the maelstrom.

"Bloody hell," Ron said rubbing his entire right arm and staring at her. "What was that?"

"What was what?" Harry asked.

"I ran into Hermione and got blasted with this surge of power. Weirdest thing that's ever happened to me traveling Portkey."

Remus lifted in eyebrow at Hermione as if to say, 'don't they know?'

She shook her head slightly in response, and he rolled his eyes at her, but it was clear he was amused. "Sorry, Ron, didn't mean to do that. I hate Portkey travel. Good thing Harry's taking his Apparition test tomorrow." She rubbed her side again. "You need to watch those elbows." Her other arm was a bit sore as well from where Harry had bumped into her during their journey, but as he had no romantic interest in her, he hadn't been affected by Severus's spell. She decided to consider the results more later.

A glance at Harry showed him pale, his eyes riveted on something behind her. Hermione turned and saw the charred remnants of a foundation. Plants and vines had begun to grow through the cracks in the cement and the rubble had been hauled off, but there was no question in her mind that it was what remained of the Potter home.

"There was more left after . . . well, after," Remus said as they walked over. "But some Death Eaters came back a few weeks later, angry I suppose, and burned what remained of the home to the ground. Eventually we had the rubble hauled off."

Harry walked slowly over to the crumbling cement wall of the basement and almost reverently placed a hand on it. Silence seemed to have descended around them, only punctuated by the occasional bird warbling.

Harry's eyes watered up, but no tears fell as the others lined up beside him. A sense of solidarity flowed between them. Then Harry turned and followed the line of the foundation. "Do you remember the layout?" he asked Remus.

Only Remus' voice and the sound of their footfalls through the deep verdure disturbed the silence as they continued their way around the house. Remus described the upstairs, main floor and basement layout as well as he could. Then he detailed the way Lily had decorated: the bowls and vases of flowers she scattered around the house, the many pictures crowded together on the living room wall...both Muggle and wizarding variety intermixed...the loving way she planned the nursery when she learned she was pregnant.

Tears flowed from all of them now and were silently wiped away as they all mourned the lost opportunities, the love and happiness Harry would have felt if James and Lily had lived. Hermione felt a lump form in her throat, then wondered if Harry would have been half the man he was today if he hadn't been forced to live without his parents. Would he have turned into the kind of arrogant prat his father was in school, or would he have learned the compassion of his mother? Would he be as determined to make something of his life, even if the only gift he could give the world was Voldemort's death, or would he have grown complacent in a loving, wealthy home?

There were too many variables to be able to deduce. The possibilities would have taxed the capabilities of the most accomplished Arithmancy master, so Hermione set them aside.

When they finished walking the perimeter of the house, Remus turned and headed down a little path that curved between trees and around boulders, down a hill and past a small stream, leading to a flat plot of grass with white and gray headstones dotting an area the size of a Quidditch pitch.

"I haven't been here for a couple years," Remus apologized as he walked to the right and began scanning headstones a few rows in. "I know they're buried near here."

After a moment he came to stand in front of a large gray headstone with both Potter names listed on it. Their birth and death dates preceded the words *Together in life, together forever*.

Harry fell to his knees and ran a hand over the words on the stone, tears pouring down his cheeks. Remus settled a hand on his shoulder and gave it a squeeze, then motioned for Ron and Hermione to step back with him and leave Harry in privacy.

They watched him from a hundred feet back for a long moment, then Ron wandered off, weaving between the headstones, stopping to read one every so often. Hermione understood his need to move, to do something more than stand and watch Harry's pain. She could see Harry's lips moving. He was speaking to his parents, and she could imagine what he was saying and wondered if she was even partially right about the way he felt, the things he wished he knew.

Her eyes welled with tears again and she had to blink them back.

When Ron was sufficiently far away, Remus turned to her. "We need to talk about the situation we discussed the other day, but cannot speak freely, not even here." His voice was carefully modulated, his words chosen so if someone did happen to overhear them, they wouldn't understand the context.

Hermione lifted a brow. This was the first private moment they had together since she told him about the vow the Headmaster had required of Severus. She had hoped he would try and speak with her today, though she hadn't expected privacy to be handed to them on a platter, as it had. "That is not unexpected."

He nodded. "Tonks and I were discussing the situation..."

Slashing a hand through the air, Hermione cut him off. "I did not authorize you to discuss it with Tonks."

He let out a huff of irritation. "I didn't give her certain pertinent details. She is only aware of general items. But she agrees with me that something specific needs to be done to ensure that the information we are gathering remains accurate and complete. After events of this spring, you can understand why we are concerned. The pressure for me to divulge my source is growing."

"Yes, yes. Of course I understand. I had plenty of concerns of my own and made sure to clear them up post-haste. But Remus, they aren't going to trust once they know the truth. Most won't listen to the truth anyway, not if they know the source."

"That's why we felt it necessary to require the same assurances that the Headmaster asked for. With an audience this time."

It took only a moment for Hermione to understand what he meant. An Unbreakable Vow. A shiver traveled down Hermione's spine at the thought. "I don't know if that's acceptable. Dumbledore was one thing, one of you lot is another."

Remus pushed the hair from his face and glanced around to verify the location of both boys. "That was why both Tonks and I thought compliance was most likely if you took the Headmaster's role, rather than someone else. You are already filling it in this situation in nearly every other way."

"Me?" The thought had merit. She hated the position it would put her in, but realized instinctively that it was their best option. She had Severus' best interest in mind, wouldn't trample on his personal space...indeed, he had so little personal space where she was involved that it would hardly be more imposition than he was already under. And it might provide protection for him both from angry Order members and the eventual court case, should they fail to get away safely. If the other members knew of his role in the war, perhaps she could get enough support to keep him from life in Azkaban.

Hermione couldn't imagine how they would manage if he went to Azkaban, how she would survive if she couldn't prove he was goaded into slaying the Headmaster from several directions. Then again, leaving behind her home and family to make a new name for themselves on the other end of the planet wasn't hugely appealing either. As far as the three mostly likely options: death, Azkaban...leading to a slow, lingering madness and into death, and moving to Tahiti, the third was the best, but . . . there were no good options at this point, better not to spend too much time dwelling on them.

"I'll make the suggestion and see where things go," she finally said. "We'll be working on a project tonight, but a few days may be required to consider your suggestion."

He nodded, and as Ron was making his way back over to them, they turned the subject. A few minutes more and Harry walked back over to them, his face red, his eyes bloodshot.

"Hey," Hermione said when he came over, then reached out and wrapped her arms around him. He hugged her back tightly, burying his face in the crook of her neck for a long moment.

When he pulled back, he wore a new look of determination. He turned to Remus. "So, are the property boundaries pretty much just the fenced area around the house

then?"

Remus shook his head. "No, you own everything to the west of the cemetery, at least fifty acres. I'm not sure of the exact boundaries, but we could get a plot plan or something for you, if you'd like."

"I'd appreciate it," Harry said. "Do you have a general idea you can show me?"

After they finished up at the house, Remus pulled out the Portkey, again and they arrived in the copse of trees in the park across the street from Order Headquarters.

"Why didn't we reappear at Headquarters?" Ron asked.

"Only the secret keeper can make a Portkey arriving there, and that person didn't make this one. I have some things to take care of, but I'll see you kids in a few days. Be careful, especially now that Harry is," Remus checked his watch and smiled, "eleven hours from adulthood. Voldemort will be getting more and more anxious to force a confrontation."

"And we're not quite ready for that yet," Harry said. "But we're working on it. We'll be careful. Promise."

Remus said goodbye and Disapparated. The other three stood for a moment in the clearing, looking at each other.

"So what did you think? Fifty acres ought to have space enough," Harry said.

"I'd say so. I was thinking about popping back there and taking a little flight, checking out the area to see if there's one spot that's better than the others. Something large enough, but well sheltered." Hermione wondered how they would take her offer.

Ron started to protest, but Harry nodded. "She's right, she can cover the area in no time. If we finished our, er, Transfiguration projects, we might have gone too, but as we haven't"

Glad that Harry was being sensible about this, Hermione nodded. "I'll meet you back in the house in fifteen minutes or so."

"I don't know. I don't want you running around here alone." Harry put a restraining hand on her arm. "What if Snape remembers the area that Headquarters was in? He could be skulking around here."

"Harry, that's not possible. Don't you remember what it was like before they told us the location again? I knew it was in this section of London, but the area I knew about was huge. There's no way Snape could pinpoint this neighborhood." It frustrated her that she couldn't tell him Severus was innocent...well, not exactly innocent, she supposed, but not the evil, foul traitor that he thought of. Then again with Remus' request, maybe that day would be coming sooner than she thought.

All of the maneuvering and secrets were giving her a headache.

"You never know, Hermione," Ron reached out to touch her shoulder, then backed off with a short yell of pain. "Bloody hell, what's going on here? First you shock me when we're Portkeying, and again now." He shook his hand and stared at her. He stared at Harry, who was still touching her. "Didn't you feel anything mate?"

"No, nothing."

Maybe a migraine, rather than a normal headache. Hermione pinched the skin on the bridge of her nose. "Let me go check things out, then I'll meet you back at Headquarters. I promise you'll get a full explanation at that time."

"I want to know now!" Ron crossed his arms over his chest and snarled at her.

"After I check out the property. I promise, Ron, I'll tell you everything I can."

"Everything you want to tell, not everything you know."

"Give it up, Ron, we know she 'can't' tell us everything going on. It's complicated." This last bit was just tad sarcastic and had Hermione wanting to snap at Harry.

"Yes it is. I'll meet you at Headquarters in fifteen minutes tops. I promise." Not wanting to deal with anything else, she popped back to the copse of trees they had left only a few minutes earlier. Hermione put her head in her hands for a few seconds and took some long, deep breaths to calm herself before changing to her starling form and flying above the tree tops.

In this form she could understand all of the bird calls around her, understand the story the wind was trying to tell, the moods of the sun. Maybe those last two were mostly fantasy, but she felt one with nature in this form, like she belonged in the sky.

While she enjoyed the first few minutes of freedom, however, she didn't stop paying attention to her surroundings. Being a small bird had its own set of drawbacks. She was in danger to large birds of prey, and if she landed, she could be hunted by smaller scavengers like fox and cats. Still, she stretched out the first few minutes of her time swooping and reeling through the air.

After she felt her tension released somewhat, Hermione circled a bit higher and took a good look at the land below her. In only a moment she located the foundation for the old home, then flew out to the cemetery. Using her memory of the guidelines Remus gave her for the property, she figured the basic property lines. She flew a bit lower over the area to see it more closely. The acreage had a good amount of woods on it, but several large, open spaces as well.

She swooped down in a few clearings, circling them at three feet from the ground to check for visibility. She discounted the first spot because it was too near the property line. A second because she could see a bit of a road through the trees, and she didn't know what kind of light or explosion might result from the spell they were using on the Horcrux. The third was entirely too small for their purposes, and the fourth lay near a small stream and was marshy.

Finally she reached a spot that looked perfect. She took a quick fly around the area, checking ground conditions, foliage thickness, size. Then Hermione transformed back into her own shape and walked around a bit. The spot was near the middle of the fifty acres, the most remote place she could find and well insulated from curious eyes. They would place some Muggle-repelling charms first, of course. Deciding that, she cast a few on the spot so they would have time to warn off anyone in the area. The pasture grass was growing well, but still didn't reach her knees, so it wouldn't be too long. She settled her hands on her hips and nodded. This was it. Then she focused and Apparated back to Grimmauld Place.

Harry and Ron were waiting not-so-patiently when she arrived back at Headquarters. They each had a butterbeer open in their hands and lounged on the library sofa eating sandwiches. Ron's face was hard, his eyes searching her face as she appeared in the door. Harry tipped his bottle toward the third, unopened bottle sitting beside a plate with a sandwich for her on a table by her preferred chair. "So what's the word? You were a little longer than we expected."

"It took a few minutes, but I found just the spot." She took a few minutes to describe the location and setting. Harry and Ron fired off the list of requirements they had come up with, and it seemed to fit far better than anywhere else they had considered. It was very nearly perfect. "And since you already own the property, there's no one's permission to gather."

"Right. We can run over in a bit and do it. I want to get it over with." Harry took a drink of his soda. "Ron's right: it's creepy carrying this thing around. When it's done I'll get Bill to put the locket in my vault for now."

Hermione took her first bite of sandwich and nodded. She would probably be a few minutes late to meet with Severus, but he would understand. Their appointments were rather fluid, and the next steps in the potion didn't have to be done until this evening. The ham and cheese sandwich was dry, and she peeled up the bread to see Ron had left off most of the mayonnaise and all of the mustard. After considering getting up and fixing the sandwich...he obviously was trying to annoy her...she decided it wasn't worth the effort. Though it would at least postpone the hassle of explaining the shocks Ron kept getting.

"Well, you said we'd get a full explanation. Or something similar to it." Ron dangled the butter beer bottle from his fingers, glowering at her.

Where to begin? "When I went to visit my soul mate the other day, he noticed I had a few bruises on my arm. One of the Order members got upset about my soul mate and my keeping him a secret and had grabbed me harder than they planned on. This made my soul mate very angry, and when I refused to tell him who had done it, he cast a spell on me. It's a protection spell that works several ways. First, if anyone tries to harm me physically, either intentionally, or in the heat of the moment, they will get zapped."

"I wasn't mad at you," Ron said. "And I wasn't hurting you."

Hermione licked her lips, her mouth seemed strangely dry all of the sudden. This was an incredibly awkward conversation. Harry sat back, curious, but more detached than anything, while Ron visibly worked to keep his anger tied. "No, it also works that way on anyone who is attracted to me. Call it his little reminder that I'm off limits, I guess."

She let out a little laugh, but it sounded forced and hollow, even to her ears. "It has nothing to do with your intentions, only your attraction. If you were to get involved with someone else, and your feelings grew platonic again, the phenomenon should go away. That's why Harry wasn't affected, because he feels nothing for me but friendship."

"So I can't share a friendly hug with you unless I want to get zapped? What kind of bloke is this? That spell sounds almost dark. I've never heard of anything like it. I think it's time you told us who he is, Hermione."

She let out a huff of frustration. "I can't tell you who it is. The spell is Greek, and I didn't understand the words, but as he isn't coercing me into anything, I'd hardly call it dark."

"I imagine he can still touch you."

"Of course he can, he's my soul mate. We'd both go mad if we couldn't touch each other." Ron's face hardened and Hermione set aside the remainder of her sandwich, she wasn't hungry anymore. "You really have to get over this Ron. I'm sorry things didn't work out the way you wanted them to. I care about you, but we can't keep up with this never-ending battle. Just as I start to think you're getting over it, moving on and accepting that you and I are never going to be more than friends, you start up on this again. Don't you get it? This isn't only hurting you and me, it affects your family, Harry, and everyone else when you act like this."

"Fine, just shove all the blame off on me, as if it were my fault." Ron stood and clenched his hand in fists at his side.

Unwilling to be towered over when they were arguing, Hermione stood as well. He still had several inches on her, but they were closer, at least. "It is your fault. Grow up Ron. Just grow up. I want to leave things the way they were between us before Dumbledore died. We were friends, we got on fine and we sometimes went out with other people. I hate being at odds with you and Harry, and you agreed we need to work together."

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to have someone you love flaunt their relationship with someone else in your face?"

"I do seem to remember watching you snogging Lavender in the middle of the common room for several months last spring...I don't know how this could be worse since you've never seen me with him and I don't bring him up in casual conversation. But you don't love me now any more than I loved you then."

She saw him begin to protest and cut him off, lifting her voice a bit more in volume. "No, Ron, you don't love me, not like that. You love me as a friend, but not as a lover. I was convenient and we always thought we'd get together. It's not the same. I'm sorry you're having such a hard time accepting it." This last she said with a low voice. She was sorry, in more ways than one. Sorry for him, sorry for herself, sorry all the way around...well, not sorry about her love for Severus, but for everything else.

She rubbed her temples, the headache her flight had cured now returning. "Can we get through this Horcrux destruction today? Then I'll spend the night elsewhere while you take a break."

"You'll spend it with him." It was an accusation dripping with venom.

She didn't bother to answer, denying it would be stupid since she had been planning to see Severus all day, and agreeing would only add fuel to the fire.

Then he had to take things altogether too far. He stepped up until he was less than a foot away from her. "You're nothing but ~~his~~ *whore*!"

Fury took over her and she shoved him away from her. Not thinking, too angry to consider, she rubbed her ring with her thumb, saying the charm to reveal the ring. "I'm not his whore. I'm his *wife*. You were still too chicken to break up with Lavender when I married him in March, so don't start on me."

Ron looked up in shock from where he lay sprawled on the floor, all color draining from his face. "You're . . . *you* married him?"

Angry with herself for getting out of control, for sharing her secret, more angry with him for pushing her so far, she turned away and looked at Harry's shocked face. "I told you my situation was different than yours. I can't take this today, I'm sorry. I'll see you back at the Weasleys' tomorrow after your test; we'll set things up afterward. That's if this *arse* has the decency to apologize by then."

She stalked off, slamming the front door behind her, and knowing with pleasure that Mrs. Black would be yelling her head off by now. Already cursing herself for her revelation, she cast a variation of her secret spell. No matter how many people asked, Harry and Ron wouldn't be able to speak of her revelation in another person's hearing, whether they knew the person was there or not. This was beginning to get completely out of control.

She closed her eyes and Apparated to the cottage.

AN: Thanks to my beta, countrymouse, and to RobisonRocket for catching my errors.

I received some flack from readers when they got to this last bit, and I seriously considered changing what Ron said, but I just couldn't. I don't think Ron would really believe something like that about Hermione, but he isn't known for being terribly level-headed, and I think he's feeling horribly jealous and confused, so he's being a total prat. Can't be helped. Won't last forever.

32: One More Down

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See Chapter 1

Chapter 32: One More Down

When Severus arrived a few hours later, the sun was beginning to set, and Hermione had worked her way through half the front garden, cutting back overgrowth, pulling weeds, and tidying up. She greeted him with a curt hello, then turned her attention back to the weed she was yanking out of the ground with all the ferocity of a she-lion.

Severus had felt her anger for the past few hours, sensed her location, but had been unable to leave his place at the Dark Lord's side. Now, he looked down at his wife and saw the pale skin of her arms and neck turning pink from sunburn and knew she had been too angry to think ahead. He wondered, as she hacked at an overgrown rose bush with a kitchen knife, if she planned to sleep that night or finish all of the considerable work the yard still needed before taking a break.

"What happened?"

"Idiot, pig-headed, stubborn . . ." She continued the mantra under her breath, but he could tell her anger wasn't directed at him. Strangely enough, he thought part of it was directed back at herself.

He allowed her to mutter for a little longer, then seeing the cuts and scrapes on her unprotected hands, pulled her to a standing position. "Who are you trying to punish: the idiot you're maligning or yourself?" Severus lifted her hand and uncurled it from around the knife. "I was under the impression, wife, that you are a witch...one rather talented in the art of transfiguration. Surely you could have turned this into a more appropriate tool."

"I didn't want to, didn't care. I'm just so angry I want to pummel someone." She pushed her hair away from her face, and he felt desire spur through him. Power all but radiated from her, anger turned to good effect. There was something sleek and feral inside her...something aching to get out. He could feel it. And while gentleness had been the thing she needed most when she worried about her parents, today what she needed was action.

And he was happy to provide.

He pulled her into the cottage, leaving the screen door to slam behind them as he led her to the bedroom. When they arrived, he cast a healing spell on her hands, cleaning and repairing the damage she had done to herself, then carefully set his wand on the nearby bureau. "You need to expend some energy? Expend it on me." He lowered his head and took possession of her mouth. She kissed him back with fervor, tugging at his jacket, fumbling with his buttons, and yanking on his hair to pull him closer at intervals. With a growl, she lunged, and they fell onto the bed.

When they lay panting some time later, Hermione felt considerably better than she had expected. Three hours of hard labor in the yard were nothing compared to a high-energy romp with her husband. Being in his arms provided a shelter, a comfort she hadn't known elsewhere.

"So now you've used me and are ready to cast me aside for other activities, perhaps you would condescend to tell me why you were so angry in the first place?" The soft circles he was caressing along her back were in opposition to his accusing words.

She would have smiled if she weren't so disgusted with Ron, and even more with herself for taking the bait he had thrown out to her. She accused him of acting like a child, then she reacted to his awful words, sharing something that was best kept secret. "I had a stupid fight with Ron. He made me so angry I said things I shouldn't have."

"Oh, did you divulge the location of my favorite freckles, denounce the Cannons and tell him that the Wasps would trounce them in the finals?" His fingers slid up her back to her shoulder blades, then lingered to smooth over that skin.

It tickled a bit, and Hermione decided she couldn't have this conversation with Severus in their current position. He wasn't going to be happy with her when he heard. She pulled away from him, and though he appeared reluctant, he let her go. After putting on a robe, she tied it around her, then walked back over to the bed and sat on the edge. He watched her, his patience about fifteen times greater than anything she would have thought him capable of owning only six months earlier.

"First." She had been about to start with Lupin, wanting to put off the discussion about Ron for a while, then realized of the two the second discussion of the day would be the easiest to broach. "Or rather, second...we'll start with second and work our way back to first. Remus took us out to Godric's Hollow today and during our Portkey travel Ron got zapped when he bumped into me. Harry didn't. When we got back, Ron got zapped again when he tried to touch my arm. Harry was already touching me and wasn't affected at all."

His eyes narrowed and a scowl appeared on his face. "You allow Potter to touch you?"

Hermione wasn't sure if it was outrage or irritation or simply teasing in his voice. She took a moment to analyze his emotions and decided it was a mix of the three...with heavy emphasis on the first two. "He's like a brother to me. His hand was on my arm, it was really nothing, as was evidenced by the fact that your little spell didn't so much as send him a tingle. Anyway, that brought up questions of why Ron couldn't touch me at all, and Harry could."

"And that, of course, enraged the red-head until he said something monumentally stupid to you." He reached up and picked up one of her curls, wrapping it around his finger.

She nodded. "And caused me to say something nearly as foolish back. Or maybe even more foolish."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Indeed?"

It always amazed Hermione that he could pack so much into one word. With six little letters, she felt as though she were being thoroughly interrogated. "I admitted to Ron and Harry that we've been married for months."

His hand faltered in her curls, and all emotion coming from him was cut off. Suppressing an inward groan, Hermione shifted a little closer to him. That could only mean one thing: he was so furious he used an Occlumency shield to wrap it up until he was ready to deal with her. Several long seconds passed before he moved or spoke. "He must have said something far more stupid than I even thought him capable of for you to have risked our lives like that. What was it?"

She started to shake her head, but he grasped the hair in his hand and slowly used it to make her urge her head closer to his. "What was it?" The words were little more

than a hiss.

Hermione moved her head just a tiny bit closer to loosen the tug on her hair. He had moved slowly, so it hadn't hurt her much, but it was still uncomfortable. "I'm not going to tell you."

"What was it?" The words were spaced out, carefully controlled, but she could feel some of the anger radiating through the bond now. "You will not deny me this, wife. I will kidnap him from that joke shop and torture the admission from him if necessary, but I will find out. You won't keep me out of this like you did about the bruise."

After weighing her options, Hermione decided he was completely serious and it would be easier to admit the truth now. "He knows I spend the night with you sometimes, he was hurt and angry and called me a . . . " She still couldn't bring herself to say the hateful word.

With a whisper, he was in her mind, in her memory and saw the entire encounter. When he finished, he released her hair and ran a hand down the side of her face then back to grasp it in her hair. He didn't tug on the hair or hurt her, just held tight, allowing what she knew was an empty threat to express his anger. "You need to control your temper, wench. Just as Potter needs to control his, to keep his shields up; you need to do the same. No amount of Felix Felicis will protect you from yourself if you let loose your anger in the Dark Lord's presence. The spell I cast on you only protects you from physical attack, not magical. That's first."

When she opened her mouth to argue, he tugged lightly on her hair, silencing her. "Second, you should have hexed the little blighter into next year at least for saying that you could be anyone's whore. You deserve better than that little cretin could ever have given you. He would have played dirty every time you argued, and let's face it...you would have fought often." His fist released her hair and settled on her shoulder

"Granted. Is there a third?"

"It was brainless for you to tell the boys about the marriage, but I suppose if it makes your life less miserable in the long run, and as it is too late to change things, we'll deal with the consequences. But it really can't get back to the Dark Lord, Hermione, or I'm dead. We will both be dead, but not until after a long, painful torture session."

She shivered at the weight behind his words and knew they were true. "Of course. I took care of it. They won't speak of it to anyone, couldn't if they wanted to, and I'll work things out with them tomorrow. If they won't be sensible, I'll cast an Obliviate and hope I don't do too much damage." She really hoped it didn't come to that. She believed she could cast the spell without any problems, but she hated to do something like that to her best friends.

The expression on his face said he was thinking of making a nasty comment about Ron's brain...or lack there of, but he seemed to think better of it. "I may still kidnap and torture Weasley for saying something like that about my wife. But please, don't turn that wand on me. You're scary when you're angry." The frown on his face was a bit too forced, and after a moment one corner of his mouth began to creep up.

Hermione pinched his side. "Quit teasing me."

"Who says I'm teasing you?"

"You could never be scared of me. You're the big, bad Death Eater, remember?"

He pulled her close and covered her mouth with his in a long, drugging kiss. "You are my wife, and as such you have the power to make my life miserable. I ought to be scared, don't you think?"

"Let me scare you some more," she said, leaning closer to kiss him again.

He had other ideas, however, moving back out of her range. "So if that was second, what was first?"

"What?" She had honestly lost the conversation thread.

"The talk with the boys was second. What was the first thing you were going to come back to?"

"Oh, right. Well, hmmm. I spoke with Remus today."

"He still doesn't want to trust me."

She smoothed back his hair from his face. The scowl had returned, but what she felt from him wasn't anger, it was sadness, hurt, disappointment...no, none of these, but all of them. The emotion was too complex to button hole. "No, I think he actually does want to trust you. Very much. But he's not sure he dares, and he knows no one else will willingly trust you."

"For good reason."

"For good reason," she echoed, then licked her lips nervously. "He wants you to take another vow."

"Not to him..."

"No, not to him. To me. In the presence of others. I'm sure he would want to approve the wording on the vow, but he knows you would never make one to anyone else in the Order."

There was a long pause as he considered her words. "I need to think it over."

"Of course. We figured you'd need time to decide. It adds another layer of both danger and protection."

"Yes." Silence lingered a few more seconds, then he seemed to break through the trance over him. "Well, we better get chopping those ingredients. We need to add them to the next step here in about an hour." He brushed his lips over her forehead, then stood, pulling her from the bed with him.

The next day, Hermione arrived at the Burrow while Ron was working for the twins and Harry was getting his Apparition License. Mrs. Weasley put her right to work moving tables into place, charming balloons and crepe paper while Ginny set the tables the old-fashioned way. Fleur and Bill were still away on vacation, but Charlie got off work early and came over to help during the last hour.

A little before three o'clock people began to show up at the door. She directed them out to the garden where food and drinks had been set out. School mates, Order members, Weasleys everywhere. Fred, George and Ron Apparated over right at three, directly into the yard. Ron glowered at her, then turned away. Hermione sighed.

By the time Mr. Weasley and Harry showed up shortly after three, there were at least forty people crowding into the back yard, laughing and talking until Hermione made the signal that Mr. Weasley had Flooed in.

"Hello," he greeted them as he stepped out of the fire.

"Hello, Mr. Weasley," Hermione cast the cleansing charm for him, since he seemed to be searching about in his cloak for his wand. "Harry right behind you?"

"Yeah, everyone here?"

"And their friends too, I imagine." They shared a conspiratorial smile as the hearth flared green and Harry twirled into view.

"Hey, Hermione. Don't know why Mr. Weasley insisted we come by Floo, now that I can Apparate." Harry tapped his wand to himself, clearing away the soot, then gave her a considering look.

Hermione locked her fingers together in front of her, nervous about how he would react to her news of the night before. "Well, you're here. And I'm sure we'll be putting your Apparition License to plenty of use now." Hermione grinned at him. "Come on back; we have a light tea on the patio. It's a lovely day. Ginny's back there." Hermione added this last when Harry lifted a brow at her. The Weasleys rarely had tea on the patio, but Ginny was always worth going out of his way to see.

"All right. We'll talk later, OK?"

She nodded and he turned and opened the back door.

"Surprise!" The whole group of people yelled out at him. Harry whipped out his wand automatically, but Hermione calmed him with a touch on his arm, and he paused to look around. His jaw dropped, and he stared at the crowd, the balloons, and mountains of food. The twins had set off a firework that spelled out the words *Happy Birthday Harry* and other fireworks were popping and fizzing around the perimeter of Party Central.

Harry just stood there, his mouth open, as though he had never seen anything so amazing in his life.

"Hey, you OK?" Hermione asked after a moment. People began to look at him askance.

"Yeah, yeah." A smile bloomed on his face. "You did all this for me? *Forme?*"

"Of course, you dolt. No one else named Harry is having a birthday in this house today." She tugged at his hair and grinned, seeing the overpowering emotion on his face. "Go on out there; they're all here for you, you know."

Grinning now, Harry walked out and threw his arms around Mrs. Weasley, who was the first person he reached on the other side of the door. His 'Thank you' was muffled in her blouse. Then he let go and began greeting others.

Throughout the afternoon and evening, as the party raged on, Hermione thought she had never seen Harry so happy. He and Ginny only stole looks at each other across the party, preferring to let non-Order members think they had cooled off and split up. They both agreed it would be best for her protection, though Hermione was certain Ginny wouldn't stay in the background for long. When they began to fight, the youngest Weasley would be by his side, no matter what he had to say about it.

Ron continued to ignore her, though the pain of a cold shoulder had been dulled over the years as he had used it so often. He spent his time, instead, with Luna and Neville, laughing and talking under the shade of a tree on the far end of the yard. After the blow-up the two of them had the previous day, Hermione was just as glad to have some space.

She took her time moving around the group, greeting everyone she knew. It was nice to see her school friends, and she enjoyed talking with the Order members. Hermione was glad Harry was having such a great time...his eyes were lit up like Big Ben at night. However, she could have done with half the people, or maybe a tenth, and been much more comfortable. She didn't enjoy crowds; would rather be sitting in a quiet corner with a book.

After giving a covert answer to Remus about her discussion with Severus, Hermione found herself talking with Charlie, with whom she spent more than an hour before Kingsley wandered over and joined the conversation.

By the time the party began to wind down, the sun was setting, and it was too late to do anything about the Horcrux. Though several people stayed around to help clean up, it was full dark when the Burrow was more or less put back to rights, and Hermione was exhausted.

Harry was sitting in the kitchen at Headquarters with a butterbeer when Hermione came in for a glass of water before bed. "Hey," he greeted her.

"Hey, did you have fun tonight?" She reached for her glass in the cupboard.

"Yeah, it was great. The greatest. Mrs. Weasley said the party was your idea." He motioned for her to sit in the chair to his right.

"She did almost all the work. It was time you had a birthday party." She shrugged and filled her glass, then settled beside him.

He reached over and touched her ring finger. "Where is it?"

"You're touching it, but it's well hidden." Hermione touched it herself and said the incantation.

He turned it on her finger. "I'm not sure how I feel about this, about you keeping it a secret from us. You're full of secrets this summer, the Felix Felicis, the soul mate, the Animagus, marriage. I feel like I hardly know you anymore."

"I'm still the same Hermione you always knew. Regardless of what's happened to me, the man I married, I'm still the same. He's very private, so much more than anyone knows, and, Harry, it could be very dangerous for both of us if word got out that I was married."

"More dangerous than your life already is?" He didn't let go of her fingers, but touched her ring again.

"Yes. Please believe me, I would tell you if I could; I hate having secrets from everyone. Do you have any idea how exhausting it is keeping one set of stories for my mum, another for Order members, a third for you two? I can't wait until the whole mess is over. I want to quit having to pretend."

He ran his finger over the platinum ring one last time, then pulled back his hand. "When this is over, if I survive, do you think Ginny would accept a ring from me?"

She grinned. "I think she'd be thrilled to accept a ring from you. But remember to keep things appropriate until after the wedding." The chances of that were minimal, she knew, but she had to tease him anyway.

He only wiggled his eyebrows at her in response, causing her to laugh.

After writing a few lines in her diary in her bed back at Headquarters later that evening, Hermione drifted into sleep. She wished there had been time to resolve things with Ron...who had stayed home to jabber with his brothers a while later...and to take care of the Horcrux, but was thrilled that Harry was so happy with his party.

They could all use a little more joy in their lives right now.

The next morning, Hermione was the last to rise. Harry and Ron were already sitting at the table eating when she walked into the kitchen. Ron glanced at her, then back down into his plate, focusing on his meal; Harry smiled and waved her toward her usual chair where a plate and cup were already sitting. "There's fresh coffee if you like."

"I like." It was as verbal as she could be after the way she had tossed and turned the previous night. After the party, she had considered going to the cottage for the night, thinking the bliss of not facing a sulky Ron over the kitchen table would be almost as wonderful as the possibility of sleeping in her husband's arms. In the end, she had decided to return to the House of Black. She didn't want to cause any more hard feelings.

When she sat at the breakfast table a full ten minutes without Ron glancing her direction even once, Hermione wished she hadn't returned. It wasn't as though her reception later that morning could have been any chillier than it was turning out to be.

"So, are we agreed on heading straight to Godric's Hollow after breakfast to take care of the locket?" Harry asked, obviously exasperated by the other two giving monosyllabic answers to everything else he had tried to discuss.

"Sure," Ron said. "I'm working at the shop this afternoon."

"Yes, good idea," Hermione agreed before returning her attention to her toast.

An hour later, the three of them Apparated from the copse across the street from Headquarters and ended up in different parts of the clearing Hermione had picked out. The boys took a look around, then came back to the center of the clearing to join her.

"Looks good." Ron's words were grudging, and he didn't meet her eye, but it was agreement.

Harry nodded and flicked his wand at a spot in the center of the clearing, which cleared a space of ground about five feet in diameter. He walked over and placed the locket in the center of the circle, then stepped back. "Hermione, you go right; Ron, to the left." While they moved into position, Harry stepped back a few more feet, and Hermione knew he was judging the distance to make sure he would be behind the shields she and Ron would erect.

"You ready, Hermione?" Ron asked.

"Yeah." Her stomach turned with worry and anticipation, but she also felt a layer of certainty that this would work. It had to work. She lifted her wand and pointed it at the locket. At Harry's signal, she and Ron cast the shielding charm together.

When the shield was up and stable, out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Harry lift his wand and cast the spell she had gotten from Severus' text. The shield glowed blue and gold, then rippled as Harry held the spell on the locket.

Hermione felt the power seeping from her, concentrated harder and forced the shield to stay in place until everything around her seemed to collapse in on the point where the stream of magic issuing from her wand hit the shield. The spell became her whole world as she worked to maintain her focus.

The locket fought back, letting out purple, red and green smoke, flashing and wailing in high-pitched tones as it gave up the bit of soul inside it. Finally, the tiny white light that was the bit of Voldemort rose slowly from the locket. When it was well cleared, Hermione saw the stream of light coming from Harry's wand lift and the blast of dirty, gray power knocked all three of them off their feet and several meters backward into the deep grass.

Hermione gasped for breath, trying to force air back into her lungs after the impact had emptied them. She turned on her side and set her forehead on her arm, feeling lightheaded and a bit nauseous.

"You two OK?" Harry's voice asked after a few seconds.

"I'll live," Ron groaned.

"Ask me when I can breathe again," Hermione said. "Any broken bones?" Able to get a deep breath again, she sat up, then immediately hung her head between her knees. The shield had taken more out of her than she had expected, and she felt weak, and her stomach hadn't completely settled.

"I never did a bit of magic that wore me out so much." Ron sat up as well, and though he didn't hang his head like she was, Hermione glanced up to see him still breathing hard.

"Try Priori Incantatem some time. On second thought, don't try it." Harry stood, moaning when he stretched his muscles. "And we have to do that three more times."

This time it was Hermione's turn to groan. "Don't remind me, please." She got to her feet and stretched as well. There would be bruises on her back, she was sure, but it didn't feel as though anything were broken or really damaged. She wondered for a moment if Severus was any good at massage.

"Don't you think just killing Nagini will be enough? Are we going to have to go through this for the snake too?" Ron asked as he stood and started walking over.

"I hope you're right. That's something to look into. What's that?" Hermione's gaze was drawn to a dark object on the edge of the circle. She drew nearer, then had to hold back the rising bile in her stomach. A small bird had apparently been caught by the blast, and all that remained was bone and a few bits of charred flesh.

"Hermione, do me a favor and make sure not to go flying over someone when they cast a spell, will you?" Harry asked, setting a hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah. I'll have to watch out for that." She wondered briefly if she would have been half as disturbed by the tiny bird body if it weren't about the size of her Animagus form.

"You two up to Apparating back yet?" Harry asked.

"Not quite." Hermione brushed her hair back from her face. "Give me a minute. That shield was draining to maintain. Whatever was in that locket along with the bit of soul sure didn't want to be contained."

"It didn't want to come out either," Harry said, stopping to scoop up the locket and stuff it back in his pocket. "I think we need to check with Bill and make sure it's inert now. As soon as he gets back."

"Good idea, mate. Hermione, you don't look so good." Ron looked over, lifted a hand as though he wanted to comfort her, then withdrew it before making contact.

Seeing both concern and irritation in his eyes, Hermione nodded. "I'll be OK; I just didn't sleep well last night. Too much on my mind, worn out. I just need a long nap, and I'll be fine."

Ron's face fell, and he looked away, stuffed his hands in his pockets and scuffed one foot. "Yeah, I guess I haven't made things easier. I...I want to stay friends. I don't want things to get out of hand like this again. We've been best mates for years, and I know I've been acting like a real prat."

It wasn't a direct apology, but for Ron, it was pretty straightforward. Hermione decided it was good enough and prayed things didn't regress anytime soon. "I'd like to stay friends too."

He blushed and grinned, but didn't take his hands out of his pockets. "This is normally when I would give you one of those friendly shoulder pats, but under the circumstances, you'll have to accept the spirit of it instead."

Hermione smiled back.

"You want to head back to work on Transfiguration before lunch?" Harry asked.

Hermione laughed. She never thought she would have Harry prodding her about Transfiguration when there wasn't a test the next day...even then that had always been her job. "I'm up to that. Ready, Ron?"

"Whenever you are."

In a blink they were gone.

33: Adulthood Acknowledged

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See Chapter 1

Chapter 33: Adulthood Acknowledged

Hermione welcomed Order members to Headquarters the next night, directing them to the kitchen where Dobby had prepared a nice meal. It was a larger crowd than usual with the usual attendees, plus some she only saw occasionally. All of the Weasleys, Mundungus Fletcher, Kingsley, Remus, Tonks, Mad-Eye, Professor McGonagall and many others milled around the kitchen, some bringing in chairs, others transfiguring small objecting into more chairs. The room was getting crowded when Mad-Eye was ready to bring the meeting to order.

"It's time for the children to go on upstairs while we conduct our meeting," he said.

Harry rose from the corner where he sat with Ron, Ginny and Hermione. "Now that we've all reached our majority, Ron, Hermione and I would like to join the Order."

Hermione looked over and saw him clutching Ginny's hand, his knuckles white, but that was the only outward sign that he was nervous. Ginny didn't seem to mind that her hand must have been feeling a bit crushed at the moment.

"That's not possible. You're still students," Kingsley said.

"Professor," Harry turned to McGonagall, "what has the board decided about reopening Hogwarts?"

Professor McGonagall set her tea cup on the edge of the table as everyone's eyes turned toward her. "They haven't made any firm decisions yet, but the general consensus is that they would like to close the school until the situation is handled."

"We're not going back even if they do reopen," Ron said, standing beside Harry.

"What do you mean you aren't going back? Of course you're going back, you're still children." This came from Molly, who looked ready to get into a real argument.

"No, we're not. Not before Voldemort is dead for good." Harry released Ginny's hand and walked out to the front of the room where Mad-Eye was standing. "The quest Dumbledore gave me has to be completed before we can destroy Voldemort forever. I can't do it if I'm stuck at the school. And I can't do it alone, so I'll have to have Ron and Hermione with me. There's not much point in getting a dozen N.E.W.T.s if we don't have a world to live in. And if the school won't reopen until the battle is over, the sooner we finish this, the sooner the school can reopen."

"Miss Granger, surely *you* want to focus on your studies," Professor McGonagall said.

Hermione nodded once. "We never said we were giving up on our studies. There's a great deal we need to know if we're going to defeat Voldemort, and we're working toward that goal. At the same time, I remember Dumbledore saying once that the time would come when we must all decide whether to do what is easy or what is right. All of you have made the choice to leave the easy path behind. So have we. What lies ahead may be difficult and dangerous, but it is necessary."

"Then share your quest with us. Let the adults handle it. It wasn't meant for children," McGonagall said.

"No, it's my quest, and we are adults." He shot an apologetic glance toward Ginny. "We have enlisted certain Order members to assist us where we feel we need help, and we will continue to do so. But they know only their small areas they've helped on, nothing more, and that will continue. We have made some headway, despite my being underage until recently, but there's a long way to go yet."

"You'll get yourselves killed. You're already making rash decisions." Kingsley stared Harry down.

"Not rash...carefully plotted. We can't have someone peeking over our shoulders every minute, and we promise to take precautions, to be vigilant. We have asked for help when we've needed it. You're going to have to trust us, but we need to know what's going on if we're going to make the best decisions for our goals and for our safety as well as everyone else's safety. I know I've made some bad decision in the past, but they were partly caused by a lack of information. The more information I have, the less likely that we'll do something stupid."

Hermione finally stood, ready to add her own comments. "We are young, but that doesn't mean we don't have things to contribute to the Order. We've been working on Occlumency over the past month, and Harry and Ron are becoming much better at it. If faced with a moderately talented Legilimens, it would benefit everyone in this room if they could shield their minds. I'd like to work on this. We need to be involved to be effective and successful in this. If you don't accept us, we still won't return to school, we will still continue our quest and we will still ask for assistance as we see fit, but it may take longer and be less effective in the long run."

"Voldemort wants me dead." Harry looked around the room slowly, pausing on each face, meeting each set of eyes. "I'm as wrapped up in this as anyone can possibly be. Nothing you can do or say will change that."

There was a long silence as everyone looked at those sitting around them, as though trying to decide what they thought and what the general consensus was. Finally Remus stood. "How about you four move into the library while we discuss it, and then we'll let you know."

It looked like Harry wanted to say something more, but he glanced at Ginny, who shook her head. He nodded. "Come on." Ron, Hermione and Ginny followed him out of the room and down the hall to the library. He picked the loveseat in the corner, and Ginny snuggled up to him. Hermione took one deep, cushy chair and Ron sat in another.

"I think you presented your points very well," Ginny said when they were all settled. "I'm sure they thought so too."

Harry buzzed her lips over Ginny's cheek. "I hope so. There have been too many secrets held back from me already, things that would have helped me make better decisions. I'd hate to screw something up for the Order because they wouldn't tell us what's going on."

The others agreed with him silently, then sat back and waited for word to come from the kitchen.

Thankfully only a few minutes passed before Mad-Eye came into the room. "We decided to admit you...the three of you, Ginny's too young still."

Relief flowed through Hermione. She had thought they would accept her, Harry and Ron, but there was always that chance they might not. Smiling, she stood and followed Mad-Eye back to the kitchen, the boys at her heels.

Severus stood before the Dark Lord the next day, hoping he would be pleased with the news of Hermione joining the Order and the position that would put him in to gather more specific information. Theoretically she would be feeding him information anyway.

There were only a couple others there, but Severus was surprised when the dark leader didn't dismiss them as he usually did before calling Severus forward. It seemed his relationship with Hermione would no longer be a secret. He wasn't sure if that would turn out to be an advantage or not.

"Severus, how do things go with the Mudblood?"

"I'm making progress, my Lord. She has been inducted to the Order, and I will be able to learn more of their inner workings again. Unfortunately as a lower-level member, her information will be limited at first, but it will give us an edge." Severus didn't take his eyes off the leader's feet, knowing he needed to focus on humility.

"It is a step. I'm disturbed by what I have heard since the boy came of age. He's been moving around, asking questions. We need to know more of what's going on. And we need to bring the young boy down a few pegs. Some of my servants have suggested killing the girl as a quick method. What is your opinion, Severus?"

His heart in his throat, Severus fought to keep his panic hidden. He could not risk Hermione, not under any circumstances. "Your sources are right. The loss of anyone near Potter right now would be a serious blow. However, I think that loss might be as strong or worse if he knew of his friend turning to me...the man he hates second in the world." He was sure this part of his act was true. Severus knew Potter would feel angry, even betrayed when he heard of Hermione's relationship, but it was possible they might be able to salvage something.

"You think to uncover her role?"

"Not quite yet. But before long he can be apprised. In the mean time, there may be other directions we can take things. Once Potter knows of her relationship to me, she will be of little use in gathering more information, as neither he nor the Order will tell her anything."

"Impregnate her." It wasn't a possibility, or a suggestion, but a direct command.

Staggered by the order, Severus looked into the Dark Lord's snake-like face. "My Lord?"

"Tell her about father's rights for those held in Azkaban and how you want to ensure you will be able to see one another regularly, if you were to be caught." The snake man lifted his eyebrow and smirked. "It is true, so if she doubted and did some research, she would learn you were being honest with her, but it will be one more nail in the coffin when you announce to the young brat that you have stolen his friend's innocence and fathered a baby on her, thus tying her to you forever." The Dark Lord's face was triumphant. "You will, of course, kill the girl and her baby before the child is born. We do not wish to further pollute our bloodlines."

Severus felt a similar triumph inside himself until the insane leader's final words rang out. A child would be inconvenient at the moment, he knew, but it would be a tie to Hermione, one even the Ministry could not argue against. And any child he had with her was certain to be brilliant. She was too young by half, but it might afford her a little extra protection. As long as the end of the Dark Lord came before too many more months. He would not allow Hermione or his child to be killed. Never. He bowed down on one knee. "Yes, my Lord. I will begin preparations immediately. Young Potter will certainly feel she has turned her back against him, and his humiliation will be great."

Hermione was anxiously waiting for Severus's arrival. When the crack of Apparition sounded in the cottage, Hermione had her wand out.

"I've brought chocolate ice cream cones," his voice wafted through the floor to the cellar where she was preparing the next set of ingredients. Hermione hurried up to see him. To her surprise, he did indeed have chocolate cones and was holding one out to her. "I figured if I was going to say something so inane, I might as well bring some with me."

Hermione laughed, then took the cone from his hand and slid into his embrace. She loved the smell of him on his robes, the sandalwood and touch of aconite, the solid feel of his bones and muscles beneath her hands, and the low growl in his throat before he leaned down to kiss her.

After a moment of trying to get closer to him without making a mess with the cones, she pulled away, taking his and hers and setting them near the sink, then placing a freezing charm on them before returning to Severus's embrace. She sensed a slight hesitation about him, but didn't want to discuss it. Not yet. "I've missed you."

"The feeling is entirely mutual." He pulled her in again, and they retreated to the living room where they took over one of the sofas to stretch out and continue their snog session.

Before too long he pulled her back a bit and dropped a soft, far too short kiss on her lips, then released her. "Let's sit up."

"I'm not sure I want to hear what you have to say if you want to sit and talk again," Hermione joked. His request made her a trifle nervous.

He said nothing, but sat on one end of the sofa again, leaving her to sit on the other, then he took her hand. "I've been thinking more about the vow. I know you're concerned about members of the Order taking out revenge on me, and I'm concerned they're going to start demanding answers. There are also a few, very few, things I will need to know in order to serve the Order better. Things you haven't felt comfortable sharing before now. For you, even more than myself, I think perhaps I should take the vow."

Hermione blinked. He was risking so much; she could ask nearly anything of him, and he would be forced to comply. "I appreciate the offer, and I wish I didn't think it necessary to ask you to actually go through with it. The others will need it, though."

"Even more than you."

She reached out and touched his face, drawing all of his focus onto her. "Severus, I don't need you to do this for me. I trust you." She held his gaze for a long moment, ensuring that he knew she really meant it. When she felt the rising tide of emotion in him, how overwhelmed he was at her trust, she dropped her hand. "For the bonder, I know how you hate Lupin, but he's the only one I can think of who's levelheaded enough to do this, and he's known about us for a while and is supposed to have been your contact for all this time. Do you have any other suggestions?"

"Well, not Moody, in any case. In fact, it would be just as well if we didn't invite him to the meeting at all." Severus stood and began to pace. "I believe the man hates me more than he does the Dark Lord."

"We might want to keep the list of those who know fairly selective all the way around. Minerva, Arthur and Molly, Bill, Harry, Ron, Lupin of course, and Tonks."

"Better make it the whole Weasley family, even Ginevra...it's not like she won't find out before long anyway." Severus named a few others and Hermione nodded in agreement. "How do you think Potter will react to the news though? I wouldn't put it past him to try and kill me the moment he sees my face."

"I'll see what I can do to calm him. Prepare him for the news without making him suspicious. I'll speak with Lupin privately, see what he thinks, then see if Molly will hold the

meeting at the Burrow. It's more neutral territory, and Headquarters is obviously out of bounds for you. I know how you feel about Harry. I appreciate you worrying about making things easier for me."

Taking her by the shoulders, Severus turned Hermione, then rubbed the back of his fingers across her cheek. "You're such a great lot of trouble. Life without you would be far simpler. And far less worth living."

Warmed by the words that were almost as good as a declaration of love from Severus, she lifted her lips and gave him a soft kiss.

When she left the cottage after breakfast the next morning, Hermione Apparated to the park near Headquarters and walked back to Grimmauld Place. Now that the boys knew she was legally married, she felt freer to spend time with her husband at night, rather than hurrying home before anyone missed her. As base for operations, there was a rotating list of people staying there from time to time, though Remus and Tonks were most often in residence with the three teens, and everyone pretty much came and went as they needed to.

Dobby the house-elf and Kreacher had both taken over household chores, and Dobby had proven quite adept at getting the other reluctant house-elf to work. Though Hermione would prefer just to let Kreacher go, she knew now was not the time. Harry had made it clear that once the fight was over, he would be giving the elf clothes post haste.

Remus and Tonks were sitting close together at the kitchen table, hands intertwined while they sipped at their coffee mugs. Hermione doubted the boys were even up yet. "When it's convenient for you, I'd like to have a private word, Remus."

"Now's as good as any time." Remus smiled at her, set the cup down and stood. "Would you prefer to talk in the library?"

"Yes, thanks." She glanced at Tonks, who was watching them with curiosity. She considered bringing her in on the discussion, but decided not. After all, Remus may still have a few choice words for her about her relationship.

Once the door was closed, Remus did the warding and silencing spells, then took a seat on the same sofa as before. He wasted no time with idle chit chat. "What did he say? I'm assuming this discussion is about the vow?"

"Yes, he's consented."

His smile was filled with relief. "How do you intend to tell people, and what will you tell them?"

Hermione sat around the corner from him in a chair. She folded her hands together on her knees. "We were thinking of having a smaller meeting with specific Order members at the Weasley home. I still need to speak with Molly. That was our best option since bringing him here, even if the secret keeper agreed..."

"Would be suicide. Yeah. Best at the Weasleys. And how are you going to explain that you've been in touch all this time?"

"I'm not. We're going to continue the charade that he's been passing you information, but he doesn't want to make the vow to you because of your childhood rivalry. He'll make what will appear to be a spur-of-the-moment selection...me." Hermione picked up an owl feather that had been left behind on the floor.

"We'll have to play up his good qualities," she said. "Not only hasn't he turned over dozens of names to Voldemort...despite the fact that he knows a good number of people in the Order...he has stopped a lot of mayhem, hasn't he? We agreed it was time we told people where the information was coming from. A few, anyway. And he agreed to take an Unbreakable Vow again, so people would know they can trust him. The only thing is, if people knew our true relationship, well." She twirled the feather between her fingers, letting some of her agitation out that way.

"They'd find it a bit dodgy." Remus nodded his head. "Some might think you're in league with him because of the way you feel about him. I know that's not true, but I can see your hesitation. Even with the vow, some will never trust him again."

"You're thinking of Moody. We didn't think we would invite him to the meeting. He might be angry later when he finds out, but since Moody is the type to hex first and ask questions later . . ."

Remus ran his hand over the edge of the chair, his fingers playing with the fraying edges. "So now we put it together. Who did you have in mind?"

AN: And the plot thickens. More mayhem and craziness to follow.

Thanks to Soul Bound for catching my mistakes, and to countrymouse for betaing for me.

34: Meeting at The Weasleys

Chapter 34 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 34: Meeting at the Weasleys'

Even if the meeting with more people might go very badly, Hermione was grateful to have Remus in her corner. It was amazing how liberated she felt knowing someone beside herself was aware of her situation with Severus...the whole situation and not just the bits and pieces Ron and Harry now possessed. It was a relief knowing Remus would remind people that the information Snape had been passing was valuable, regardless of the source.

Hermione sat at the Weasleys' table a few nights later and played with the cup of tea in front of her. Molly had gone all out preparing food for the meeting, even though she had no idea what it was about. Hermione had the conversation planned out and felt she had a handle on how everyone would respond. That meant she could prepare her arguments. She really hoped she knew how people would respond. Her biggest fear was that someone would hex Severus the second he walked in the door and he would change his mind about the whole thing.

Harry and Ron were in the paddock practicing their Quidditch moves, and Ginny had just gone upstairs to change before dinner. Arthur and the older boys would be in

shortly from work, and everyone else was expected in twenty minutes. Working to help Molly fix the feast had worn Hermione out, and she wasn't sure how she was going to get through the next couple of hours. Her stomach was roiling at the thought of the arguments and accusations she was expecting.

The time passed too quickly and before she knew it, the kitchen was full of people talking and laughing. Everyone kept shooting looks of curiosity toward Remus, who had been the one to call the meeting. They had decided that would be the best way to keep her true relationship with Severus hidden.

Hermione sat on the far end of the table from the front door, next to Ginny and Fleur, her fingers tracing the top of the cup over and over.

Finally Remus stood and everyone quieted down. "As most of you know, I've been receiving information from a source within the Death Eaters. Because of this information we were able to divert certain disaster at the Muggle athletic field this spring, saving thousands of lives. Also, through later intelligence gained from this source, we saved the lives of the Longbottoms, the Creeveys and, only this morning, the Clearwaters."

Remus took several steps to the right and scanned the faces of everyone in the room. "The informant has done so at great personal risk despite the fact that he received no recognition for them, and never expected to be acknowledged for his contributions. He knows he has earned derision for some of his activities and thanks for others. He doesn't expect anything but the former from you, but we decided the time had come for him to reveal himself and to gain your trust.

"I want everyone's oath that they will allow the individual to talk. I don't want anyone to hop up and hex him as soon as the door opens. There is a story to be told and we need to hear it."

"What, is it Snape or something?" Fred joked from across the table from Hermione.

Remus stood silent until everyone's eyes were on him. "Yes. It is."

A cacophony erupted as everyone tried to shout over each other. Remus stood still, the eye of the hurricane as everyone abused him roundly for even considering bringing Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore's murderer, back into the Order.

Hermione watched everyone to see their individual reactions. Molly nearly swooned. Tonks watched the man she loved through narrow eyes, then turned to Hermione and gave her an appraising look. When Tonks lifted an eyebrow of surprise, Hermione realized the woman suspected her relationship to Severus. She also realized she should have expected Tonks to put things together with the information she held that the others didn't.

Harry and Ron stood with the twins, yelling about the loss of Remus's mind, and Harry even went so far as to lift his wand...which Hermione silently summoned to herself, gaining his glare. McGonagall's lips had formed a firm line so thin they nearly disappeared...a sure sign she was about to blow her lid. Hermione said nothing, did nothing. Like Remus, she waited.

When the first bout of yelling and abuse was past, Remus motioned for everyone to settle down. "You need to understand, he's not trying to get back into the center of the Order. He knows that is too much to ask, no matter how much he has done for us in the past few months. His actions in the spring have seated him firmly in the upper echelons of Voldemort's camp making his spying abilities better than ever. Yes, I know we're all upset by what happened last spring."

"Upset? You think we're *upset* he killed Dumbledore and now wants back in our good graces? Upset doesn't cover it." Harry was standing again, his face bright red from anger. "He's nothing but a cold-blooded murderer."

"Guess that's what I get for trying to be non-confrontational about it," Remus muttered, though the sound traveled clearly across the room. "The reason Albus trusted him was because Severus gave the Headmaster an Unbreakable Vow. He swore to help the Order in whatever way Albus directed him and that he wouldn't work against us."

"Well, he's still alive, isn't he? And we only have his word on that, so what makes you think he actually took the vow? Maybe he's just trying to soften you up." Charlie Weasley spoke up this time, his voice was steady even if he looked like he could chew nails.

"He's still alive because after that he was backed into making another Unbreakable Vow last summer to Narcissa Malfoy; Albus ordered him to follow through. He was forced by both vows to kill the Headmaster." Remus looked them each in the eye, ending on Hermione, though she doubted anyone else noticed.

"Again, we have only his word for it. What makes you think he's telling the truth?" Arthur Weasley spoke up this time.

"He's willing to make another Unbreakable Vow. In front of everyone here so you all know what he's agreed to. He doesn't expect us to take the word of the vow holder and bonder. Would that content you?"

Harry stood from his chair, his face red with anger. "I will not allow that evil git in this house or into the Order again. I don't know how you all can believe him, but I'll never forgive him."

Sighing, Hermione pulled out her wand and wrapped him in cords. "Settle down, Harry. If he made a vow to Dumbledore and Dumbledore ordered him to fulfill the vow to Narcissa, there were few choices left."

"I would have died first myself before killing Dumbledore."

"You both would have died if he hadn't fulfilled his vow. All three of you, most likely. And then the Creeveys, all those Muggles at the football match and Neville's family would be dead as well. Would that have been preferable to you?" Hermione hoped her defense wouldn't give her away, but she couldn't sit there and listen to the abuse. "Would you rather Colin and Neville were dead? Do you think the Headmaster considered his life to be more valuable than those of thousands of Muggles?"

Harry stood quivering with anger for a long moment. Hermione removed his bonds and with a nod he forced himself to sit. "I still don't like it. I will never trust that git again."

Conversation broke out in a buzz. Harry and Ron still wondered how they were supposed to believe the git. Ginny rolled her eyes, but merely sat back in her chair to watch the others. Most of the older people seemed open to considering the option.

"The vow would have to have a truth clause in it," McGonagall said.

"And a loyalty clause," Tonks added, then darted a surreptitious glance at Hermione again. "One that makes him loyal to the Order."

"Yes, I believe we've come up with the appropriate wording. We've spent some time going over loop holes and think we've got it about right. I have a few copies to pass out. If everyone would like to take a look at it, see if there are any objections. Severus has agreed to these terms as well."

He passed the list around, and everyone lapsed into silence for a long moment.

"What about here," McGonagall said. "It says that he will tell the person he's vowing to the truth about all of Voldemort's actions. Why only that person? Who will it be, anyway?"

"We felt it would be counterproductive to have everyone badgering him about what is going on every minute of every day. There are a lot of sensitive issues that need to be handled carefully. Not everyone should have complete access all the time. Besides," he said with a half smile, "knowing Severus, someone would get hexed eventually. This makes him accountable only to one person. And no, Fred, I don't think you're very likely to be that person."

Fred grinned and George gave him a nudge. Charlie rolled his eyes and returned his gaze to the others.

Hermione just shook her head. Fred and George would never change. As long as it wasn't one of them she had to spend the rest of her life with, she could appreciate that

fact.

It seemed most people were satisfied with the terms of the vow, though there was some disagreement on whom the person should be.

When Remus seemed satisfied that no one was going to hex Severus when he came into the room, he reminded them of their oaths. One by one he walked around the room receiving a wand oath from everyone in the room. Harry hesitated, but after being reminded the oath only lasted for the duration of the evening, he accepted. Hermione wondered if he had it in his mind that he would track Severus down another day.

Finally, Remus pointed his wand toward the door and his Patronus shot out, melted through the door and skimmed across the grass to a copse of trees near the house. A moment later, a dark figure emerged from the trees and walked toward them. Hermione could tell right off that it was Severus; the gait and bearing couldn't be anyone else. And she was surprised he stood so close to the dwelling. She felt her heart swell, knowing how difficult it would be for him...despite everyone quieting down, the anger and tension in the room were still very high. His anxiety was clear to her, and she tried to send feelings of reassurance.

These people may not shoot out of their seats ready to hex him, but there were still a few mutinous looks, and the rest were well guarded. With another swish of Remus's wand, the front door opened before Severus reached it.

Hermione hadn't seen him for a few days so she had to fight the urge to gasp when he appeared in the light of the kitchen, a long, partially healed gash running above his right brow. She had felt the pain there earlier that day, but it had receded so quickly, she hadn't expected it to be visible still. She could see the tension in his face despite his scowl.

"So who's going to take his vow?" Harry asked when Severus stood in the doorway without speaking for nearly a minute.

"Not you, Potter, that much I promise." Severus lifted a disdainful brow and began to skim the faces around him. They passed once over the circle without pausing and without expression. On his second pass he paused for a moment on Hermione's face, pursed his lips, which had the effect of making him look surlier than ever, then continued on. "If I'm going to submit to this, it must be someone with an unassailable sense of honor. Someone too impossibly Gryffindor to take advantage of the opportunity." He managed to infuse the word Gryffindor with mountains of disdain.

His eyes passed over the crowd one more time. The fact was, most of them had been Gryffindor, though, as Remus had said, the twins didn't quite fit the description. His eyes stopped on Hermione, and she felt his trepidation and applauded his acting ability. He cocked an eyebrow and spoke with more than a little derision. "Miss Granger, perhaps you would be acceptable."

The older adults made protests about Hermione being a child, forgetting that she was now a full Order member. She knew some of them thought he picked her because he thought she could be manipulated. Hermione stood and everyone around her slowly quieted down. She maintained eye contact with Severus, held her face without expression. "I'm rather proud of my sense of honor, Professor, so thank you for the compliment."

"I'm no longer your professor, girl. And you *would* be proud of that trait. I have to admit in this case it is an asset." The grudging look on his face kept the comment from sounding too complimentary.

She licked her lips, allowing some of the nerves she was feeling to show. Everyone else would think it was simply because she didn't want the job and was trying to convince herself to do it. "We all have something to contribute to the cause. I suppose my sense of honor isn't the most amazing gift, but I'm glad to give it."

Severus nodded, surveyed the room's furnishings with distaste, then turned to Remus and filled his voice with loathing. "I suppose we can get to this some time tonight? Tomorrow is the full moon after all."

Hermione wished he wouldn't do such a thorough job of being surly Snape.

"Kneel before me on the floor. Hermione, if you would join us." Remus gestured to a spot in front of him.

"Remus, do you think it is best? Miss Granger is too young to be saddled with such secrets and responsibility," McGonagall gave it one last chance.

"It will be her or no one. If I walk without taking the vow, you will all lose the information I have been passing. Miss Granger may respect authority, but I've never thought her to be a pushover." Severus stared down at his erstwhile coworker, then turned and curled a lip at Hermione. "Bossy and nagging is more like it."

"We are all learning responsibility at a young age these days, Professor." Hermione looked McGonagall in the eye, and caught the woman's nod of understanding.

Severus looked back at Hermione's face, met her eyes, and took her hand in his own. She was flooded by the indefinable feeling of rightness that always came over her when they touched, and she had the thought that three days apart was too long. Far too long. How they had ever managed a week before was beyond her. Why would she ever want to when she could feel like this with a simple brush of skin?

She wondered if this was how it would feel when they were one day living together full time, if they should both live to see that day come to pass. She thought she saw the same question echoing back to her in his eyes.

Remus lowered the tip of his wand to their clasped hands, and Hermione swallowed before speaking. "Will you, Severus Snape, promise to give me, Hermione, the complete truth about any activity within the Dark Lord's camp that may be of concern to the Order of the Phoenix?"

"I will."

A lick of flame shot from Remus's wand and circled their clasped hands.

"And will you vow to do your best to bring about the long-term goals of the Order until the Dark Lord is brought to an end?"

"I will."

A second jet of flame shot out to join the first. Hermione glanced at them, then returned her gaze to Severus's face.

"Do you vow to remain true to the goals and values which Albus Dumbledore envisioned for us?"

"I will."

When the last flame leaped from the wand and joined the others, Hermione felt Severus's grip tighten on hers. For the first time, she fully realized the precarious position in which he had been placed. Caught between a mad man and his soul mate, he had to fight to find his way. Remus lifted his wand, and Hermione whispered, "Wait for me in the copse."

The flames dissipated as he nodded slightly, still without taking his eyes from her.

When he pulled away, Hermione wondered if she had just done him a great wrong.

Severus joined the others at the table for a few minutes. Hermione sat next to him, asking him a few, pre-worded questions that would satisfy the people in attendance that he had, in fact, been carrying out Dumbledore's expectations, and not acting outside of his responsibility to the Order. When he'd had enough of Harry's glares and the

others' questions, he stood and excused himself from the table. With a brusque goodbye to no one in particular, he headed back toward a more distant copse. Hermione didn't watch him walk away, knowing any sign of more than respect from her now would be suspect.

She only stayed perhaps twenty minutes before making her own excuses about needing a breath of fresh air and slipping away. She wandered the yard for a few minutes before heading in the general direction where he hid. When she was only feet away, however, she was joined by Harry. "Hermione, wait."

Surprised, and worried about the amount of time she was making Severus wait, anxious to be with him again, and worried about what Harry would say, she turned to watch Harry cross the last few steps. "Hermione, things are breaking up in there and, well, that vow, it put a lot of pressure on you. Didn't it?"

"Not nearly as much as it put on Snape. But yes. Did Remus talk to you? He indicated he wanted to talk to you afterward." Hermione tried to remove the focus from herself, turn Harry's attention in another direction.

"I just wanted to say, I still hate the greasy git, and I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive him. I'm sorry you'll have to have regular contact with him now, but thanks for being willing to put up with him." He took her hand in his. "You are much more than a friend to me, more like the sister I never had. I know I don't say it often enough, but I appreciate your help and support. I'll work on not wanting to kill the git every time I see him, if he helps us get rid of Voldemort. I think you are very brave to take this on."

Hermione sniffed a little as tears rose in her eyes. "You better get inside before you make me cry, you prat." She pulled him into a hug, then released him. "I'm grateful for you too. Being your best friend certainly keeps life interesting." She laughed with this last statement and wiped at her eyes before the tears touched her cheeks. "Get on with you, and let me cry alone. I hate tearing up in front of others."

Harry laughed, then placed both hands on her face and turned her head down to drop a kiss on her head. "Go find your mysterious soul mate. It looks like you could use a hug."

She swatted at him as he walked away and she watched him go for a moment before turning toward the copse most people used as an Apparition point. She hadn't taken more than a couple steps into the dark vegetation before Severus wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She tipped her lips upward and he kissed her firmly.

"I about hexed him when he said you were more than a friend," Severus said as he trailed his lips along her jaw toward her hairline. "Luckily sister was his choice, or I would have had to break my vow and kill him. I'm quite certain that wouldn't fall under the auspices of looking out for the Order's long-term goals. Brilliant play on words there, my dear." He placed his forehead on hers and looked into her eyes, despite the darkness surrounding them. "I was worried you'd forget, and I'd be trapped in a hole."

"There are too many possibilities, times you might find yourself with information that the Order would be interested in, but that might compromise your job if you acted. I can't take a chance with you."

"I also noticed you only asked me to be perfectly honest with you about Order business, and not in everything. You could have made me be perfectly honest in every question you asked me for the rest of our lives." He lifted a brow at her. "How did you ever manage to control your desire to know all?"

Hermione chuckled against his neck. "I'm not sure I want to know the truth all the time. You can be a real bastard sometimes."

He laughed as well...it was one of the most beautiful sounds she had ever heard.

"Besides, I trust you to tell me the truth, remember? The vow was for them, not for me."

The sound of voices calling into the darkness, saying their goodbyes, echoed on the air. "What do you say we move this to a more private venue?"

"Good idea."

Without altering their hold on each other, they Apparated into the night.

35: Proof of Trust

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Chapter 35: Proof of Trust

When they arrived at the cottage, Hermione was surprised to see the place had been prepared for their visit. She lifted an eyebrow at Severus, but he only smirked. "I didn't realize we had plans tonight," she said

He led her to the living room, which filled with candlelight at a swish of his wand. Soft lights at the top of the stairs beckoned through the kitchen, and he set a hand on her waist, leading her to their room. The bed was surrounded by flowers, and candles floated around while a soft evening breeze blew through the curtains.

"Prepared well in advance, I see."

He turned her and guided her into his arms. "I hoped you could be persuaded to spend some time alone with me." His lips began a trail up the side of her face, soft caresses that lulled her and drugged her senses. "Imagine my satisfaction when you asked me to meet you in the copse. I came here a few hours ago to set up, plan, fantasize." He found her mouth and seduced her with his gentleness. "Any problems with that?"

Hermione slid her arms up his back and returned his kisses. "None at all." For a long time they stood there, holding each other and enjoying simple kisses, soft caresses.

When he led her to the bed, Hermione nudged some space between them. Something wasn't quite right. Being with him always felt great, but something was bothering him, worrying him, and she could tell it was taking part of his attention. It would bother them both until they settled it. "Hold on. What's going on?"

He slid her sleeve down a bit and pressed a kiss to her shoulder, sending shivers up her spine. "Come, my pet. We have all night."

She stiffened for a moment, then forced herself to relax. The only time he called her 'pet' was when he thought he might use the memory for Voldemort. A small moment of loss, of knowing this time he hadn't prepared her for the deception, unless one considered that 'endearment' as preparation. She knew it was his preference for these kinds of memories because the dark leader saw it as possessive, even dehumanizing. She forced a slow smile and looked into his face. Then, in a low, sensual voice, she

asked, "And what did you have in mind, exactly?"

He leaned in and kissed her again, his lips playing hers, but she couldn't let the knowledge that this memory was intended for Voldemort leave her mind. "Everything, my pet. I have everything in mind for us."

In a moment, she found herself on the bed, slowly sliding down on the covers until her head hit the pillow, her wild hair splaying out behind her. He stroked her face. "Do you trust me?"

"You know I do." She felt his anxiety grow and her own heart quickened in response. What did he have in mind?

A moment later, he produced two vials of liquid. One was a deep burgundy, the other a rich purple. She hated taking anything without understanding its exact properties, but she could sense now was not the time to ply him with questions. He nuzzled her ear, and his fingers worked magic on her shoulders and upper arms...it was incredible what a gentle caress could do in a completely non-sexual location.

"Take these, the red first." His finger traced her lower lip, and Hermione shuddered.

Though she could tell he was nervous, he also managed to radiate reassurance...he believed this was the right thing to do, so Hermione reached out and took the vial of red liquid, popped the cork and swallowed it down. Peppermint and rosemary flooded her mouth, and she was grateful it at least tasted decent. Then she reached for the second. This was sweet, tangy and fruity.

A smile, so seldom employed, slid across his face, and she could sense him relaxing. There would be time to question him later. Now, she wrapped her arms around his neck and brought his face back down so she could nibble on his lips, his chin, his jaw.

After several minutes passed in this gentle kissing, he lifted his head and feathered his fingers over her face. "That's all for him; what's left of the night will be ours alone. I promise."

The lingering rigidity in her body fled, and she rubbed her neck. "You could have warned me."

"Perhaps I could have, but I knew you would have a million questions for me, and I wanted to get through that without the constant nattering you'd have subjected me to." The way his lips turned up at one corner told her he was only teasing at the moment, but she sensed a bit too much truth in his words to allow herself to relax completely.

"So what were the potions I drank?"

"They'll be to our benefit in the long run. Consider them a protection of sorts."

His reluctance to answer sent warning signals through her, and she pressed a hand to his chest, pushing him away when he drew nearer. "What were they?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "I thought you said you trusted me? Is my word that they will benefit us not enough?"

She weighed his questions, the possibilities, and her own heart. She hated going in blind, but she did trust him, told him as much...even if the words 'in the long run' made her nervous. Now, she needed to stand behind her word. "I do trust you. I just don't understand why you can't tell me what they were. I wouldn't have taken them so willingly if I didn't trust you."

Hermione felt his breath on her skin as he slid a kiss along her brow. "I swear to you that it will benefit us, even if it doesn't seem so at first. Consider it insurance." Then he leaned in and kissed her lips.

Though she knew he was avoiding the question, and his caveat sent out more warning signals, she pushed her reservations away for the time being and gave herself up to the sweet moment of time. When she allowed her eyelids to slide shut, she could still see the candlelight flickering on them.

Bill showed up at Headquarters shortly after he returned from his honeymoon. Harry had sent an owl the previous day asking him to come by when it was convenient. Remus and Tonks also joined the trio for dinner. "Sit down and have some," Harry said, gesturing to an empty chair.

"No, thanks. Fleur is cooking dinner tonight. You needed to talk though?"

"Yes. Have something to drink and we'll finish up here." Harry slid a butterbeer toward Bill, who took a seat and twisted off the cap.

When the meal was done, the trio and Bill went off to the library, leaving Remus and Tonks behind to speculate. "So, what's going on, then?" Bill asked when the proper privacy charms had been placed.

Harry removed the locket from his pocket and tossed it over to Bill. "Check that and make sure it's inert, would you?"

Bill pulled out his wand and cast a couple silent spells. "Yeah, whatever was in there is gone now." He tried to pass it back, but Harry held up a hand.

"Could you put it back in my vault for now? I don't want to spend too much time in Diagon Alley."

"Sure, no problem." Bill placed it in his pocket. "Anything else you need to know?"

"If we brought you something else with the same final spell on it, cast by the same person, would you be able to recognize the magical signature?" Hermione asked.

"Well, yeah, I suppose. So there will be other objects?"

"Two more. We're not certain of the identity of one of them yet, but we're working on it. We also need you to show us some spells that will help us locate hidden objects."

Bill's eyebrows rose. "You don't know what they are?"

"We know what one of them is, but we don't know where they are," Ron corrected. "We're working on that, but the locket was protected with wards, spells, various things that needed to be overcome. First, we have to know if something is around when we narrow down locations."

Bill swore. "You kids are getting in way over your heads. What makes you think you're capable of undoing wards erected by V-Voldemort or one of his Death Eaters?"

"What makes you think they were put up by Voldemort?" Hermione asked.

"This has something to do with him. You've as much as said the objects have to be denatured before you can attack him. I have my ideas about what the nature of these objects is, but I'm keeping it to myself. I'm sure I really don't want to know."

"Good, cause we won't confirm or deny your guesses anyway."

"Fine. I'm guessing the shielding charm must have worked OK for you, since you're still alive and the thing in the locket is gone."

"Yeah, though holding the shield was exhausting. I hadn't expected it to require so much energy," Hermione said.

"That's why we had two of you working on it." He scratched his chin for a moment, then nodded. "Make me a deal; if I teach you the spells to locate the hidden object, will you call me in to break whatever wards are in the way? It could take months to get you proficient enough at ward and curse breaking to ensure you won't be dead." He gave each of them a hard look.

Hermione looked at Ron, who shrugged; she nodded to Harry, who turned back to Bill. "You've got it. We'll let you know the day we plan to do it so you'll be prepared."

"All right."

Bill stayed another hour teaching them a spell, then promised to return a couple nights later to work with them some more.

Another week passed as Hermione worked with the boys and other Order members on their Occlumency. She had to demure several times when questioned about where she had learned Legilimency, but she always managed to change the subject or distract her questioner. She wondered how long before someone refused to be distracted.

The boys' Animagus training continued well. Harry was still dark and covered in fur, but his form was shrinking as he worked on it, and he was growing a long, twisty tail. She had her own ideas about his form, but hadn't ventured to mention them out loud yet. Soon she would be sure, and then she could tell him. Ron's scales had turned green and he was growing in size. She worried he would fill the room by himself soon. Her thoughts that he might turn out to be a lizard had changed when he got larger instead of smaller. Now, she was leaning toward a dragon. Welsh Green, maybe.

They were just finishing up their afternoon Transfiguration practice when George's head Flooed through to the kitchen. "Hey, Harry, you gonna make enough dinner for us too?"

Harry grinned. "You'll have to ask Hermione as she's dinner grunt tonight."

"You learn anything, or is this a social call?" Hermione asked, pulling a couple of extra potatoes from the bag under the sink.

"No reason why it can't be both. We'll close up in a few minutes, then Apparate over."

"See you then," Harry said just before the Floo connection closed.

"Better get some more chicken from the freezer," Hermione said to Ron, then spelled the peeler to get to work while she turned to other tasks. Ron had suggested corned beef earlier, but the thought alone was enough to turn Hermione's stomach. The kitchen smells made her feel a little off as it was, but she managed to push the sensation back, wondering if she had eaten something earlier that didn't agree with her.

Dinner was nearly ready when the twins came to the front door. "Help set the table, would you? We're expecting one or two more to show up eventually. Remus, at least. And if he's here, Tonks won't be far behind."

They sat down to eat, listening to the happenings at the store, joking and goofing off until dinner was done. Hermione wrapped up the leftovers and put them in the fridge while the boys spelled the rest of the room into order.

"Join us upstairs, would you?" Harry said, leading toward the hall door.

When they passed Remus in the corridor, Hermione smiled at him. "Dinner's in the ice box; help yourself. We'll be upstairs working."

"I still don't know what you three are working on most of the time." But Remus smiled back and continued on to the kitchen.

After everyone was settled in, lounging on the large cushions Hermione had found and enlarged for defense practice, Fred began. "We've continued looking around, putting in a word here and there..."

"Come up with some good buys, too." George interrupted.

"Then we had some bloke come into the shop to buy presents for his grandkids. He heard us talking about our interest in antiquities, said something about his uncle selling a family heirloom, years back..."

"Forty or more, he said, wasn't sure of the exact date..."

"To Borgin & Burkes. Family legend said it belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw. A hair comb." Fred looked at Harry. "Sound about right to you?"

Harry nodded, grinning. "Sounds about perfect. Right time, right place, right kind of artifact. Did he give you a description?"

"Silver, about four inches long, diamond encrusted," George told them. "He said it was supposed to have some beauty charm on it to make the wearer's hair tame."

"I can see the draw." Hermione grinned at them, thinking of her own unmanageable mane.

Harry grinned back at her, then returned his attention to George. "Any clue as to where it went from there?"

"No. Seems another family member went back to Borgin's months later when they realized what happened to it, but the store had no record of it. Seems a young clerk bought it, but he wasn't working there anymore."

The trio made eye contact and Hermione nodded. "That sounds like what we needed to know. Great work."

"Did you have to grease any palms for that info?"

"Nope, all free." Fred turned to Ron. "Can you come in tomorrow, all day? Change of plans."

"What change?" Ron asked.

George smiled secretively. "We're allowed secrets of our own now. Aren't we?"

Hermione tuned out the rest of the conversation. Now they knew what they were looking for, they could focus on where the items were.

Hermione spent the weeks of August helping the boys with their Animagus transformations, working on healing potions for the Order, continuing work on her own potion, and working with others on their Occlumency. Making time for her other independent study toward her N.E.W.T.s and her secret study of wandless magic became difficult when she tried to squeeze in time for her husband.

Added to all of this, whenever she visited the sweet cottage, she took a few minutes to pull a few weeds, trim a bush or thin out crowded beds. Hermione had never been especially keen on Herbology, but though she knew the cottage was only on loan, she felt a connection to the place and couldn't stand to see it so neglected.

When Severus came home and found her working in the yard one day, he paused to watch her. She knew he was there, could feel his presence, even if he didn't speak to

her. When she finished replanting the irises she had thinned from a large clump near the front door, she looked up at him. "I hope the owner doesn't mind me making a few changes. The yard has been so neglected."

He smiled and reached out a hand to her. Hermione removed the gloves she always wore now when she worked around the yard's brambles and accepted the hand up. "I'm sure, my dear, that the owner is as happy to have you working in the yard as you could wish." He pulled her near and kissed her.

"You seem contented here," he observed when they strolled into the kitchen a moment later. "I feel it in you when you are here in a way I don't feel it anywhere else."

"This has become a refuge, a lovely little hidey-hole where I can forget about everything everyone else wants or needs from me. Here it's only you and me."

He tipped her head up with one long finger and placed a soft, lingering kiss on her lips. "This place will always be here for you, for as long as you need it. Now, before we begin the final stage on the potion of our own, I have a spell for you to try out."

It took great self-control for Hermione not to begin interrogating him in her excitement. He had found or created something for the final battle. She wondered what he had managed to put together. She allowed a smile and clasped her hands in front of her. "So what is it? How does it work?"

He led her through the kitchen to the back porch swing. This was part of the yard Hermione hadn't much time to work on. She had used a few spells to clean up most of the debris and trim a few dead branches from the bushes and trees in the back courtyard, but there was a great deal to do yet.

Severus pulled out a parchment and unrolled it. "This is a spell I found last night that is intended to share feelings in a therapy-type situation. This helps family members and friends gain empathy for one another's burdens and can be directed to focus on certain emotions. It is little used and hasn't been common for some decades. I thought it might work for the one part of your needs. I've made some adjustments to it already."

Hermione threw her arms around him and laid a huge kiss on his mouth. "That sounds perfect. Who casts the spell? How does it work?"

It took only a few minutes for Hermione to understand the mechanics and practice the incantation, though with their connection, it seemed to make little or no difference. "So will this work on someone against their will?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "I wish I understood exactly what you had in mind. But no, it is only useful between two people who accept the spell."

She mulled that over, twisted and reshaped the plans to fit the situation. Maybe she should let Severus in on her full vision now. Her decision made, she turned back to him and began to explain.

Hermione returned to Headquarters the next day with the spell in hand. Once the three of them had worked on their silent spell casting, and before they moved onto their Transfiguration project, Hermione pulled the paper from her pocket. "I have something else I want to work on first."

"Come on, Hermione, I'm almost there; can't we do Transfiguration first?" Ron asked.

"No. This is more important. I need to know if it works the way we need it to, or if we'll have to look some more." They were upstairs in the attic where they did most of their combat work, special wards had been placed on the walls to prevent damage, and the space was wide and open without furniture to get in the way.

She took a moment and explained how the spell worked.

"So it's supposed to transfer emotion? What good is that going to do us?" Harry asked.

"Love is what protected you from Voldemort before. Your mother's love, your love for Sirius. It's also the way he must be defeated. I've also begun research on a spell you could cast that would force the love you feel, the love others in the Order will transfer to you, to transfer to him. This should make his body uninhabitable. If he removes his soul from his body because he is in too much agony, he will be stranded, unable to connect to this world anymore, since his Horcruxes will be gone."

"Ruddy brilliant! When have you had time to work on this? You've been busier than ever lately, what with Occlumency lessons for the Order and meeting with Snape," Ron asked, adding his derision on the last word.

"I have a few tricks up my sleeve," was her only reply. She felt guilty getting recognized for the work Severus was doing, but they had both agreed it would be best if she didn't admit his role. Not until after the battle.

"Did you pick up a Time-Turner somewhere?" Harry asked.

"No. Now, you want to give it a try?"

The spell worked exactly as advertised, though it took a little work for Ron to pick it up. Hermione had already practiced it with Severus, so she was able to focus on correcting the way Ron cast the spell and Harry's acceptance of it. She tried it out a few times herself to see how effectively she could cast it without the bond skewing the results and was very pleased with the progress.

When she finally let the boys turn to Transfiguration, she was confident that half of the final job was well underway. Now, she needed to pick out which people would help at the final confrontation and figure out how to orchestrate things the way they needed to be.

A great big thanks to my beta, countrymouse, and to the Admins who have probably wanted to pull their hair out over my thick-headed comma misuse. An especially big thanks to Sempra for finding a way to teach me that made the light bulb flash over my head. Hopefully it stays lit for a while before fizzling out again.

36: Jealous Rages and Bequests

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Chapter 36: Jealous Rages and Bequests

Hermione expected Viktor to meet her at the Leaky Cauldron any minute now. He offered to pick her up at her home, wanting to meet her parents, but she put him off. His last letter detailing his trip plans had made it fairly plain that he was hoping for something more than friendship with her, now that she was all grown up. She wondered if the hints she'd given in her previous letter that she was involved with someone had perhaps been too subtle for the Bulgarian's incomplete grasp of English. Maybe she should have learned from what it took to dissuade Ron and been straight-out blunt instead.

Both Ron and Harry would be joining them for dessert after lunch ended, but Ron was working at the twins' shop that morning, and Harry had arranged to meet Ginny for some 'flying practice' at the Burrow...she wasn't going to speculate about what else they might get up to. Hermione felt a pang of guilt for not telling Severus about her meeting with Viktor, but she intended the meeting to put their relationship on the appropriate footing...distant friendship...and she didn't want to complicate things any more than necessary. Telling Severus would definitely have complicated things for her.

When Viktor came in, Hermione thought he had never looked so handsome before. As a rule, people wouldn't consider Viktor handsome with his heavy brow and jutting nose, but he grew on her the more she got to know him. Still, her husband was far more appealing to her in every possible way.

Viktor smiled when he found her sitting at the table in the center of the room. She had been offered a more remote corner table, but hadn't wanted to encourage him with too much privacy. "Hello Hermione. You look beautiful today, as always."

She blushed at his words. No one but Viktor had ever told her she was beautiful. Her husband enjoyed her looks, to some extent, she knew, but he wasn't one to express those types of feelings. "Thank you, Viktor. You're right on time, as usual. Please sit."

He did and they ordered their meals. While they waited for lunch to be prepared, Hermione quizzed him about his trip, about his career, and everything else she could come up with that would keep the conversation on an even keel. When he looked like he planned to pick up her hand from the table, she pulled it back and fussed with her hair for a moment, as though she hadn't noticed his intent, then kept her hands to herself.

By the time Viktor got through answering all of her questions, the food had arrived and they were halfway through the meal. Hermione was watching the door, looking for Ron and Harry, praying one or both of them would show soon before the conversation got sticky. It was time she mentioned Severus somehow, though she hadn't been able to decide the best way. She took a sip of her water, then feeling a presence, glanced back at the door again. She winced when she saw her husband standing in the entrance in his glamourised form. She felt his intense anger rolling through her.

"Hermione, it's so good to speak with you like this. I have missed our talks," Viktor was saying as Severus made his way across the room. If her husband had been wearing his usual bat getup, his robes would definitely have been flaring out behind him.

Before she had a chance to respond to Viktor, Severus was at their table. The depth of his rage astounded her; it was far greater than when she had admitted to him about telling the boys of their marriage, yet his face looked serene. "Well, hello dear, I had forgotten you said Viktor Krum would be in town." He turned to Viktor and held out a hand. "It's so good to finally meet you. She's mentioned her dear, old friend Viktor several times over the months we've been dating."

Viktor took Severus' hand in a daze and shook it. When they let go, Severus slid into the booth beside Hermione and picked up a chip from her plate, popping it into his mouth. If it weren't for the feedback she was getting from him through the bond, Hermione would have been certain someone had put a fake in his place. This glamourised version of himself wasn't acting at all like Severus.

"Really? She hasn't mentioned you at all." Viktor looked between them, and Severus slid an arm over Hermione's shoulder, pulling her closer.

Hermione wanted to protest that she had mentioned something about it in her letter early in July, but Severus didn't give her the chance. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Sebastian Prince."

"Prince. You look much older than Hermione. Too old to have attended school with her. How did you meet?" Viktor seemed to be pulling himself back together, accepting the new boundaries of their relationship, though he looked more than a little upset to learn Hermione was dating someone else.

"Oh," Severus picked up Hermione's hand and pressed his lips to the backs of her fingers. "We've known each other for years. She was a child when our paths first crossed, but it wasn't until this spring that I began to see her for the woman she has become." He looked adoringly into her eyes.

Hermione smiled and felt her face flush some more, though it wasn't out of pleasure from his flattering words, but humiliation at the way the situation had played out. She wished she had handled things differently all the way around, and she wondered how Severus learned about her lunch with Viktor.

"Vell, I wish you the best, of course." Viktor didn't look like he wished Severus anything but the shortest path to hell.

"Hermione, Viktor, good to see you." Harry's sense of timing was impeccable, and his hair was even more disheveled than usual, but his eyes were bright from his time with Ginny. He slid into the seat beside Viktor and shot a questioning glance at Severus.

Desperate not to have Harry ruin the affect of Severus's appearance, Hermione smiled brightly, concealing the way her stomach was starting to turn over. "I didn't know Sebastian would be able to join us, so I didn't mention it to you, Harry, but here he is. And I was sure he wouldn't be able to meet with me until tonight." She turned to Severus and popped a kiss on his cheek, hoping Harry remembered that Hermione had mentioned her scheduled date that evening.

Understanding dawned on Harry's face, and he looked more closely at her companion. "Of course, I've been wanting to have a chance for a long talk with Sebastian for some time now. Glad you could join us. In fact, I'd love to get together with you some time; you, me and Ron could have a few drinks. Tonight might be ideal. If Hermione could spare you. Viktor could join us."

Sadistic jerk. "I'm afraid we have plans this evening. Projects we've been working on. But perhaps you can work something out another time." Hermione smiled brightly at all three of the men. Harry only partly concealed a smirk, Viktor glowered, and Severus held a serene, but rather blank expression on his face.

Then Ron joined them and opened his mouth to ask who Severus was.

"Ron, isn't it nice Sebastian has joined us for dessert?" Harry asked before his red-haired friend could do more than greet the group. "After all, we've been trying to pin down the man Hermione's been seeing for all these months. He's been rather illusive."

The red head's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. "Yeah. Great. I've heard plenty about you, in the most general of terms, of course. It's time we got to know you better. Hermione's practically one of the family, which means she has seven brothers, and two dads...that's if you count Harry into the mix, of course. I'm sure they'd all like a chance to interrogate you...in the nicest possible way. My twin brothers will probably want to become your best friends." He smiled brightly; clearly he and Harry were of one mind in this situation...make the married couple as uncomfortable as possible.

Hermione was grinding her teeth together as she smiled pleasantly back at Ron. "Sometime you'll have to do that. Too bad now is such a bad time...the twins will have to wait until another day to force feed Sebastian Canary Cremes. Stay and have dessert, would you? I'm far too full. It was great seeing you again, Viktor. Coming, Sebastian?"

"Yes, I don't have too long before I have to get back to my station. Nice to see you boys again and to meet you, Viktor." He bowed his head toward them, then whisked Hermione out onto the street of Diagon Alley. Once out the door, he Apparated them to their cottage.

"What were you doing with that man?" Severus asked after tapping himself with his wand and vanishing the glamour he had been wearing. "What are you trying to do, get me killed? And I swear I'm going to hex those two twits you call friends the next time I see them."

"Viktor's my friend, Severus. I told you he was coming into town."

"Your *friend* wants you to be more than a correspondent to him." He grabbed her arm and pulled her into the cottage.

"You're hurting me." He loosened his hold slightly, turning to face her again. "And so what if he wants more? Notice Harry and Ron coming in? That wasn't exactly by happy accident. I didn't wish to be alone with him for long. I intended to let him know clearly that I was involved with someone, then leave him with Harry and Ron for dessert and mind-numbing Quidditch talk while I came back here to work on the potion. I would never be unfaithful to you. You know that."

"The Dark Lord's minions don't understand that. How do you suppose I heard about your little tete-a-tete? The damn woman who put me under the Imperius came gloating back to me at the Dark Lord's side and announced to the world that you seemed to be spreading yourself around. How do you think that made me look?"

"What do you care what she thinks?" Her stomach tightened in a knot, her nausea growing.

He threaded his hands in her hair, his palm against her skull, bringing her face close to his own. "I care because it makes my hold on you look loose. It makes it appear that you aren't fully under my power; that you can be swayed another direction. If that is the case, your usefulness, and therefore mine, to the Dark Lord lessens significantly. And that puts us at risk. Both of us. And the very idea of another man touching you..." he didn't finish his thought, crashing his mouth down onto hers instead. "You're mine. Mine."

A couple minutes passed before she was able to push him away. The bond may have approved of their physical contact, but she did not. "I belong to myself."

"No. This ring," he fingered her wedding band, but was reasonably under control now, "makes you little more than the property of Severus Sebastian Snape. It says you will encourage no man, whether you intend to be unfaithful with him or not. It says you will do everything in your power to keep both me and yourself safe so that your actions will not be called into question. My ring says the same for you." He pulled back his left shirt sleeve. "And this mark says that every public action either of us makes can affect whether we live a long, happy life together, or die horribly. Your every word affects my life span. You can insist on continuing on the way you have been living, or you can consider your life and mine."

Hermione stood, considering his words. She tried to refute them, but saw no way to do so.

"Your behavior today has put us both at risk. You must not be so foolish again. First you tell those twits about our marriage, then you force me to extract you from a potentially dangerous situation. You should never be out in public for such a long period of time. The Dark Lord has eyes everywhere." He pushed her away, then straightened his shirt sleeve and headed into the kitchen, slamming the basement door shut behind him as he pounded down the stairs.

Hermione pushed her hair back from her face with both hands and sighed. She sat in a nearby chair. Had her actions left them open to trouble? Was she at greater risk now than she had been before? And what was the hurt she had felt radiating from him along with the anger when she pushed him away? Would she ever understand the man she married?

Headquarters was quiet when Hermione entered that evening. Severus had stayed at the cottage long enough to prepare for the next step in the potion, making sure she understood the procedure. Then he Apparated away. She had to figure he returned to the Dark Lord's side, as that was where he had been before he joined her at the Leaky Cauldron. He had Occluded her so completely that she felt nothing but the buzz of his shield in the back of her mind for the rest of the day.

After spending the afternoon puttering around the yard, Hermione had completed the next step in the potion, thrown together something to eat, then returned to Headquarters.

Now it appeared she would have the place to herself that evening.

When she went into the kitchen to get a drink of water, she found Remus sitting at the table, a finger's depth of firewhiskey in his glass. He looked up and gave her a wan smile of greeting. "I heard from the boys; they indicated they were spending the evening with Viktor. Wondered what happened to you. I guess you disappeared with Sebastian...is that who I think it is?"

At his questioning glance, she nodded. "Sebastian is his middle name. He showed up at the lunch in disguise, angry." She sat across from Remus and told him everything that had happened. "I don't know if he was being melodramatic or if I really screwed things up that badly. I thought I was being careful: Public appearance, nothing private, bringing in the boys before dinner was over to diffuse the situation. I thought I had left adequate indications that I was involved with someone else, but apparently I hadn't. I just feel as though I've screwed things up and don't know how to make them better. Viktor probably hates me now, but I only feel moderately bad about that. How do I fix things with Severus?"

"It's rough sometimes, being an adult, having someone else who depends on you. It's even worse when that person's life might be in jeopardy if we make the wrong decisions. I feel it every day. I could hurt Tonks sometime. I could turn her into what I am or worse...kill her if I'm incautious. But she loves me, and I love her. What's more, I need her. I think you're in a unique position: Understanding the situation I'm in, the danger me and my actions could pose for the woman I love, the way her actions could affect me. You have to learn a new kind of discretion. And your circumstances are far more volatile than most."

Hermione nodded and sipped on her water. They sat there side by side for several minutes, drinking their drinks until the front door opened and closed. "That must be Ron and Harry," Remus said.

"This could be awkward. I still want to shoot them for the way they acted, but I feel bad for dumping Viktor on them, and I'm not sure how to explain . . . everything."

He smiled. "I'll leave you to figure out an explanation, shall I?" He stood and exited the room.

The boys came in a moment after he left. Both were rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed. Hermione pushed back the groan that threatened to escape as she realized they'd been drinking a great deal of something far stronger than butterbeer. "Hello." She took another sip of water and wished she had taken a stomach soother before leaving the cottage.

"Hello 'Mione. Where ya been? Viktor was really disappointed you left so early." Ron sat down across from her, sloppy happy.

"Great. I've been working on that potion."

"With 'Bastian?" Ron asked.

"When'd you meet him, anyway? Thought your husband was at Hogwarts with us. Never seen him before." Harry sat across from her, and Hermione decided he was the less inebriated of the two. "No one his age at the school."

She wished the idiots had stayed away from the drink all the way around. How did they expect to defend themselves if they were only half sober? That made her wish they lived in a world where the two young idiots could go out for an evening with friends without having to worry about being caught out, unable to defend themselves. "Yeah, that was him. He was wearing a glamour. Sebastian was obviously not the name you know him by, and the glamour altered his apparent age."

"I don't think he was too happy about you having lunch with Viktor," Harry said.

"What was your first clue?"

"He looked bloody angry to me...behind his eyes," Ron said, leaning his head back against the wall as he sat in his chair. He looked half asleep already. "Cool civility on

top, spitting angry underneath. Want to meet him again sometime when he's not so mad. Something about the way he moved, 's familiar."

"Someday, Ron. Someday." Remembering Ron's suggestion of a full Weasley inquisition for Severus made her eyes ache and her stomach roll.

"Viktor was pretty upset about Sebastian," Harry said, slurring his words a bit. "But he'll get over you, eventually. Figured he might meet someone else he likes as well as you before he turns fifty. Jus' as well I couldn't mention the marriage. Pro'ly wouldn't have made him feel better."

Probably not. Hermione patted Harry on the shoulder, feeling even more guilty about Viktor than she had before. "Let's get some sleep tonight."

Surprisingly, both boys readily acquiesced.

However, sleep didn't come easily to Hermione as her concern for her husband and her relationship to him grew more confusing by the hour.

"Mr. Potter." Minerva McGonagall stopped Harry after the Order meeting ended the following night. "It seems Albus left you some items in his will. I have brought the box with me tonight."

Hermione watched the Headmistress swallow hard as though it was painful to consider being the bearer of inheritances...at least in this circumstance. The meeting had been rather dull, and Hermione noticed the frazzled way the Transfiguration professor looked.

"OK, where is it?" Harry looked bemused. None of them had considered that Dumbledore wouldn't have several hundred other people he would rather give things to.

There was a large packing box sitting on a side table in the library. Minerva gestured to it. "I don't know what all is in here, but the solicitor asked me to bring this by. Apparently, his portrait directed the placement of every item in that box for you, and he asked that you look at it as soon as you can. I admit, I find myself curious, especially since the box is rather heavy."

Harry ran a hand over the box, his hesitation to pull back a flap obvious. Losing Albus Dumbledore had been very difficult for everyone, but Harry had been so certain the old man would be there to help him through this. It should have been Harry assisting Dumbledore. Now Harry was left to head the project alone.

Ginny arrived at the door, watched for a short moment, then crossed the room to Harry, sliding her arms around him. Hermione knew the younger girl must have sensed his need from wherever she had been in the house. Harry buried his face in Ginny's hair and held her back just as hard. There had been so little time to mourn this summer, what with plans being implemented.

That made Hermione wonder about Severus's time to mourn. She still felt an occasional pang of despair and regret from him, but she doubted he had allowed himself to feel the true depths of his emotions. Whether that was because she would experience it as well, and he wished to keep something private, or because he couldn't face his guilt, she didn't know. Surely a man as passionate as he was, one who felt his own guilt as strongly as she knew he did, needed to mourn Dumbledore's passing more than he'd allowed himself to do.

She had caused him a great lot of trouble, she thought. She hoped he felt she had contributed to his comfort as well, but didn't know if that would make up for the danger he was now in. All she knew, was even if the enchantment no longer lay between them, drawing them together, she now loved him independently of it, needed him, and couldn't imagine her life without him.

And with that realization, she knew she had to track him down and apologize in her next free moment, to consider him more carefully with her outward actions. When her actions could mean life and death to both of them, she had no right to selfishness.

Hermione looked up to see McGonagall slowly back out of the room as Harry's pain and need for privacy became evident. She shut the three teens inside. Hermione sighed gratefully.

Several minutes passed as Harry and Ginny stood entwined before he released one arm and half turned toward the box. "What do you think it is?" he asked.

"No idea. Best open it, don't you think?" Ginny nudged him toward it.

Slowly Harry opened the flaps and took out the smaller boxes within. As he unloaded them, he found several smaller boxes and one large box. All the smaller boxes were labeled with covert titles. The first Harry read said, 'your quest.'

He turned toward the large box and opened it up, revealing the Pensieve, and the first smaller box held vials of memory...several of them, each with their own labels.

"Harry, you don't think..." Hermione asked.

"Yeah I do." He grinned at her. "We'll have to take these upstairs and review them. Maybe there's a clue I missed. I wonder what else is in here."

"I want to see them with you," Ginny said.

"Ginny, we've been over this." Harry set a hand on her shoulder.

She shook it off. "Yes, you want me to stay safe, not to get involved in your project or quest or whatever because it could be dangerous. Do you really think seeing these memories and helping you piece together information, to plan movements, is going to be dangerous? I'm not talking about me going out to search with you...though you know I want to. I'm talking about brainstorming."

Harry considered her for a moment, then shrugged. "You're right. See if you can spend the night with Hermione, and we'll go over these tonight."

Ginny grinned, grabbed his face, and laid a big kiss on his mouth before moving away. "I'll tell Mum."

"Get Ron too and meet us in the attic." He smiled as he watched her go, then turned to Hermione. "I'm crazy about that girl."

"Yeah, I know. Let me give you a hand."

He carried the Pensieve, and she brought along the carton with the smaller boxes, wondering what was in them. Maybe only the one he opened had memories and the others held trinkets of another sort? She supposed she would find out eventually.

More than ten minutes passed before Ginny and Ron joined them. "Sorry, Mum took some convincing. She made me promise to spend the night with Hermione and not in my own room," Ginny said, rolling her eyes.

"In other words, not with me," Harry interpreted.

"Exactly."

Hermione warded the door and conjured shelves for the box and its contents. They gathered around the Pensieve as Harry poured the first couple of memories into it. "This could take most of the night," he warned.

Everyone nodded, unfazed by that. They dipped their faces forward and entered the memory.

Thanks to my beta, countrymouse, and to the admins who take so much of their personal time to correct these stories. Special thanks to sempra, who validated this chapter.

37: Gathering the Pieces, Making Amends

Chapter 37 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 37: Gathering the Pieces, Making Amends

It was nearing sunrise when they finished viewing the last memory in the smaller box. When they pulled out of the Pensieve the last time, Harry rubbed his eyes and sighed. "I was hoping there would be something new there. Something I hadn't seen. I was sure Dumbledore must have included something new."

Hermione had pulled out a piece of paper and begun taking notes when they returned from the first set of Horcrux-related memories, so their list was fairly complete, but now they were all too exhausted to continue. They had seen all the memories Harry had been privy to during his special lessons with Dumbledore: From the first day he met Riddle at the orphanage to the boy's days at Hogwarts, Tom's discussion on Horcruxes with Slughorn, his work for Borgin and Burkes to his request to teach at Hogwarts. "At least it's fresh in your mind now. Maybe it will help jog our memories." She was trying to be helpful, but wasn't sure if she succeeded.

"Any ideas?" Harry asked, looking around at everyone's tired faces.

When no one said anything, Hermione set out her suggestions. "First, we all need to sleep. After that we should make a big poster of the things we know, like Muggle policemen do. It might help us see a pattern better. At the very least, it will keep the basic details where we can see them." Hermione rubbed her eyes, which felt gritty. Her diary had alerted her to a new note from Severus some time ago, but after verifying it wasn't anything urgent, she had put it aside. Now, she wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed with it and read her husband's words. She wished they had looked even vaguely conciliatory, instead of simply news of the latest meeting with Voldemort. Then again, she hardly expected Severus to try and bridge the gap when it was her fault things had gone so badly wrong between them in the first place.

"Sounds like a good idea. Let's get some sleep," Ron said.

They all headed down to their rooms after Hermione warded the door so no one would disturb their things. Hermione arrived in her room alone, got ready for bed, and read the short, concise entry from her husband. There was nothing personal in it: no snide remarks to make her smile, no expression of wishing to be together. It made her feel very alone. She started making a few return comments of her own before Ginny joined her. The younger girl's cheeks were pink and her lips looked a bit swollen from kissing, but otherwise all looked fine.

They shared a conspiratorial smile, then Ginny began preparing for bed. Hermione returned to her diary.

It was mid afternoon when the four of them had eaten and returned upstairs to continue their work. Hermione charmed a paper to expand to cover most of one wall. They set out each Horcrux in its own column with any pertinent information they knew about it. As they stood back and considered their work an hour later, Hermione wondered how this was supposed to make things easier.

"Wait a minute," Ron said, walking along the front of the board, reviewing the information silently. "There is a pattern...or there might be." He ran his hand through his hair, making it stand on end. Though they had all slept for hours, none of them felt truly refreshed.

"You mean besides the fact that all the objects have significance to Voldemort?" Ginny asked.

"The locations, I mean. The diary is a bit of a stretch, but he had one of his Death Eaters hold it for him, one of the group who followed him...the group that extends his power by doing his bidding. It also represents what he accomplished as a teen in the Chamber of Secrets, and his lineage to one of the Four Founders.

"The locket was originally located in the cave where he did something to those other kids in the orphanage. An example of his power or of coming into his own, I guess. The ring was found at the little shack his mother grew up in. All of the places have some kind of personal significance to him. Maybe the other two items were left in significant places too."

"That's brilliant, Ron." Hermione's mind began to race; she had missed that point completely, and it definitely had merit. "So if we figure out what other places might have had significance to him, we'll have a starting place to find the comb and the cup."

"Let's start with pinpointing the two locations that make the most sense, then we can work on how to get there." Hermione turned to Ginny to begin brainstorming.

The next day Hermione couldn't get her mind off her confrontation with her husband. The boys slept late, which left her with time on her hands to brood. She could feel him brooding as well and knew his anger was justified. It was easy enough to deal with an irritable husband when you know you are in the right, she thought, but when you were filled with self-recriminations, it took on a whole new dimension.

To escape the constant thoughts about her husband, Hermione focused on study. August was drawing to a close, and she knew the next few months were unlikely to provide time for her to focus on her studies as she would like. In addition to the Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense lessons she worked on with the boys, she spent time of her own on Arithmancy and Runes and still put in time on wandless magic, though that was so draining and frustrating it got less attention than the others.

When pain assaulted her whole body in the evening, she gasped, doubled over and slowly worked on Occluding her mind. Severus was being tortured, and there was nothing she could do about it. When closing her mind barely touched the discomfort she was feeling, she breathed through it, then let out a sigh of relief when it was lifted and she was left with only tingling muscles.

Dropping everything, she called out, "Harry, I'm going to see Sebastian for the evening."

"What? Why tonight?" He appeared in the kitchen door, and she gasped as another bout of *octrucio* was cast on her husband. "I thought we were going to go over this information again tonight."

"He needs me. I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow."

He nodded, seeing her desperation. "OK."

She opened the front door and Apparated away.

The cottage was dark as she knew it would be. Moonlight gilded the flowers and shrubs, peeked through tree limbs and cast a faint glow on the path to the front door. In another situation she would have lingered, enjoying the evening, but tonight she couldn't appreciate it as it deserved. She hurried to the front door and cast the charm to open it, then with a flick of her wand, lit the lamps around the house.

As a third bout of *crucio* rocked her husband's body, Hermione ground her teeth together and began willing him to join her at the cottage, wishing he could leave the meeting and join her, that she could care for him and acknowledge their need to work in tandem. She worried Voldemort might be so angry he would kill Severus, and she would never know if it was her fault, and never have the chance to make it up to him.

When the curse lifted, she felt his relief and knew it must be over. She wished again for him to join her as she moved around the kitchen, heating water in the tea pot and setting out biscuit and preparing fruit for a late tea. She didn't know if he would actually come, but if he was still too angry to see her, she would have something to eat while she tried to figure out how to make it up to him.

When the front door slammed shut a few minutes later, she couldn't help but smile, even if his irritation was set at screaming. She turned and saw him shudder with aftershocks of the *crucio*, his eyes blazing into hers.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

"Preparing tea?" Hermione couldn't understand why he was looking at her like that.

"Calling me when I'm in the middle of a meeting. Willing me to the cottage like that when you know I can't come. I was lucky he was ready to let me go. I could have blown my cover, Apparating back here without permission." He stalked over to her and penned her against the counter with a hand on either side of her. "I'm starting to think you're trying to get us killed."

He was scary in his fury, but she found herself more fascinated than worried for her own safety. His anger may have been directed toward her, but she didn't feel a threat. And his words made her wonder what was going through his mind. "What are you talking about? Yes, I wanted you to come here, but I had no expectation you would interpret that as a demand. What's gotten into you?"

He paused, seemed to consider, to reign the anger back in, then stepped back a few inches. "I need my pain relief potion. I'm not thinking clearly." He wiped a bit of blood from a cut on his jaw and stepped back even further.

Hermione had no idea what was going on, but she wasn't about to ask when he was like this. "I'll get it for you. Have a seat." She walked to the bathroom medicine cabinet where she knew she had seen a bottle of the potion and returned with a muscle relaxant as well. She wondered how much sleep he had gotten over the previous few days; she could feel his exhaustion.

He was sitting in a chair, leaning against the wall, his eyes closed and face twitching slightly when she returned to the kitchen. "Here, take some of this." She held out the bottle and his eyes fluttered open.

Severus reached for the bottle, uncorked it, and tossed back a generous dose. "What's the other one?" When she told him, he took that bottle and swallowed it as well.

"Would you like some food? When is the last time you had a real meal?" She took the bottles back from him and set them on the counter, then added tea leaves to the hot water to steep.

"I ate something for breakfast. I've been at his beck and call all day, haven't had time to eat." His anger seemed spent, or at least tucked away for the time being.

Or sleep. She nodded; she had felt the short burn on her arm nearly eight hours earlier. "Well, it won't be fancy, but we'll see what I can put together." She opened the fridge and pulled out several sandwich ingredients, then cast a spell on them so they would make themselves into sandwiches.

As she put things together, set the table and set out the food, he said nothing, watching her with weary eyes. "So why the *crucio* tonight?" she finally asked.

"Don't ask. I don't want to get into it."

"I can order you to tell me, for the Order." She hadn't done so, just decided to test him out first.

"It will have no bearing on Order operations, so I don't have to answer you. Ask me after I've eaten and had some sleep, and we'll see if I feel like discussing it." He looked up in her eyes as she turned toward him again. "Please tell me you're getting close. Please tell me this is going to end soon. I don't know how much more I can take." Vulnerability echoed in his eyes, tearing her heart out.

Hermione set the tea pot on the table, then turned toward him. She cradled his face between her hands and pressed a soft kiss to his lips, his cheeks, his closed eyelids, his forehead and nose, then back to his mouth. A vulnerable Severus nearly broke her heart, especially knowing how hard he was to break. "We've had a breakthrough of sorts. At least, I think we have. I spent the past two days reviewing the information and putting things together. I think we're getting close. How about you? How are you coming on the other half of our spell?"

"I'm making headway. It's been slow going, but I should have it in another week or so. If the madman will leave me be for a little while."

She kissed him again, then released his face. "Best eat. Then we'll rest. We can talk in the morning."

To her surprise, he turned right to his plate and began loading it up.

Severus woke to the sun shining in his eyes and his wife's warm body in his arms. He thought back over the past few days, the groveling he'd done before the Dark Lord to atone for Hermione's lunch with the Bulgarian.

His bouts of torture the previous day had been because he hadn't bent her to his will, hadn't ingratiated himself with her, or rather, gotten her to ingratiate herself with him. The Dark Lord felt Severus' relationship with Hermione was pivotal to destroying Harry and to learning the inside track with the Order. He was right, of course.

Over the past few days, he had sensed her excitement, the underlying sense of purpose she had gained, and the moments of regret. He knew he had been too tired when he came to her side, had nearly let more slip than he was ready for. When he considered the possibilities, he nearly decided to tell her about the other aspects of the spell he had placed on her, of the purpose of the potions he had fed her, but weighed his options and decided against.

Still, a show of understanding and forgiveness might be in order. It might make her more likely to reciprocate when his secrets were revealed. Especially the second of the two. He had never considered children. Even after he married Hermione, he had figured the point was moot if they didn't survive the war. That meant he had no idea how she would feel about it, and he wasn't about to ask now...not when it was almost certainly too late for her to weigh in her opinion. She would be expecting him to bring another dose of the contraceptive potion soon. He would need to make a decision about how to handle things before then.

But not today. Today was for smoothing out the rough edges between them. It was both his job and his pleasure.

Hermione woke to the feel of Severus' arms around her in their bed. She couldn't help but think of the little cottage as anything but theirs, though she knew it belonged to someone else. After dinner she had stripped him and put him to bed, then joined him herself. When he turned to her in the middle of the night, she had welcomed him into her arms. Now, as his breath on her neck sent trails of goosebumps down her back, she wondered if that had all been done in a half-asleep haze of lust, or if he had known what he was doing at the time.

"I can sense your mind racing. I know you're awake." His voice was husky in her ear, and she shivered slightly at the tone.

"Feeling better?"

"Much. Much better. Food, sleep, and you in my arms appears to be the best medic." He pulled away, releasing her from his embrace and sliding out of bed.

Taken aback by his words, she narrowed her eyes at him. "You forgot your habitual swear word after that comment." She kept her tone light as she slid from the covers and picked up her robe nearby.

"What's that supposed to mean?" His voice was guarded.

"You know; it's usually more along the lines of 'food, sleep and you in my arms...damn that potion and those Weasley twins for making me care one way or the other if you live or die.' " She pulled the ties of the robe into a knot at her waist and pushed back her tangled mane of hair, anything to avoid his eyes. She knew instinctively that he wouldn't share what happened at the meeting last night with her, and that the enraged comments he had made when he entered the cottage would not be explained. It was more than irritating that there was so much of his life he still held back. Didn't he trust her at all? Then she thought of her Animagus shape and realized it worked both ways.

There was a long silence, but she could tell he was trying to decide her mood, interpret her comment. For once she didn't want to make things easier for him, so she stayed silent.

"You were too brilliant a student for me not to care a little if you died. After all, I saved Longbottom, and he was abysmal. Why would I have no preference whether you lived or died?"

"That's a point for you, I suppose. Are you planning to take a shower right away, or can I go first?" Hermione walked over to the drawer where she had stashed a few changes of clothing and began picking through her unimaginative under things. She made a mental note to buy something a bit racier when the war was over. For once she wanted to damn the potion for making her so sure she would still want to be with this taciturn, irritable, difficult man when this was all over. And damn it even more for making her love him and accept these parts of him, even as they drove her crazy.

"Why don't we take it together? I heard some Muggles complaining about a drought. We could conserve our natural resources." He came up behind her and set his hands on her hips, then leaned in and touched his lips to a bare spot on her shoulder.

"Somehow I doubt it would actually conserve water if we shared." Certain he had something up his sleeve, she ordered her body not to react to his touch as he kissed her shoulder again, then moved the hair from her neck and worked his lips up to her earlobe. As usual, her body refused to listen when it came to him.

"But it might be enjoyable to give it a try."

Hermione pulled out of his arms and turned to face him. "Go ahead and take the shower if you like; I'll see about breakfast. I haven't seen the house-elf in ages."

"Twinkie has been working on other parts of the estate, but all you have to do is call his name and he'll come take care of anything you like. I think he's actually offended you haven't had any chores for him to do yet." His hands worked up to the ties at her waist and loosened them so he could slide his hands against her skin.

It took great self control to nudge him away when he was already getting to her. It was rare her husband tried his hand at seduction, but she didn't want to get wrapped up in that right now. "I didn't realize this cottage was part of an estate. I thought the elf only belonged to this cottage."

"This is a remote corner of the estate. I believe the cottage once belonged to a caretaker of some kind. Perhaps once the war is won you'll be interested in taking a tour." He pushed the robe from her shoulders.

"Severus, I don't think this is the right time..."

"It's always the right time, my dear." He dropped his head and placed his open mouth on that one sensitive spot beneath her collar bone.

"You wouldn't say that if we were at the Weasleys'." Her eyes were all but crossed with the effort to resist the pull of the enchantment.

He dropped his hands and backed off. "Now you've killed the mood. What was the point of bringing up the Weasleys?"

"We need to talk." She picked up her robe from the floor and tied it around her again. "Twinkie."

"You called, ma'am?" The house-elf winked into existence before her.

"Could you put some breakfast on the table? Severus will need something substantial. I'd prefer a lighter breakfast."

"Yes, ma'am. Right away, ma'am." The house-elf grinned and winked away again.

"I'm such a hypocrite, using a house-elf." Hermione ran a hand through her tangles and sighed. "Look, you were right. I was wrong. I won't have any more solitary lunches with old flames. I'll try and consider how my behavior might affect your standing with the Dark Lord, but you'll have to explain in more detail what's going on. I need to understand the danger you're in, the part I need to play."

"It's all forgiven, Hermione. I know you saw your error." He stepped forward again, but she held out a hand to stop him, narrowing her eyes at him.

"It's all forgiven? Just like that? No discussion. No explanation. No apologies?" She knew it was him, and she knew he wasn't under the Imperius Curse...she could sense various levels of emotion from him...something she didn't get when he was being controlled by that woman earlier in the summer. But she sensed there was a little more to the situation than he was letting on.

"I have made mistakes of my own, things you have forgiven me for readily. You put up with my bitter nature, me pushing you away, and you never complain. The time will come when you may have cause to be angry with me, and I thought to give myself a bargaining chip." He smirked as though he was joking with her, but she sensed that he was partly truthful.

Hermione recalled those potions she had ingested. He still hadn't told her what they were, and she hadn't noticed any difference since she took them. "So, totally selfish reasons for forgiving me, huh?"

"Absolutely selfish. I am not a nice or forgiving man by nature. You should know that." He slid his arms around her waist again, pulling her close. "But I see the advantage for both of us in kissing and making up." He then put it into practice.

After debating for a moment, she decided to pick it apart later. For now she gave herself up to the pleasure of being in his arms.

Yes, Severus is a manipulator, but we already knew that. Also, stay tuned for the reason behind his unexplained rage. It's coming up in a couple chapters.

A big thanks to RobisonRocket for countrymouse for their suggestions and corrections on this chapter.

38: Finding the Comb

Chapter 38 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 38: Finding the Comb

On September first, the day all of them should have been on the train to Hogwarts, both Harry and Ron managed to make their Animagus changes and hold them for over an hour. Ron had turned out to be a Welsh Green dragon...which pressed the large attic room to it's limits...and, after Hermione spent some time doing research, she was able to identify Harry's Animagus form as a Black Cap Capuchin monkey. Though both thought their forms were pretty cool, neither saw how they would be as useful as her own. Hermione's bird form made her nearly invisible in public, and she could cover long distances fairly quickly, but a huge dragon wasn't so easy to hide, and monkeys always drew attention.

Still, they were all relieved when the final transformation was done.

"I can't believe it took us so long to finish this. I was sure it would only be a few weeks," Ron said.

"It took me twice as long," Hermione pointed out as she cleaned up the stack of books Ron had knocked over with his dragon tail earlier.

"Yeah, but you didn't work on it every day."

"Nor did I restrict myself to the once-a-week meetings with McGonagall," she admitted. "Now, any other ideas on locations for the cup and comb?"

"I've been thinking about it," Ron said. "I'm betting he got one of them into that orphanage. It had special significance to him. And remember how he hung that rabbit from the rafters? It was an event that proved his power over the other kids."

"I've been thinking along the same lines, only I can't figure out how to get us in there without drawing attention to ourselves," Harry said.

"Well, they take a summer trip to the seashore, right? Maybe we can lure them out with another trip. Maybe free tickets to the zoo." Hermione pulled out a piece of paper and began writing down ideas, then grinned to herself. "Ron could take you with him to deliver the tickets, with you in your monkey form, of course. The kids would go crazy over that."

"That's brilliant. I think it would be an excellent way to spend pureblood wizard money, don't you? It would gall Sirius's mum's portrait to no end." Harry grinned at them.

"Then again, it might not even be open still. Check into that, would you, Hermione?" Ron sat beside her, nudging her arm by accident. It took a moment before Hermione realized and looked at him in surprise. He hadn't jumped or flinched at all when he touched her.

She lifted an eyebrow at him, and he flushed when he caught her meaning. He looked away, pretending great interest in the list of Horcruxes. "Well, Luna's been stopping by the shop a lot lately. And we sort of, I don't know." He shrugged. "I like her."

"I couldn't be happier for you." Hermione grinned and set down her notes. "I'll head to my parent's house. I'll use their computer to see what information I can find about the orphanage. I'll probably stay for dinner, as it's been a while since I've seen my mum. I'll let you know what I learn."

"See you tomorrow," Harry called after her. Just before she reached the bottom stair, she thought she heard him suggest to Ron that they visit the Burrow that evening.

Using the information they had picked up from Dumbledore's Pensieve, Hermione was able to gather quite a lot of information about the orphanage before her parents came home for dinner. The building was still standing, but it had been damaged pretty badly in a fire one of the little girls had started a couple years earlier. The building had been abandoned since.

The government hadn't wanted to fix the old relic, but hadn't gotten around to selling or tearing it down yet either...though the latter option was coming up soon. That was perfect as it meant the structure would be empty when the three of them Apparated over. Hermione had a good feeling about all of this. The orphanage had to be one of the locations.

She wondered how long it would take them to find the comb or cup, or if one of the Muggles had found the item when they cleaned the building out and removed it. Would that be possible? With all the protections on the ring and locket to keep Muggles and even powerful wizards at bay, would a Muggle be able to walk off with a piece of Hogwarts history without anyone being the wiser? She thought not...she hoped not.

Her parents came in the back door when Hermione was just warming the oil in a pan on the stove...a smell that made her appetite wane. "Hermione, I was wondering when we'd see you again. I thought I'd try and send a message tonight, and then I got yours that you'd be here." Her mother greeted her with a tight hug.

"Hi, Mum, hi, Dad. I thought it might be nice to see you. I used your computer to look up some things, then started dinner. How does stir fry sound?"

"Wonderful. Just let me get cleaned up and I'll be right back to help you," her mother said.

"Hey, Peanut, how are things going? You should've been on the school train today, shouldn't you?" Her father smoothed a hand down her hair. "Do you wish you were going back?"

"Of course, but they aren't going to open the school until the war is over. We're going to make sure it ends soon. Maybe by Christmas we'll be back in business." Her

parents hadn't been thrilled when she told them she wasn't returning to school this year. They'd been even less thrilled when she told them what she would be doing instead...or at least the general idea of what she would be doing. She hadn't been anymore direct with them than with the Order. It was better to redirect his line of thought than to continue in that vein. "How was work today?"

"Good, good. Just a day at the office. Your mother and I were thinking about taking a vacation now that schools are starting again. We didn't go anywhere this summer, wanting to be available to spend time with you instead. But we were thinking about spending a couple weeks in Majorca...you could come along."

"That sounds fabulous, but I really can't get away right now." Hermione thought about the warm weather and white sand beaches on the Spanish island. She could really use a break. "Then again, I might be induced to come spend a day or two while you're there. We'll have to see what the next few weeks bring. You should go though, absolutely. You work too hard at the office."

"I'll talk to your mum about it. I better go balance the budget a bit while you ladies cook dinner. Let me know when it's ready." He pressed a kiss to her head, then sauntered out of the room with both hands in his pockets.

Hermione's mum entered the room a minute later, her blouse changed to something more casual and her hair pulled back from her face. "Looks like you've got things well in hand."

"Mostly. You want to wrap the egg rolls?" Hermione knew she could wave her wand and have the egg rolls fill and wrap themselves, but it was nice spending a few minutes working side-by-side with her mum, and she hadn't been back to visit for a couple weeks.

"Sure." They worked together for several minutes while her mother talked about the latest family news and neighborhood gossip. It surprised Hermione when her mother segued into more personal matters. "So things with your young man must be going well. You look happy enough."

Blushing, Hermione avoided her mother's eyes. "Things are going well. He's . . . Mum, he's very special to me. I mean, I can't imagine my life without him." It was touchy treading the thin line between saying too much and saying too little, but she wanted to prepare her parents for a reality they would eventually have to face. Severus was not a young man, by their standards, though he was nearly ten years younger than they were. Thank goodness he wasn't their contemporary.

Her mother set the egg roll she had just finished to the side and turned toward Hermione, studying her face. "That sounds pretty serious. You aren't talking about marriage are you? I'd hate to see you married with a baby before you have time to complete your advanced schooling. You did plan to complete your schooling, didn't you?"

"Er, I did plan on it, yes. Completing my schooling, that is. If I can. In any case, I haven't stopped studying, and I'm sure to have decent references for a job someday. And I don't plan to have a child for years, Mum. I want to get settled into a career, spend some more time with him and take it easy. Things are far too uncertain right now to bring a child into the world...too uncertain to make definite plans of any kind. Witches can bear children well into their fifties, you know, so even if I waited ten years, I would have more than enough time to have a dozen children of my own...Not that I plan on more than a couple at this point. But I'm not really planning on children right now anyway." She found herself trying to backpedal and undo all of the things she had said that came out backwards. By the end of her tangled monologue she felt rather wrong-footed indeed.

Her mother laughed. "As long as you make me a grandma before I die, and not in the next few years, I'm sure we'll get by. But I think if things have progressed so far, it's about time I learned the young man's name and met him. Don't you?"

Hermione's stomach turned, and she felt suddenly nauseous...not that she hadn't been feeling a bit off lately anyway. The stress of their situation, both hers and the boys, and hers with Severus had been getting to her, stealing her appetite in the evenings. She had hoped in a different setting she would be able to let go of the stress, but this discussion wasn't helping any. Severus could put on the disguise he used occasionally around the Muggle world. At least in that form he looked ten years younger than he really was. The age difference would probably still bother them.

"We're in a strange situation, Mum." Hermione focused her gaze on the pan of veggies in front of her. "Sebastian's in a precarious spot. He's fighting Voldemort too, but he works as a spy. That means we can't be open about our relationship."

"Sebastian? Does this Sebastian have a last name?"

"Um, he introduced himself to Viktor as Sebastian Prince, but that's actually a pseudonym for public reasons. A kind of compilation of family names, I guess. He's fairly well known among the wizarding population, so if I bring him, he'll be in disguise, which alters his physical appearance, including his age. So don't be surprised if he looks to be late twenties when I bring him. He isn't that age." *He's older.*

Her mother returned to filling the egg rolls, but paying close attention to her daughter. "He's well known? So he's a famous wizard, is he? Not Harry?"

Infamous is more like it. "No, I already told you it's not Harry. Sebastian's a brilliant wizard, really brilliant in Potions, Defense, and he creates his own spells from scratch." There were so few things she could actually tell her mother about her husband, finding a few to focus on was the best she could do.

"I'm sure we'll love him when we meet him. Our only contacts in your world are the Weasleys, and those nice Aurors who came to help us in July." Her mother faltered slightly at this last reference. She and her husband hadn't discussed their experiences much with Hermione since that day, saying they would prefer to put it in the past. Hermione wondered how much in the past it really was, or if they didn't want to worry her, so they glossed over the deeper ramifications. Since she didn't want to pry and could do nothing about it, Hermione preferred to push that niggling question to the back of her mind and come back to it when there was more time to deal with it. She was already emotionally tapped out.

"Yes, well. I'll have to discuss a visit with him. We'll see if we can get together with you before too much longer. Dad said you were talking about going to Majorca."

"So the building's empty? When do you want to go over?" Harry asked after Hermione explained what her research had brought up. It was late the next morning, and Hermione had been up for several hours, but the boys were only just getting around to breakfast at Headquarters.

"I did a fly-by in my Animagus form this morning," Hermione told him, pouring herself another glass of apple juice. "The building is definitely abandoned, but appears inhabited by vagrants. It's not in great condition. I'm not sure how safe it's going to be or where we want to start. Even worse, I found references that they intend to pull the building down in a matter of weeks, so we can't put the search off for long."

"Sounds like we'll have to be careful, take plenty of precautions. We shouldn't wander around individually, and we can't take the time to huddle up." Ron popped a bite of toast into his mouth.

"I was thinking maybe I should try getting in through a broken window and check it out better," Hermione said. This was dangerous ground knowing the way Harry felt about any of them being caught out alone. She had been considering options for the past twelve hours though and hadn't come up with anything better. "In my Animagus form I wouldn't have to land on unsafe floors, and I could give it a check around to see if there are any seriously dangerous places we need to stay away from."

Harry considered her words. "I don't like the idea of you going in there alone, but no one can know that we're headed there, and as you've already visited in your Animagus form. . . . If Ron and I were Disillusioned and stood outside the building while you checked things out, to keep a look out, we might be OK."

"That's still a little iffy, to my way of thinking," Ron said. "But I can't come up with anything better."

Hermione nodded to herself. "I wouldn't go inside without you keeping watch, but we can probably work around my being seen there too. I'll see what I can come up with."

The boys agreed.

It was late the next morning when the Disillusioned Harry, Ron, and Hermione Apparated to a side street near the defunct orphanage. They found each other at the agreed meeting spot quickly enough and made their way across the street and down the block. Ron took up position near a fire hydrant, Harry around the side of the building by another entrance. Hermione focused and changed forms, choosing to stay Disillusioned for her flight as extra assurance that she wouldn't be detected by wizard or Muggle.

She flew up and around the building, locating a broken window on the second floor and darting into the building. The rooms were dark and dirty from disuse, and there were still darker spots on the wall from smoke damage. It was clear the room had been inhabited recently, most likely by vagrants, she figured from the pile of bedding in a corner. In her bird form she didn't have the ability to smell as she did in her human form, but looking at the pile of excrement in one corner of the hallway, she decided that was an advantage.

There were sections of the building that had been burned, but barring a room or two, the damage looked mostly cosmetic to Hermione. She noticed people still lived near those areas, so she figured they must be fairly safe.

She flew up and down the halls, checking out rooms, shifting back to her regular shape to gain access to a few closed doors and casting Muggle-repelling charms every hundred feet or so. She hoped anyone in the building would be forced out so she, Harry and Ron could enter without worry about running into some of the less savory inhabitants. By the time she completed her rounds, she counted thirty vagrants in the building. The vagrants were already moving toward the outside doors when she flew back out the window and landed near Harry's post.

She changed back into her regular form yet again. "Give it a few more minutes to ensure the Muggles all get out, then we can go in. There's little serious damage from the fire...mostly just one or two rooms...so we can go in and get started."

"You sure it's safe? There seem to be a lot of people coming out of the building." Harry's whispered answer allowed her to pinpoint his exact location.

"I'm sure. I cast some Muggle-repelling charms so we'll have to give them time to work. Let's grab Ron and go talk layout, then we can return and get down to business."

"Good idea. I could use some lunch too."

Hermione smiled to herself, but held back an audible laugh. If Harry was hungry, Ron would be all but whining about being kept from his lunch for so long. She heard his foot shuffle against the cement, and they headed to the area where Ron was stationed.

They Apparated back to the same location an hour later. Hermione changed back into her bird form and took a quick trip through the building, verifying that the Muggles had all left the building. She smiled when she changed back to her true form, landing near the spot from which she had left. "All clear," she said in a low voice.

"Let's go then," Harry said.

She headed toward the front door, casting charms on the front windows so anyone outside the building would see only emptiness inside. The other windows faced away from the street and were unlikely to be a problem. Once they were past the reception area, the three of them returned to visibility and looked around.

"What do you say? Start here and work our way through the building a floor at a time?" Ron asked.

"Yeah. That seems best." Harry pulled out his wand and cast a trip alarm on the outside door. "That should let us know if anyone else comes into the building. With the Muggle-detraction charms, anyone coming in now is sure to be magic. Best be aware if that happens."

"Right." Hermione was pleased Harry was thinking ahead. "Let's start in the room on the left. I think it was the dining room."

They carefully searched the first floor one room at a time, spreading out as they entered each room. Each took time to cast the magic-revealing charm Bill had taught them, then moved on to the next room when it was done. It took more than an hour to complete the first floor. They moved on to the second before they came across any of the serious fire damage.

From one of the classrooms below, they had seen holes in the ceiling, fire damage, water damage, signs of smoke everywhere, even the lingering scent of smoke here and there. Of course, catching it over the smell of human waste wasn't always easy, and most of the time they tried avoiding smelling anything. When they stood in the doorway of the room where the fire was reported to have started, however, the damage looked much more significant.

"I can see why they didn't bother to repair this place," Ron said as he stared at the jagged, half burnt walls, the holes caused by firefighter's axes, the white powder that still lingered from fire extinguishers. The windows were all broken out and bits of garbage, both burned, and those which had blown in through the windows since, were spread around the room.

"Yeah. The building's old enough, and the damage is pretty significant," Hermione admitted. "Some of the dorm rooms upstairs were damaged pretty heavily too." She pointed to large holes in the floorboards. "I wouldn't trust myself to walk across any part of that floor."

"Dorm rooms. We are so stupid! I can't believe I didn't think of it." Ron slapped his forehead and turned to Hermione and Harry. "Where is it that Riddle hung that rabbit? In the dining room? No, in the dorm room. We should have started there, mate. It's got to be there."

"Ron, you're a genius! Let's go check them out." Harry was already halfway to the stairwell when Hermione turned to join him.

They started with the dorms that were in good condition, making their way slowly toward the burned-out room above the fire. When they reached the edge of the burnt-out room nearly two hours later, Harry looked at Hermione. "I don't think I want anyone walking across that floor. Who knows if it's stable."

"Yeah, but we can't leave without checking the room, and neither of us can cast spells in our Animagus forms."

"She's right. Mate, what are we going to do?" Ron asked.

Harry deliberated for a moment, then nodded to himself. "One of you cast a Levitation Charm on me, hold it and move me around the room while I cast the revealing spell. When you get tired, we can trade off. We have to know if it's in there before we go on."

"Are you nutters? Do you know how draining that is?" Ron asked. "We could drop you."

"Do you have a better idea?" Harry asked.

Hermione knew she didn't. After a long moment, it was clear neither of the boys had a better idea either. "Fine then, I'll cast it first. Ron, when I nod at you, you cast your own spell, and I'll hand him off to you."

"Too bad we didn't bring our brooms," Ron said.

"Good idea. We'll do that when we bring Bill back to undo any wards on it. If we find it." Harry pulled out his wand and nodded to Hermione.

Hermione cast *Wingardium Leviosa* and directed Harry slowly around the room.

She had traded off with Ron twice and over an hour had passed when Harry finished his circuit of the room and she took over again. Having only one of them able to cast the charm meant the work was going painstakingly slow. All the magical energy they had expended had exhausted them all. She lifted Harry near the half-burnt rafters so he could continue casting his charms. When he shot the spell at an area of the ceiling that was untouched by scorch marks, a green haze settled around the area.

"Guess that's it." Harry smiled with relief. "We better get Bill over here."

"Tonight's too late. It'll be dark soon, and using light will draw too much attention to ourselves." Hermione was almost glad for the respite, though she wanted to get it over and done with.

"Right. First thing tomorrow then. Back to Headquarters?" The three teens grinned at each other and Disapparated from the building.

A big thanks to my beta, countrymouse, for her suggestions and corrections. Thanks to Angel Mischa for her corrections on the chapter. Also, thanks to all my reviewers for their feedback--you guys are the best.

39: Injuries and Discoveries

Chapter 39 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 39: Injuries and Discoveries

Bill had to be to work at nine in the morning, so he asked the trio to meet him at the abandoned orphanage at six-thirty. Ron and Harry were all but rubbing their eyes when they arrived with Hermione, brooms in hand.

"If I'd known we were going for a flying lesson, I'd have scheduled this for the weekend," Bill said when he saw what they'd brought with them. His scars had now healed so the puckered skin had smoothed out and only the shiny pink scar stretched across his face. While the scar might have been horrifying on someone else, mixed with his earring and ponytail, he looked cooler than ever. Hermione imagined it wouldn't take more than a scowl to unnerve someone who didn't know him.

"You'll understand when you see the room where we're going," Harry said.

Bill followed them into the building and up the stairs. "This place is a dump," Bill said as they reached the third floor. He was holding his nose, causing Hermione to wonder if he had picked up extra sensitive smell when he had been exposed to the werewolf saliva a couple months earlier. Then again, the place was rank. "You think Voldemort really left bits of, er, yeah, those artifact things here?"

Hermione eyed him, certain he knew what the artifacts were. Still, he didn't ask for confirmation, and she was just as glad. "Not since the orphans moved out of the building. Probably back when the place was safe for habitation. And smelled a bit better."

When they reached the doorway to the dorm room, Bill looked around at the destruction and whistled. "I see why you brought the brooms. Hand that over here, Harry, then someone point me in the right direction."

In a moment, Bill had mounted Harry's broom, and he and Ron were hovering near the site Harry had outlined. Ron cast a shielding spell, and Bill began work on the wards while Harry and Hermione watched from the doorway.

The process took longer than Hermione had expected, and from time to time there were small explosions, bits of smoke and sparks that hit Ron's shield, then glanced away. Hermione was glad they were more or less behind the shield as well, so the sparks didn't head toward herself and Harry.

After the better part of an hour, Bill paused and looked at Ron, who had sweat trickling down his face. "You'll have to trade off with Hermione. You're getting tired and I can't have you let go of the shield. There are some nasty buggers on this thing."

"But Hermione hates brooms," Ron said. "She's a menace on them."

"I'll go up instead," Harry offered.

"No, Hermione's charm work is better, and you know it." Bill gave her a piercing look. "She'll have to get over her fear of flying, for the moment at least."

Ron brought his broom back over and dismounted, handing it to Hermione, who felt as though she were shaking all over. She had never liked brooms, wished never to mount one again, but it appeared she had little choice. She really wished she could use her magic while in her Animagus form and determined to research into whether it was actually possible or not.

Steeling herself for the task, Hermione mounted the broom and focused on what she wanted it to do. It took her twice the time to traverse the distance as it had Ron, and she didn't make it in a straight shot, weaving up and down somewhat, but she made it there. White knuckled. Barely breathing.

"Relax, Hermione. It's a broom, not a bludger." Bill looked at her with a mix of amusement and concern.

She took a deep breath, determined to succeed at this. If she could all but command the winds as a bird, surely she could stay on a broom for a few minutes. "I'll be fine. Really." She rolled her shoulders and worked at loosening her muscles, then focused on the spot of the rafters where Bill had been working and lifted her wand to cast the spell.

Once her attention was on her task, the broom hovered more smoothly, no longer weaving around with her nerves. Bill's attention returned fully to the wards he was removing as sparks flew.

An interminable amount of time passed, and Hermione began to appreciate Bill's endurance. He seemed barely winded by the intense work he was doing, while she felt out of breath and worn out in a matter of minutes. Keeping her focus on the rafters, she flexed her shoulder muscles and wished her legs weren't going numb from holding onto the broom as he slowly peeled back the layers of wards and curses on the item.

With one last muttered counter-curse, an explosion of colored sparks blasted them both, knocking Hermione from her broom and sending her end-over-end. She felt her

back hit the floor, pushing the air from her lungs. The floorboard cracked and gave way as her head went down through the gaping hole in the floor. As she flipped toward her stomach, falling to the floor below, she instinctively changed into a bird to stop her fall and caught the air, flying away from the falling debris. Though her flight was somewhat erratic, she flew back up the hole to land beside the boys who were calling out her name.

When she changed back to her usual form, she could feel a haze of pain surrounding her and wished she could just pass out.

Bill swore and rushed the few feet between them, landed next to her and dismounted his broom. He turned her around, beginning a diagnostic spell. "That was wicked! When did you learn to do that?"

"June. I think I hurt my back." Pain radiated from the spot where she had hit the floor, and she felt something wet and sticky trailing down one hip. She slumped, holding onto the door jamb to stay semi-upright.

Ron and Harry both exclaimed over her injury when Bill pulled her shirt over her head to expose her bloodied back. Bill had to shoo them away so he could have some space. "Looks like it; but don't worry, I know a lot of medical spells." He cast a cleansing charm, then another to prevent infection and began repairing the skin and tissue damage. "So, I'm guessing you're unregistered?"

"Yeah, it'll have to wait until the war's over." Hermione appreciated that he was trying to keep her mind off of what he was doing, but she couldn't focus on anything but managing the pain right now. To top things off, she could feel Severus's worry about her and didn't have the energy to send back reassurances.

"Can't blame you for that. It could come in handy sometime."

When she was back in one piece, Bill ran his wand down her exposed back, murmuring another spell Hermione recognized as a different diagnostic spell than the first. He paused, taking in a deep breath, as if surprised, then pinpointed the spot that still hurt on her back and cast one more healing spell Hermione had never heard before. There was a terrible, sharp pain, causing her to cry out, then heat radiated from the tip, and the pain melted away to a dull ache.

Standing straight again, Hermione tested her muscles and ran a hand over her skin. She felt distinctly uncomfortable in only her bra in front of the three males now that she wasn't focused on her injury. "It feels completely better."

Bill picked up her shirt, cleaned and repaired it, and handed it back to her. "Yeah, you broke a rib, cut yourself up pretty good and damaged your kidney. Fixed all of that, but it wouldn't hurt to have a Healer look it over if you have more pain tonight." Bill wiped a hand over his face. "You three are going to be the death of me yet."

"That was quick wand work," Ron said, clearly impressed. "Where did you learn those spells?"

"It was necessary. Working in the catacombs it isn't always convenient or something we want to announce to the world. Learning basic healing charms came in handy." A funny look came into his eyes as he looked at Hermione, as if seeing her for the first time. "But you really should see a Healer, Hermione. You never know what residual effects something like that might have. It could cause far-reaching complications and you need to think of more than yourself now."

Hermione smiled reassuringly. "I feel great, thanks. If I have any other pain, I'll see someone. Did we get the comb, then?"

"What makes you think it's the comb?" Ron asked.

"Space requirements...it's pretty tight up there. Is it the cup instead?"

"Don't know. Is it safe to touch now?" Harry asked Bill.

"Yeah. I got them all."

"Accio comb." Harry held out a hand and a silver metal object slapped into his hand.

Fascinated, Hermione peered at the object, the diamonds winking at her along the top as if they were newly set. She reached out a finger and ran it along the cool metal. "Can you take a closer look at it Bill; make sure it's got the same signature."

"If it doesn't, someone went to an awful lot of work to protect it," Ron said, taking his turn to handle it.

"It's hardly a trinket," Hermione pointed out.

"Yeah, but who would hide something that valuable where it might be destroyed by Muggles if he planned to come back for it?"

"No Muggle could have gotten to it with the wards on it." Harry took the comb back. "And no normal wizard would waste that much effort when a Gringott's vault would be just as safe. Safer actually, since we couldn't have gotten to it in the vault."

Bill paid no attention to the chatter around him, taking the comb from Harry and casting a couple spells on it. "It's the same, and it looks like we got everything. The only things left is the, er, thing you neutralized in the locket."

"You know exactly what it is, don't you?" Hermione asked. Too many times now he had changed his sentence half-way through. He had to know what it was.

"Not if you don't confirm it. Which reminds me, I have some time before I have to get going. Want an extra hand on your shielding spell? Hermione really shouldn't be doing anything that serious today after the shielding she already did."

"Ron held the same spell for nearly as long as I did," Hermione pointed out.

"Yes, but your circumstances are different." Bill gave her a knowing look, making her wonder what she was supposed to know. "I've got a few minutes yet."

Harry grinned at him and gave him the directions of where to Apparate.

When they reached the clearing, Bill forbade Hermione from participating in the shielding spell. "You've been hurt. Even if you feel fine, it's taken a lot out of you, so you aren't casting this spell. Just stand by and watch this time...from a distance. Seriously, Hermione."

She wanted to whine, complain, and stamp her feet, which convinced her she must not be back to full strength, so she glowered and accepted his decision.

Twenty minutes later, the bit of soul fled the comb, and all three men found themselves flat on their backs. Hermione sat much further back and felt only the flash of dissipating magic. It was incredible to watch the magic going on from a distance though, being able to study the changing colors and shifting boundaries, rather than focus on only her little part of the process.

Before Bill Disapparated to work, he again encouraged Hermione to see a Healer. She smiled and watched him go with no intention to see anyone.

What's going on? Are you all right? Do I need to come to you?

The diary notified her of the newest entry before Hermione left the clearing at Godric's Hollow. As it was clear Severus was anxious about her well-being, she answered it the moment she reached her room.

I'm fine. We had quite an adventure; I'll have to give you the details later, but Bill was there and healed my wound. I'm as good as new now. I'll be by to work on the potion this afternoon. One more down, two more to go.

As a general rule, Hermione preferred not to mention the Horcruxes in her diary, and even when she did, she kept it indirect. If Bill Weasley could break wards as strong as the ones on the comb, someone else who was determined could surely access the diaries. There was enough damning stuff in them without giving the game away completely. Despite what she had told Bill, she did feel a low ache in her back still, but figured with her husband being so worried about her, maybe she would convince him to give her a back rub. And wouldn't that be nice?

She put the diary away and continued on up to the attic where they planned some silent defense practice.

"So what's our next stop?" Harry asked Ron and Hermione as the three of them split a celebratory pizza at Grimmauld Place that afternoon.

"I've been wracking my brain, and the only other site I can think of is Hogwarts," Ron said around a mouth of food. "But the diary is already connected to that."

"Borgin and Burkes, maybe? He did learn about most of these artifacts because of his job there," Hermione said before taking another large bite of pizza. Practice that morning had drained her far faster than usual, which she would have attributed to her shield work that morning, except Ron seemed hardly affected, and he held the shield much longer if you counted the Horcrux destruction. That Harry was unaffected wasn't surprising since he didn't hold the shield at all; and when considering sheer power, he had far more at his command than either Ron or herself.

"What do we do, just go in and start casting spells?" Harry asked. He poured her more soda and slid another slice of the no-cheese pizza onto her plate when she indicated she'd like another. "What's with your appetite lately? I still can't believe you ordered that."

She shrugged and turned it for a bite. The thought of all that greasy cheese had been more than her stomach would handle, but the pizza was tasty this way. "Well, we can hardly search every inch of Hogwarts. Even with a phalanx of house-elf assistance, it would still take months."

"Then we have to either expand our choices of locations, or reduce them," Ron said. "It's unlikely he would place the cup in any of the common rooms, except maybe Slytherin. And I'd guess the Headmaster's office is off limits. I'd love to find it in his first flat or something, but we need to be more realistic."

"Great, that should be just wonderful." Hermione took another bite of pizza and hoped the boys were thinking more clearly than she was at the moment. She decided she could use a nap before meeting her husband at the cottage.

When Hermione gave Severus the details of the Horcrux chase and destruction at their cottage later that afternoon, she was surprised to see how upset he was. Yes, she had been hurt, but she was fine; Bill had healed her. She hadn't mentioned falling through the floor and having to use her Animagus form to keep from falling through the second story, no reason to really upset Severus, especially when he didn't know of her alternate shape.

"So Bill healed me and I'm fine. Other than some lingering discomfort in my lower back, I feel great."

"You're having lower back pain? Turn around; I'll check it out." Severus was so earnest, so anxious she couldn't argue with him, though Hermione thought he was going completely overboard. When had her husband turned into a fuss-budget?

She turned and slid out of her Muggle t-shirt so he could see the wound site more clearly. That reminded her that she had disrobed as much in front of the boys that morning. She decided to keep that detail to herself.

"You should have seen a Healer."

She felt his wand tip running along her skin, his fingers tracing the edges of the wound and realized there must be some residual scarring or bruising left. "You and Bill and your one-track minds. I feel fine."

"What was that about Bill?" His voice grew hard, anxious and worried all at once.

Realizing she shouldn't have mentioned that Bill encouraged her to see a Healer, Hermione kept her groan back. It wasn't like her husband to be so over protective, but now she had let it slip, she knew he wouldn't drop the subject until she told him more. "It was odd, he said I was fully healed and should be fine, but he kept telling me to go see a Healer. He cast one of those diagnostic spells and then turned all mother-hen."

"Which diagnostic spell did he use?"

Hermione told him, then waited while he cast it himself. There were several long seconds of silence while her soul mate just sat there, silently caressing her lower back. She glanced back over her shoulder and saw his eyes glued to the area he was touching. "What, do I have cancer or something?" she joked.

"No, no, nothing like that. You're perfectly normal for someone in your situation. It looks like he did a great job of healing you. Just to be safe, you should take some time off from the more dangerous hexes in your practice with the boys." He ran his hands down her back, then reached around her to lean her back against his chest, one hand coming to rest on her hip, the other splayed across her belly almost possessively.

In my situation? But she didn't have time to pursue that comment because he started to move his hands over her.

"So you wanted a massage, then?" His voice was a low purr in her ear.

"That would be heavenly."

When Hermione was asleep that night, Severus cast a few more diagnostic spells and ran his wand along the length of her body, seeking out other possible injuries. Everything checked out fine, so he cast the one spell again over her stomach and marveled. Already he could imagine her womb stretching, cradling their baby and felt a tug of excitement at the prospect.

When he had seen the results of the spell earlier in the day, he had considered letting her in on the secret of Bill's odd behavior. He knew he should, and that it would come back to blow up in his face, but he knew she would be very upset with him and didn't want to deal with it at the moment.

Sometimes honesty was not the best policy.

While she had taken an afternoon nap after her massage had turned into lovemaking, he had snuck down to the potion lab. After starting a batch of prenatal vitamin potion, he thoroughly dug through the ingredients he kept on hand, removing anything that might pose a danger for her. He would pass off the vitamin potion as a basic precaution when he directed her to take it every morning.

Next, he checked the upcoming schedule for the Felix Felicis and determined a few spots where he would handle the potion. There was no point risking his growing family unnecessarily.

AN: So Severus's potions have done their work, but Hermione still suspects nothing. That won't last long. More interesting still, Bill knows she's pregnant. What will come of that secret?

Thanks to my beta, countrymouse, for her help with this chapter. Also, a bit thanks to our Admins for all of their time and efforts to make this site what it is. A special thanks to RobisonRocket who made the final corrections on this chapter.

My apologies to the reader who didn't want Hermione to get pregnant. I spent a good amount of time weighing the pros and cons of her getting pregnant before I had Voldemort give the order, but decided to go this direction for several reasons. I hope you'll forgive me.

40: Sweet And Sour Revelations

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Chapter 40: Sweet and Sour Revelations

A few days later, Harry was sitting on his bed sorting through the items from the box Dumbledore had left him, when Hermione knocked on his bedroom door. Ron was working for his brothers yet again, and Hermione and Harry had recently finished up working on Occlumency with a couple of the Order members. Lunch was past due as far as Hermione was concerned, since she hadn't had much of an appetite that morning, but she stood in the doorway, allowing Harry a few minutes to himself, unwilling to interrupt the silent mourning that surrounded him.

He had been shooting her strange looks all day, but hadn't brought up whatever it was that was bothering him. Now he sat with a couple of the metal objects from Dumbledore's office set out around the bed, along with a box of vials. The Pensieve sat on a table in one corner, filled with shimmering memories, and another couple vials stood empty nearby. A box sat behind them, several more vials still nestled inside it. A few photographs were stacked on the corner of the table...wizarding photographs, she figured, judging from the way the people in them seemed to be moving. From the doorway she was unable to tell who occupied the pictures.

When she looked back over at Harry, he was studying her, his green eyes searching her. She returned his gaze, but he said nothing, simply turned his eyes toward the Pensieve and gave it a long, considering look. When he turned his face back toward hers, the furrows in his brow had smoothed out and his mood shifted. "I'm starved. Want to go get something to eat?"

The abrupt change surprised Hermione, but sensing he wasn't ready to talk about whatever was on his mind, she nodded. "I'm thinking Chinese. I could really go for some Moo Shu chicken and egg rolls."

He smiled. "It's the third time this week you've had a taste for Chinese."

Hermione shrugged. He was right, of course. Lately her palate had been acting rather strange. She couldn't face the fried mushrooms and tomatoes at breakfast, had felt off by dinner most nights, eating little, but ate a sensible lunch. And while she had followed her husband's advice about cutting back on the most dangerous hexes, she still felt more tired than usual. She had passed it off as her body still recovering from her injury, but as the weariness seemed to set in before that day, she hadn't quite convinced herself. She wondered if she was coming down with something.

"That's OK, I could go for something hot and spicy right now." He stood and set a vial of shimmering white memory that had been sitting on his lap into the box on the table by the Pensieve and looked thoughtful as he fingered it, then turned away. A half smile forming on his face as he looked at her. "Have a good evening with Sebastian last night?"

"Yes. You, Ron, and the twins hung out with Viktor, didn't you? He goes home today, right?"

"Yeah. He mentioned you; said to say goodbye."

"Thanks."

Harry looked uncomfortable. "I have to tell you, he didn't say so, but I don't think, or rather, I got the impression that, well . . . You probably won't be hearing from him much anymore."

Torn between being amused at his discomfort, and a bit of wistfulness at the end of her friendship with Viktor, she nodded. "Yeah, I had the feeling."

Harry nodded in return, then turned back to the door. Unsure what to make of his behavior, Hermione followed him out of the room and down the hall. There was a good Chinese place they both liked only a few blocks away. It looked totally Muggle, but was actually owned by a witch and wizard. The first time Harry, Hermione, and Ron had shown up there, the sweet old Chinese woman recognized them and offered Harry a free lunch.

He had declined, but she had given the trio their drinks for free. Over the past few weeks the restaurant had become a favorite for them. The fact that they accepted both Muggle and wizarding currency made things much simpler for the trio as they didn't have to worry about which they had on hand at the moment.

The summer heat was waning, but certainly hadn't gone for good as they left Grimmauld Place and headed west to the small restaurant. Neither Harry nor Hermione spoke, both lost in their own thoughts. Having exhausted herself with thoughts of where the next Horcrux might be located, she turned her mind back toward her husband's strange behavior. His secretive behavior was making her ever more wary. Not that she didn't have her own secrets. She still hadn't told him about her Animagus form, nor did she plan to tell him anytime soon. There was no reason to keep it a secret, but still, she kept it to herself. Who knew if it would come in handy some day?

The restaurant had red and gold painted walls, a black ceiling and light fixtures hanging low over each table that shone like colored jewels. Mrs. Chan greeted them by name at the door and showed them to a table in the corner. "We're always so glad to have you," she said as she handed them menus.

"We love coming here." Harry flipped his menu open as the woman walked away to get their drinks.

After Mrs. Chan had taken their orders and brought their usual drinks out, the two friends were left with nothing to distract them. Harry played with his straw in his drink, giving it a swirl, swishing the ice, avoiding Hermione's eyes.

"So, it looks like there were some other memories in the box besides the ones we saw." Hermione didn't want to pry, but she was definitely curious about them. "Anything

useful in our search?"

"No," he shook his head and met her eyes. "There were some great memories from his time with my parents. I spent hours watching them over and over. And there were a few others." He took a swallow of his drink, then looked at her again "About Sebastian, you said the glamour changed his age. You didn't say whether it aged him up or down."

She blinked in surprise at his segue. "Er, no. I didn't. I thought it would be obvious.*'Distract, redirect, prevaricate, but don't tell him the truth.* Hermione had no idea how he had come up with this line of thought. Her comment on age adjustment had been intended to confuse the issue, not be a tip off. "Tell me about the other memories."

"Mixed in with the memories of my parents was a memory of Dumbledore taking a vow from," he looked around and dropped his voice, "the person you have a similar arrangement with."

Hermione leaned closer. He had seen Severus' vow to the Headmaster? Even she had never seen it, only knew it had happened. What he said next surprised her even more.

"There was also, in the same vial, a memory from last summer when this person went to Dumbledore and told him of their second vow. The one that brought about the events of last spring." He looked up when Mrs. Chan brought their plates of food over. There were the inevitable pleasantries and thanks to pass around before the woman left them again.

Hermione had been anxious to get back to the conversation through the lengthy polite chatter and barely waited until the woman turned her back on them before diving back into the conversation. "So you believe him, then?"

He pursed his lips and opened the chop sticks wrapped in paper beside his plate. "I'm never going to like him, Hermione. I still hate him for the way he treated me and my family. I still think he's a sadistic bastard, and I'm not sure I fully trust him, but I know what I saw in those memories. I barely slept last night trying to put it all together."

"I hardly expect you and Severus to become bosom buddies. Besides, if it appeared you didn't hate his guts, his life would be forfeit. We all have our roles to play." Hermione spooned some rice onto her plate and began to load the pile with meat and vegetables.

"Severus is it?" Harry didn't so much as blink in surprise when he asked the question. In fact, he looked almost as though he had expected her to use the man's first name.

It was all she could do to keep from cursing aloud at her slip of the tongue. Instead she gave him what she hoped was a bland look. "I've been in regular contact with him lately, you know. He's not a total bastard when I get him alone." When he gave her an incredulous look, she amended. "He can still be petty and spiteful at times, but he keeps those to a minimum with me. He's even given me a few tips on making my, er, special defense project come out better."

Harry knew she was referring to the Felix Felicis potion and lifted an eyebrow. "Really? How is that coming, anyway?" She wasn't sure if he had been relieved or disappointed when she had told him he and Ron couldn't go to the secret-kept location of the potions lab she had found. He asked about her progress regularly, though, so she assumed he was more than mildly curious.

Hermione swallowed a bite of rice and veggies. "Nearly finished with the second set. That makes enough for thirty-two doses by the end of next week if we don't halve them into twelve-hour doses. I'm preparing for the third set of batches now. I'll probably begin it in a few days. I just need to double check the timing to be sure nothing will interfere."

Harry scooped a bite of food onto his chopsticks and slid it into his mouth. After two more bites, several loud cracks of Apparition filled the air. There were screams of Muggles, the sounds of running, things falling on the floor. Voices casting hexes right and left filled the air.

Harry and Hermione were up, their wands in their hands, and charging around the partial wall that separated them from the rest of the patrons before they had time to think.

"Expelliarmus!" Hermione called out when she saw someone in a long black robe pointing a wand at a Muggle customer. The wand flew to her hand, and the man turned to face her, his skeletal white Death Eater mask sending shivers down her spine. Her heart rate increased and she wished she had time to summon help from the Order.

A flash of colored light speeded toward her from another masked intruder, and she barely had time to put up a shield to protect herself. A scream came from a Muggle woman as a third Death Eater...a female voice this time...cast *Crucio* on her. Mr. And Mrs. Chan emerged from the kitchen, wands in hand, and began tossing their own spells.

Harry dueled with a fourth black-cowled form while Hermione turned back to the first a moment too late to subdue him magically. She flinched, but had no time to evade as the man hurled himself at her, landing on top of her.

Terror clawed at her throat as she hit the floor, squished between the man's weight and the hard tiles below them. Before she could begin to scream, the man yelled out and rolled away from her. She had barely enough time to raise her wand and begin to cast a spell before another black-clad figure arrived across the room from her. Cursing to herself at the addition of another Death Eater, she focused on her spell.

Mr. Chan yelled something in Chinese, and he and his wife Disapparated. Hermione finished binding the man across from her, then turned, her wand drawn as the female Death Eater began to cast a spell in her direction.

"Come here." Hermione turned in surprise as she recognized Severus' voice, then after a slight squeezing sensation, found herself standing at his side. He had not moved to her position, she had moved to his without a clue as to how it happened. "That is enough!" he called over the din.

Harry's voice screamed out in agony as he was hit by the Cruciatus Curse, and Snape sent a stinging hex at the man who had cast it. "I said *enough*. The ones you have come for are gone, and that brat is not for you. His life belongs to the Dark Lord."

The others turned toward him and the woman tugged her mask off, looking Hermione up and down. "She doesn't look like much to me. How you could want that chit when you could have me..."

"I owe her something for the hex she cast at me," the man still bound in ropes on the ground interrupted, obviously feeling his claim came first. "It was wandless magic at that. Don't know how a *Mudblood* managed it." His sneer was clear, even though his face was still more than half covered.

Hermione stood, looking around her, trying to take it all in, considering her options, her reaction, the best behavior. She needed to appear submissive to Severus, his pet, his toy. And Harry was going to blow up when he saw it. Sending him a desperate look; asking for his understanding, she looked back at Severus, who had turned his attention to her. They didn't touch, her arms hung by her side, his crossed over his chest in his standard professorial intimidation technique as he surveyed the mess around them.

He reached out and stroked a long finger down her cheek. "Wandless magic, my pet? However did you manage such a feat?"

She shook her head slightly, but leaned into his touch. "It wasn't my magic that protected me when he jumped on me." Her upper back still ached from her impact with the floor.

"What's going on here? Who are you?" a Muggle man with a gash on his forehead and his body wrapped in cords asked from his place under a table.

Severus sighed as though he had been inconvenienced. There were at least twenty Muggles in the building, and all exits had been blocked to prevent their escape. "You have created quite a mess," he said to his compatriots. "And you have disturbed my pet. Everyone in this building is going to have to have their memories altered, and with

the mess we've got here, and the escaped targets, the Aurors are likely to appear any minute. The Dark Lord is not going to be pleased."

"First the witch is going to pay for that blast," the Death Eater said again, coming forward. His wand pointed at Hermione. A coil of ropes lay where he had been, and Hermione knew the woman had released the man.

"No, she isn't. The Dark Lord wants me to continue my relationship with her for the time being. You were hurt by my spell because you bothered her, which could have damaged my long-term goals." Severus's eyes flashed, and he shot a stinging hex at the man. "That should teach you to leave what is mine alone. Now I'm going to have to modify her memory as well. Such bother."

"What do you mean, your pet?" Harry shouted at Severus, lifting himself from the floor. "What's wrong with you, Hermione? Snape's a traitor, not our friend. Get away from him!"

The female Death Eater lifted her wand and shot ropes out of it to wrap Harry up. "Don't need you going anywhere right now." She turned to Severus, her eyes excited. "Let's take him with us."

Slashing a hand through the air in denial, Severus cut her off. "Not yet. The Dark Lord will decide the time and place. Until then, we will be patient as he has directed. It's really too bad Weasley wasn't with them. Him you could have had...it's not like his family would have missed one less; there are so many of them." He sneered.

"You bastard!" Harry shouted.

"And do you always follow his directions?" The woman pushed the now bound Harry over onto the floor where he landed on his rear, then cracked his head against the corner of a chair. She then slinked over, challenging him with the defiant lift of her chin and direct gaze. "Have you completed your job and gotten her with child?" She shot a spell at Hermione which created a red cloud which hovered for a long moment, then turned turquoise.

Severus smirked. "As you can see, I have." His eyes trailed over to Harry, and Hermione could feel the dread emanating from her husband, even through the shock of learning she was pregnant. How did she get pregnant when she was on the potion? How long had he known about this? The Dark Lord ordered it? Why didn't Severus ever tell her? She blinked as though confused by the revelation, rather than feeling the betrayal that was shooting through her.

"So, Potter," Severus said after turning back to Harry, "now you know your friend, the one you've been panting over, and I have been lovers for several months. She loves me." He curled his lip at this comment and looked as though he thought her love ridiculous. "And she's going to have *my* child."

"No! You bastard; how dare you touch her!" Harry fought against his bindings while the others laughed at him.

Severus merely smirked, turned toward Hermione, tipping her face to him and kissed her briefly, as though to taunt the younger man. Hermione lifted her mouth to him, though allowing herself to look upset by Harry's reaction, even a tiny bit torn by his anger. That response, at least, was sincere, as she didn't know what to think of their situation, never mind Harry's take on it. Only minutes before he had been telling her he more or less trusted Severus...at least somewhat. Now he was calling him a traitor again? Her mind flew through the thoughts shooting at her even as she leaned into her husband's touch. It had only been hours since she had left his bed, but that hardly seemed to matter to the enchantment.

"Now, the four of you, Disapparate. I'll clean up the mess and join you at the Dark Lord's side later. There will be no hint of this destruction when I leave, only *Potter* will know the truth. And no one's really believed him in years. Even the dear, departed Headmaster brushed away his concerns about my activities with young Malfoy. You, Hestia, you get to tell our master about your failure to capture your prey. Stealth, not showmanship will win this war. If you had focused on the Chans instead of playing with the Muggles, you might have succeeded." He glared at all four of the other Death Eaters and they quickly disappeared.

"What are you going to do to us?" a woman huddled in a corner asked.

Severus ignored the woman, waved his wand at Harry, releasing him from his bonds and with a flick returned his wand to him. Another flick and a muttered spell cast a temporary numbing spell, presumably for the lump on Harry's head. "Please hold off on the hexing until we put things to rights here, would you?" he asked. "I'd really rather fix the mess those idiots caused before we get into more personal business." He turned to the first man, raising his wand at him.

Harry screamed, "No!" but when the bolt of light only released the man from his bonds, and a second repaired the cut on his forehead, Harry stood down.

Severus sent Harry a long-suffering look. "I understand you've been studying basic first aid. Please assist me in straightening this out. When everyone is patched up I'll Obliviate this whole encounter from their minds. Then we can talk."

Hermione moved forward, but Harry only stared in shock. "You're going to fix this?"

Severus's eyes narrowed. "Surely you don't think hurting innocent Muggles for no good reason falls within the bounds of my vow?"

"Er, no." Harry watched Hermione getting to work, and Severus face the next customer, then turned to assist.

Hermione made it clear to her husband through their emotional bond that she was incredibly angry at him, that she intended to let him know in no uncertain terms what she was angry about. She generated as much inner anger as she could while still speaking gently with the traumatized people in the restaurant.

In two minutes the room repairs were done, people were set back to rights, and after moving Harry and Hermione behind him, Severus had cast a general memory modification on the rest. "Shall we go?" he asked, turning back to Harry and Hermione.

"Yes, lets. The Shrieking Shack?" Hermione suggested, knowing it was the only private place she could think of where both men could go. It had the advantage of already having a reputation for strange screaming noises...so when she bit her husband's head off, no one would find the sound surprising.

Harry nodded in agreement, and the three of them stepped back into the alcove where Harry and Hermione had been eating. In the moment before they Disapparated, she heard the whoosh of Apparition as Aurors appeared.

AN: My apologies for both taking a long time to post this chapter, and for ending it here. I promise to have the next chapter in queue as soon as this one is validated. The expected sparks will fly as Hermione demands answers and offers threats.

Thanks to my many fabulous reviewers, my wonderful beta, countrymouse, and the dedicated Admins at this site. A special thanks to RobisonRocket for help with this chapter.

41: Coming To An Understanding

Chapter 41 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 41: Coming to An Understanding

Hermione had Apparated across longer distances before, but she hadn't had time for more than a bite of lunch before their little battle, and she was feeling a bit lightheaded. Add the drain of a post-adrenalin rush, and she collapsed when she, Harry and Severus Apparated into the Shrieking Shack. Severus reached out and caught her as she began to slump to the side. He banished the dirt and garbage around the bed in the corner and set her down on it. "Careful, my dear. You've had quite a scare. Are you all right? Did that oaf hurt you?"

Looking up at him, Hermione saw Harry staring at the two of them, his face tight, but not lifting his wand at Severus. She leaned back into the thin comforter, which still smelled moldy despite Severus's cleaning job, and moaned, rubbing her hands down her face. "What a day." She peeked an eye through her fingers at Harry. "You aren't hexing him." She tipped her head to the side. "Why aren't you hexing him?" She glared at her husband. "I'd like to hex him, if my head weren't spinning."

"You want me to hex your husband? I'd be happy to oblige, but I thought you'd prefer it if I didn't." Harry's face was stony with anger, his arms ramrod straight and ending in clenched fists.

"Ten points to Gryffindor for figuring it out, Mr. Potter." Severus didn't even look Harry's way, preferring to hover over his wife, murmuring a charm to determine if there was anything physically wrong with her. He didn't bother to ask why she wanted to hex him.

"I could change my mind and hex you anyway, just for spite," Harry said, galled by his old professor's snide comment.

"You could, but you won't." Severus finished the charm and tucked the tip of his wand behind Hermione's back and cast a spell to alleviate the pain and bruising from her fall. Then, apparently satisfied by the results, he smoothed Hermione's bangs back from her face and tucked a lock of fly-away hair behind her ear. "I'm beginning to think you aren't your father and may, in fact, turn out not to be a complete idiot after all." He stood and turned around to face Harry, who glowered all the more for the comment about his father.

Severus looked Harry over, keeping hold of his wand, but retaining it at his side where the threat was considerably less. "Considering the way you acted when we faced each other at the school last spring, and the things you yelled at me in the restaurant, I am curious to know why you haven't tried to hex me behind my back."

"Don't worry; I'm still tempted. Very tempted, in fact. The thought of you and Hermione having a child together makes my current decision to withhold my hexes rather difficult to follow, in fact. Not to mention the vomit factor."

Severus merely nodded his understanding, saying nothing.

Harry continued, "But please, give me a little credit. I could hardly appear to trust you in the restaurant after you've been keeping such a low profile. And I know if you're incapacitated I won't get any answers at all."

"So she has taught you something worthwhile this summer." The words might have been complimentary, but the delivery was not. "How long did it take you to figure out our true relationship? How much damage control are we going to have to do? And how did you get mixed up in all that in the first place?" He shot an irritated look at his wife, as though blaming her for an indiscretion.

That only made Hermione even angrier.

"Happy accident." Harry's voice was ironic. "We happen to love that restaurant. And your relationship with Hermione was confirmed when I saw the two of you together today, but I had a hint of it last night. Viktor referred to you as 'that Prince fellow' when we spoke last night. I hadn't heard the last name you were using before. You could say it was you who let too many hints slip. When I asked Hermione this morning if the glamour aged you up or down she gave me a non-answer...very telling, actually. Our Hermione prefers to misdirect or flat out refuse to answer rather than lie, though she does that creditably enough when necessary." He crossed his arms over his chest and glared. "I still hate you though, and I'll expect a full explanation soon."

"I owe you nothing, and what Hermione tells you will be up to her." Severus fingered his wand, but didn't lift it, though his face went thunder-dark. "My relationship with my wife is really none of your concern."

"As she's one of my best friends, it is very much my concern...not that I want the gory details, you can save that for someone with a stronger stomach than me. But I care if she's happy and, well, friends care."

Hermione decided to join the conversation. "Now that you've agreed to shake hands and hate each other like good sporting competitors, and I've decided to postpone hexing my husband for the next five minutes...though that could be rescinded at any moment...could I ask a question?" While they had their little chat, she had regained her head and sat up on the bed once again.

"Of course, my dear." Severus glared once more at Harry, then turned his full attention to his wife.

Hermione ground her teeth together at the placating tone of Severus' voice and reminded herself to stay calm. "Two questions. First, no second, then back to first." She ignored him when he rolled his eyes at her. "How in hell did I end up pregnant?"

Harry looked back and forth between them. "I think I'd better go. I don't want to get caught in the cross fire. And if no one has explained the birds and the bees to her yet, it won't be me."

"You'll get yours, Harry James Potter," Hermione said, narrowing her eyes at his joke; she was in no mood for it.

"Good idea, Potter. Oh, and if anyone asks, you hate my guts even worse than before and you and Hermione are at serious odds. In fact, perhaps she should spend a few days at her other residence as you've had a great row and don't want to see her now you know about me. Though perhaps you should be too angry with her to be able to talk about what angered you, even to any of the Order members. I'm not sure we're ready to unveil the relationship to all and sundry."

"Why would I pretend to hate her?" Harry asked.

"Because, you dunderhead, the whole point of my getting her pregnant in the first place was to alienate you two, to anger you and make you reckless and to off-balance you. Which means we'll have to show proof that you're about to go off the deep end, or something similar. She'll come to you later at Headquarters, maybe tomorrow, and you can work out what will be most convincing. In the meantime," Severus grabbed Hermione by the elbow and pulled her toward him, "come, my pet, we've much to discuss."

"You use that word one more time on me when you don't have to, and I'll make you *æunuch*," she said, glowering her best. She saw Harry flinch, but her husband only smirked, enraging her further.

"There's no time for that now." He sneered at Harry and Disapparated them both to the cottage door.

When the dizziness of Apparition faded away on the cottage walkway, Hermione hoped she wouldn't feel like this for the next eight months. "Great. Just great. Get your hands off me, you git." Hermione pulled away from him and stumbled toward the door.

"You don't have the strength for that after all those spells you cast. The pregnancy has taxed your system too much," Severus protested. "Sit down. Take a few minutes to regroup."

"Sod it. I don't want to see your face for at least the next nine months, maybe longer if you don't want it hexed." She slammed the door behind her and made her way through the cottage to the bathroom, where she sat on the side of the tub in a heap.

Pregnant. She was going to have a baby. She turned on the hot water in the tub and began filling it, her eyes welling with tears as she tried to make sense of the day's revelations.

A baby.

After using a spell to reheat the bathwater twice, the water cooled a third time. Hermione looked at the way her fingers and toes had wrinkled up. She was nowhere near ready to face her husband, but decided her digits would become unrecognizable if she waited any longer to get out.

Severus was no longer in the cottage, nor even near the estate. He had mentioned to that ghastly female Death Eater that he would return to the Dark Lord's side. She figured that must be where he was now. As he hadn't been tortured yet, she was confident his aims must have been reached...or at least that the monster he spied on believed it was so.

Over the past two hours, Hermione had reviewed the day's events dozens of times. She realized from the conversation among the Death Eaters that her pregnancy had been requested by the Dark Lord...to what end she didn't know. Harry's public response to the announcement had been perfect: shock, horror, betrayal. The fact that he had remained wary after the three of them were alone told her his public response hadn't been completely feigned, even if he had managed to keep hold of his temper.

She wished her pregnancy were as feigned as the split between Harry and herself. In the rapidly cooling water, she slid a hand over her belly and pressed it closer. How long before she could feel it move? It was already weakening her power...something she couldn't afford as the final battle drew near. She was going to need a trip to Flourish and Blotts for books on pregnancy as it was clear there were a few differences for witches and Muggles, though she hadn't exactly read any on Muggle pregnancy either. She was completely unprepared for this. She hated being unprepared for anything.

Pushing that thought away, she rose from the water and reached for a towel. After dressing, she had some fruit for a quick snack since she had basically skipped lunch all together. A few minutes later, she was walking through the back yard, surveying the garden and prioritizing the work that needed to be done next.

By the time Severus returned to the cottage hours later, she was thoroughly exhausted. Hermione had worked through the afternoon, passing over dinner to continue her work well into twilight. Still, her anger and resentment had only slightly abated.

"You're going to make yourself sick, skipping meals and working so hard."

Hermione didn't look up at her husband, focusing on the plants she was replanting instead. "Sometimes I hate having you in my head."

"Sometimes the feeling is mutual. I know you've been starving yourself for the past three hours, probably more, but I've only been aware of it that long. Killing our baby isn't going to make everything all better."

She tossed a handful of muddy weeds at him, hitting him dead in the chest, then stood shakily to her feet. He was right, but she wasn't about to admit it. "What do you care? You didn't even bother to discuss children with me. Don't you think I ought to have a right to decide whether or not I give birth? What if I never wanted a child? What if I especially never wanted *your* child?" She followed this question by tossing her small hand spade at him as well. His only response was to hold out a hand that magically redirected the spade to the side before it touched him. "Show off."

He turned, calling back over his shoulder. "I expect you in the kitchen in less than a minute to eat whatever Twinkie has put together for us."

Hermione muttered under her breath about where he could put his expectations and began gathering up the weeds she had discarded on the walkway as she worked around the garden. When the minute passed, she had an arm full of weeds and found herself standing in her kitchen beside the table full of food. Once again, she hadn't initiated the change of location, just found herself there in an instant.

Severus sat calmly at the table, a cup of tea in one hand. He lifted his wand and banished the weeds in her arms. "Go wash your hands for dinner."

"Make me." She clenched her hands and set them on her hips. "You are my husband, not my lord and master."

His fingers grew white on the handle of the cup, and he placed the cup onto the saucer with great care, his anger rolling through her, a compliment to the venom she was spewing back at him. "You are not my slave, you are the mother of my child, and as such, you will take care of yourself."

"I didn't *ask* to become the mother of your child!"

"It's too late to change it now. Accept it and start being responsible!" He gritted his teeth and stayed in his seat, though he looked ready to pounce any moment.

Wanting nothing so much as to hurt him, she narrowed her eyes. "I'm sure there are potions that could reverse this issue. If not, Muggles have plenty of techniques."

He bounded from his chair, grabbed her by both shoulders, and held her only inches from himself. "You cannot mean that. You, the savior of all elf-kind could not destroy your child's life. Our child's life." His fingers were like vices on her shoulders, and she knew he wasn't as sure as his words indicated.

She wanted to spew her defiance back into his face, but she felt the jolt of fear from him, the desperation. This allowed her to get a handle on her anger and think through the haze of his betrayal of trust. "What do you care?"

Silence hummed between them for a long moment before he answered in a low, pain-filled voice. "Life is precious. You never realize just how precious until you take one." He released her and walked the three steps over to the sink, curling his fingers around its edge.

Feeling deflated by his despair, Hermione watched him for a long moment, then walked over, nudged him to the side, and began to wash her hands. He said nothing as she dried off and returned to the table, taking the seat opposite the one he had been sitting in and picking out a strawberry tart.

He turned when she poured herself a cup of tea, staring at her, as if uncertain whether to believe her change of heart. "What are you doing?"

"Since I've barely eaten today, I thought I might have a bite. You?" She acted as though the blow up between them hadn't happened, knowing when they finished eating it would all come up again, possibly more volatile than ever. But first she needed to eat. Hermione had always had more difficulty thinking clearly when she didn't eat properly. He was right, she was lightheaded from lack of nourishment, and while she hadn't wanted this baby, she didn't intend to kill it either.

"This discussion isn't over," he said as he joined her at the table again.

"Not by a long shot." Hermione buttered a muffin and took a large bite, then closed her eyes as she savored the hot buttery goodness. Why was it they didn't have Dobby cooking the meals at Headquarters again? She vowed to change that as soon as may be. The house scouring was pretty well finished anyway.

They ate in silence, both shooting furtive looks at the other when they thought they could do so unobserved. The wind chimes Hermione had set up in the back window tinkled in the wind, calming and reassuring her as she finished her meal.

When she was full, she rose and headed for the bathroom.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I need another shower. It was hot working out in the sun."

"You won't be long?"

"No. Wait for me in the living room."

As she shampooed her hair again and allowed the hot water to loosen up the soreness from her back and neck, Hermione wondered how she would approach the situation with her husband. He had no right to intentionally get her pregnant without at least discussing it with her first. No right. But she understood him, probably better than he thought, and she knew he still didn't dare trust her. Not even after everything they had been through. Trust could cost a spy like him his life.

She got out of the shower and dried off. After wrapping her hair in a towel and sliding into clean clothes, she padded through the cottage to the living room, taking a seat in a large arm chair across from him, instead of beside him in the loveseat.

A long moment passed before she began to speak. "First, those potions you gave me last month, they were fertility potions, weren't they?"

He nodded minutely. "The first nullified your contraceptive potion, the second was a fertility potion. I was afraid I wouldn't have much time and had to act as soon as possible." His emotions were fully occluded, his face impassive as he made the acknowledgement. "However, I thought the pregnancy issue was the second thing you wanted to discuss and something else was first. What would that be?"

She ground her teeth together, her ire already rising. "First would be how you keep calling me to your side. It's bloody irritating, that's what."

He nodded, unperturbed by her irritation. "The Greek spell, the protective spell, includes the ability for me to call you to my side. It is far more draining to do so than to simply Apparate to your side...especially long distance...but it has its uses. It protected you from the slicing hex Nott was sending your direction, and it brought you in for tea when you were acting like a child instead of taking care of ours."

"But it's one-sided, isn't it? Just like the other part of the spell that allows you to beat on me while protecting me from others, this one allows you to call me to you, but not the other way around."

"I have never beaten you...nor will I. And the spell does not work precisely like that. You can't call me to your side with a thought, as I can you, but you can put a great deal of urgency on me to join you. The other night when I showed up here irritated by your constant nagging for me to join you after the three bouts of *Crucio* was due to the spell. Any more insistence in your wishes for me to be home, and I may have Apparated to your side just to get rid of the pressure.

"It could be very dangerous if I'm in the wrong situation at the time. At the same time, I can lower the insistence on my side as well, so that you only feel nagged to join me, but make the decision about when. And when that happens, you will Apparate to my side, even if you don't know my location. Also, I'm not sure if it will work if you are in a secret kept or unplottable location like Headquarters or Hogwarts."

Somewhat mollified, Hermione glared at him anyway. "So why didn't you tell me? I could have caused trouble for you the other night because I didn't understand what I was doing. Just like I could have hurt the baby by handling dangerous ingredients because you didn't tell me about it. Hang telling me about it, why didn't you discuss it with me? I wouldn't have liked it, but probably would have seen things your way. At least then I would have had time to get used to the idea before it was reality. Why can't you trust me to make the right decision?"

"I couldn't take the chance that you might not. And the vision of you taking the potions without knowing what they were, the clear trust you displayed in me that night, went a long way toward placating the Dark Lord over the lack of information I had given him. He was pleased, as well, by the scene in the restaurant. Nott had already shared it with him by the time I arrived. Of course, Nott was punished for showing my hand earlier than the Dark Lord had planned, and for failing in her assignment, but she'll live."

"You didn't give me any warning about the attack or we wouldn't have been there."

"I didn't know about it. I only arrived there because I sensed your distress."

"You and I are a team, Severus. You can't make decisions like this for us without discussing it with me. If I have to live with the results, you have to trust me to make the right decision. Trust me with your secrets."

He leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees and stared her down. "And you have no secrets of your own? Nothing you keep to yourself that I might find of interest? Nothing recent that you've kept to yourself? What about your reasons for those spells I'm developing? Or how about the way you tried to keep the Felix Felicis preparation to yourself?"

"Those were not things that involved you directly, and you've known of them for ages."

"What about your meeting with Krum?"

This caused Hermione to color up and look away, unable to meet his eyes. He had a point when it came to her relationship with Viktor. "You're right there. I should have told you, but I was worried about how you would respond. Since I intended to end things between us at the meeting, I justified keeping it to myself. It was foolish." She met his gaze again and saw the anger blazing there.

"It was more than foolish; it was dangerous, for both of us. And, there's something else that's important to you, but which you see of little importance in the grand scheme that you're keeping hidden away. I've sensed it for some time."

Hermione blushed and turned away. How did she get onto this subject anyway?

"That's what I thought. Neither of us fully trusts the other. So don't get all high and mighty about my secrets when you've kept plenty of your own."

What to say, how to respond? Did she tell him now and get it out in the open? But how could she not tell him when it stood between them? "I'm an Animagus. I can become a starling." In demonstration, she stood and transformed, flew around the room, and landed on his shoulder.

Severus looked at her in surprise and reached out to touch her feathers. When she hopped from his shoulder a moment later, she transformed back to her true form and landed beside him on the sofa.

"Is it safe for you to transform while you're with child?" He asked as he reached out and stroked her face, a bit of awe in his tone.

"Yes, for the first trimester or so. After that it can cause complications. Professor McGonagall made me do all the research before she allowed me to begin the transformation part."

"And as the knowledge-sponge that you are, you remembered. Good. You have about a month left, then you must stop." Amusement filled his eyes. "So do you like flight as a bird any more than on a broom?"

"About a hundred times more. It's lovely to wing around as a bird."

He kissed her softly, then tipped his forehead against her own. "You are a wonder to me, and a constant surprise."

Silence lengthened between them as Hermione reveled in his nearness and fought to keep the enchantment from over-ruling her head. They touched only at his fingertips to her chin and their foreheads, but even that slight brush of skin sent shivers down her spine. "I shouldn't have kept it from you, but you have to admit, me being an Animagus is nowhere near as serious a secret as you getting me pregnant without discussing it with me first."

He nodded slightly in acknowledgment. "So is that your only secret then? You now know mine...or at least those that make a difference in the near future. I've one more, but it's not ready yet, and should turn out to be a good surprise. You'll have the answers to that soon. I'm," he took a deep breath and let it out, "sorry I didn't trust you."

She looked into his eyes and searched for the truth, then decided she had it. He had told her the important issues he was holding back, and he considered whatever was left to be minor in comparison. She would trust that was true...for the time being at least. That didn't satisfy all of her questions and concerns, however. "You said once that the pregnancy would be for our benefit, that I should consider it insurance. How is that?"

He leaned back against the sofa and drew her into his arms so she rested back against his chest. She could have resisted, but opted not to. He began softly, "Azkaban has a rule for father's rights. It is ancient, has been around for centuries, and no one has used it recently, but it allows fathers to see their children every fortnight until they enter Hogwarts...then fortnightly during their holiday breaks until he or she reaches their majority. Along with our child, you would be allowed to visit. Obviously, there would be no real intimacy between us at that time, but if things should go so badly wrong, it is a means that will allow us to continue to live for some years."

"And you consider that a life? You in prison, me as a single parent, raising a baby and seeing you so rarely? And what happens when our child comes of age? Do we then go silently insane and die, leaving him or her an orphan?"

"It's insurance while we try to work out other arrangements. A stay of execution, if you will, while you put your brilliant mind to work to try and find a better way for us."

"And if Voldemort should die soon, what's to keep me sane between his demise and the birth of our child? A child you won't see come into the world? How could I possibly manage as a single parent when I'm not ready to be a parent at all?"

"Hush," he caressed her upper arms, up and down, again and again, soothing her. "We will deal with that when it comes. I still hope to work out alternate arrangements so that won't become necessary. As Potter's best friend and comrade-at-arms, you may be given special privileges anyway. They would not want you dead from lack of access to me, and with any luck, we will be out of reach before they can stop us."

Hermione's mind spun, there were so many things to think about. She slid a hand over her stomach again, wondering about the life inside her. Would she survive the final battle? Would they be allowed a chance to live as a family? There were too many variables to consider at this point. "I'm still not sure how I feel about all of this. And I'm not certain I can completely forgive you for leaving me out of the decision."

"It is much to be getting on with. And you've enough other complications in your life right now. Though I don't blame you for being upset, I am thrilled by the thought of offspring, even though I hadn't planned on it so soon. And the thought of you, round with my child, is incredible." He ran a hand over her stomach, as though feeling for the life within.

Hermione relaxed in his arms and shut her brain off for the time being. Tomorrow there would be the hassle of placating Harry, who may have been taking this a hundred times calmer than she expected, but would still require explanations. She wouldn't think about the future past next week for now. One day at a time...that would be best.

"Oh, and Hermione, that comment about making me a eunuch?"

"I'd probably grow to regret it if I went that far," she admitted. "But the idea about giving you a frontal lobotomy still has merit, or I have a plethora of ideas I came up with for the twins but cast aside as too cruel that might work wonderfully on you." She hoped he was cringing at this point, as she was completely serious about her feelings for the word 'pet.'

"Understood."

AN: Don't worry, Hermione hasn't forgiven and forgotten yet. There is more fun to come. Next up are the inevitable fireworks, and explanations.

Thanks to my beta, countrymouse, and the wonderful Admins on this site.

42: Putting On A Show

Chapter 42 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 42: Putting on a Show

When Hermione entered Headquarters under a Disillusionment Charm the next afternoon, she hoped things went even half as well with Harry as they had eventually gone with Severus. Somehow, she doubted she would be that lucky.

The house was quiet when she entered, and not wanting all and sundry to know of her arrival, she kept quiet and walked through to the kitchen. Empty. The library's only inhabitant was Crookshanks, who looked right at her, blinked lazily, then returned to cleaning himself.

She walked up the stairs, hoping Harry hadn't gone somewhere for the day, that he wasn't avoiding her, and that Ron would be out to work for his brothers or something. Hermione didn't think Harry would have shared his insights with Ron, hoped he hadn't as she wasn't prepared to deal with another round of Ron's righteous fury.

Hermione made it all the way up to the attic before finding anyone in the house. Harry stood facing a white dummy in the far corner, apparently practicing silent spell casting. He waved his wand and green shot from it, striking the dummy, which ripped along one shoulder.

"About time you showed up, Hermione. I was starting to wonder if I was going to have to owl you," Harry said without turning to face her.

"How did you know I was here? I thought I was quiet." Hermione silently removed the Disillusionment Charm and crossed the room to him.

Harry slashed his wand once more and left a burn mark on the dummy, then turned to face her. His face was inscrutable, impossible to read. "I have a spell cast on the front door so if I'm in the house, I'm alerted when someone comes over the threshold. I have another ward on this room. Ron's working and I was expecting you. No one else has come up here without an invitation in weeks. I suppose they don't want to catch a stray hex."

"Very impressive." Hermione smiled, honestly pleased with his accomplishment. She definitely hadn't taught him that. They stood staring at each other for a long moment; he looked like he was waiting for her to begin, so she took a deep breath. "You didn't mention any of what happened yesterday to Ron, did you?"

He lifted his eyebrows. "Are you kidding? Now that he's finally happy seeing Luna, you think I want to have him blow up all over again? If you want to bring him into this, that's your decision. Otherwise, he'll have to figure it out on his own. You probably should bring him into it, as he'll be seriously angry when he finds out that you've been keeping it a secret, but it's not my decision to make."

Threading her fingers together in front of her, Hermione nodded. "Thanks for that. So I guess you want to talk about it."

Turning, Harry pointed his wand at one of the large purple cushions with gold trim they used for defense practice and transfigured it into a plump sofa of the same colors. He gestured for her to take a seat.

"Another impressive piece of magic. You've really come a long way this summer."

Harry grunted, but didn't meet her eyes. "I've a good teacher."

The compliment warmed her, as she had been the one doing the teaching that summer. Hermione sat at the opposite end of the sofa, toed off her shoes and brought her feet up onto the cushion.

"Just start at the beginning and tell me what you can," he directed.

So she did. She started with the moment in the library when she and Severus had first touched, glossed over their courtship, talked about the diary and their marriage at Dumbledore's requirement. She mentioned what she could of the Dark Lord's expectations from their relationship, keeping to the pertinent points, and skipping unimportant items that might anger him and were really none of his business anyway.

"So you're really pregnant then?"

A hand crept over her belly, and Hermione held it close, still overwhelmed by the idea. "I really am. It terrifies me, but part of me is excited about it. Another part of me is angry because I'm so young and shouldn't be facing this yet. And I'm still angry with him for not discussing it with me before it happened. If it weren't for the situation we're in, both with Voldemort and the bond, I probably wouldn't speak to him for weeks. As it is, I'm still entertaining ideas of how to impress upon him how serious a mistake this was. I'm trying to come to terms with everything. It's a lot to take in."

"Yes." Harry paused for a long moment, then asked, his voice hesitant, "So, is he good to you? I mean, I know you said in the restaurant that he's different when it's just you than when he's around everyone else. But then you said he was still petty and spiteful sometimes, so he can't be all sunshine and roses."

Hermione pulled a face. "A Severus Snape who was all sunshine and roses, even in private, would totally creep me out." Harry laughed at that, but she continued, "That's not to say that he doesn't occasionally make very sweet gestures. There was one night he prepared the cottage with candle light and flowers for me." She paused as she realized that was the night he gave her the potions. He was setting the mood of seduction for Voldemort. That made her a bit sick, but she pushed it back. Surely he would have done the same for her even when he wasn't trying to manipulate her.

If only she could be certain.

He waved his hands to stop her before she could speak again. "I don't want to hear about his seduction capabilities. I'm trying to pretend you're pregnant by immaculate conception."

That made Hermione laugh. "You go ahead and believe that if you like; it's fine by me. He is gentle with me most of the time, far more than you would think possible. And his spite is mostly to cover up insecurities, really. Having an inside track into his emotions gives me a whole other insight into the man."

"There's an insight I really don't want to have into him, but at least I understand it because I have the same thing with Ginny. And what about him calling you my paramour? What was that all about?"

"Obviously, he knows better than that. He knows his little spell works wonderfully well, and he's seen us touch, so there's no question that I'm far more sister to you than anything else. And I'm sure he's aware Ginny's your soul mate. He knows Ginny's life would be at risk if Voldemort knew you still loved her, so he's covered by making it look as though you were in love with me."

"Which would only increase how angry it would make me to learn you had been, er, amorous with him." He pulled a face at the idea.

"Exactly."

"So where do we go from here?" Harry asked after a moment.

"Your reaction to him in the restaurant was spot on. We want Voldemort to think you're angry and disgusted by my relationship with Severus, feeling betrayed even. Angry enough you don't want to trust me ever again."

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Voldemort doesn't know about your marriage, does he?"

"No, he doesn't know about the soul mate thing either, which is why I had to make it so the subject couldn't be discussed outside of Headquarters and the Burrow. If he gets so much as a whisper that Severus is tied to me, and not just manipulating me, we'll both be dead." The very idea filled Hermione with dread.

"So earlier this summer it wasn't Remus Snape was in contact with, was it? It was you all along. That's why he insisted he would only give the vow to you." Harry lifted his wand and Summoned a couple bottles of butterbeer from a magical cooling cabinet on the other side of the room. He pulled the lid off one and passed it to Hermione, then took the lid off the second and downed a few swallows.

"Yeah. It was always me. We communicate through the diary I carry around. Anything either of us writes in it is duplicated on the other side."

"I've looked over your shoulder when you wrote in it. Looked like Charms notes to me."

"Only I can read my copy, only he can read his. It's safer that way." Hermione took a long pull from her bottle. "So what did you tell people last night?"

Harry shrugged. "Ron, Tonks and Remus asked where you were, I told them you were spending the night with your soul mate, that I was upset with you about something and didn't want to talk about it."

Hermione played with the top of her bottle, running her finger around the rim. "We could tell Remus and Tonks the truth, and Ron a partial truth, at least that Severus came in and saved us, helped put things to rights."

"You want to tell the whole truth to Remus and Tonks?" He lifted his eyebrow in surprise.

Licking her lips, Hermione set back against the sofa and looked him in the eye. "Remus already knows everything. Well, everything except for the pregnancy part. Tonks knows I've been bringing the info in for all these months, and I think she's figured out about me and Severus, though she doesn't know for sure and has never asked about our personal relationship." She saw Harry begin to protest and hurried to explain to calm him. She told him about Remus catching her and Severus in Flourish and Blotts and their later meetings to discuss her relationship with Severus, and his requirement of the vow. Then she had to explain how Tonks knew about her involvement.

"So do we tell the Order that there's not really a problem between us, that we're just pretending, or do we act as though you and I are really at odds?" Harry asked when she had finished.

Hermione stood and walked to the small window that faced the miniscule back yard of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. "I don't know. I've been thinking about it all morning. We might try a combination. Those who are completely trustworthy might be let in on the truth, or at least the portion of it that pertains to our friendship still being intact. For others of whom we're a bit less certain, we might put on a scene so they believe we really have fallen out...especially those inclined to gossip."

"Fallen out about what?" Ron asked coming into the room.

"When did you get here, mate?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Flooded over from the shop. Fred let me go early; it was quieter than usual." Ron snagged a bottle of butterbeer and sat on an enlarged cushion on the ground and looked at Hermione. "So Harry said you were fighting. Is it all worked out now?"

"Looks like you forgot the Floo," Hermione said, looking at Harry. It could have been really bad if Ron had walked in a few minutes earlier and heard about Severus. She thanked her lucky stars for small miracles.

He ran a hand through his hair and nodded. "I'll take care of it tonight. You want to explain about our falling out?"

"Hmm, where to start." *What to admit to, is more like it.* "Harry and I didn't really have a falling out. We went to that Chinese restaurant yesterday and our lunch was interrupted by the arrival of Death Eaters."

Ron's attention was completely fixed on her as she explained about their fight, Severus Snape's arrival and the way he made it look like Hermione trusted him and Harry didn't. That it had caused a rift between Harry and Hermione. "Because Voldemort wants nothing more than to cripple Harry any way he can. He saw splitting us up as one of the ways to do that. Snape and I have had this planned for a while, actually." Hermione hoped she had managed to talk around the issue enough that he was happy, but only knew what she wanted him to know.

"Wow, so what're we going to do?" Ron said after he'd had time to take it all in.

"Set it up," Harry said. "Two meetings; first, at tonight's Order meeting, we put on a show when she shows up. Then we either corral certain people to stay afterward or get together for another quiet meeting later. It might be best if we hold it at the Burrow again to prevent the wrong people showing up."

"The usual suspects? Or do we be more selective than with Snape's Vow?" Hermione asked.

When they had pounded out the solution, Hermione left before anyone else came by. She would spend a little time in her garden before the meeting. This could tax her acting ability significantly, and gardening seemed to sooth her, or at least being in the cottage soothed her, and she needed something to keep her hands busy.

The Order meeting was already well underway when Hermione arrived back at Headquarters later that night. If they were going to make a real scene, best do it when everyone would be forced to watch. She was nervous, her hands shook, and she knew her face was pale, but that was an advantage in the long run as she should be concerned about going to the meeting if she and Harry really had a row the previous day.

The hall was quiet when she entered and walked down toward the kitchen where the meeting was being held. The door was open and she poked her head into the room which had a yellow cast from the light bulb hanging above the group of thirty or so witches and wizards. The twins, Bill and Fleur and Professor McGonagall were all missing, but they would be invited to the other meeting the trio had planned for the following night, so it was of little consequence. Tonks sat in a back corner; Remus was nowhere to be seen.

Mundungus Fletcher finished his report and sat back down, then Mad-Eye stood and turned to her. "Granger, anything new to report from the traitor?" He had never forgiven Remus for not inviting him to the Vow ceremony and took it out on Hermione sometimes, as she was the recipient. As it was as much her fault as anyone's, she didn't hold it against him.

Harry stood and whirled around, his eyes narrowing in anger. "What are you doing here? I told you, you aren't welcome here anymore."

"Now, Harry, I know you've had a row of some kind, but you've argued before and everything has come out right in the end," Arthur Weasley said. He gestured for Harry to be seated, but Harry didn't pay attention.

"This is different. We're not going to patch it up, and she's not welcome here." Harry lifted his wand, not pointing it at her, but in her general direction, a suggested threat.

"Harry, I..." Hermione was interrupted by Mad-Eye.

"Harry, you aren't the head of the Order, and you don't get to make those decisions."

"No, but I do own the house. It belongs to me, and she's not welcome in it anymore. Never again."

Tears poured into Hermione's eyes and down her face. Harry's acting was so good she found herself hard-pressed to remember that it was an act. "You don't understand, please..."

"I understand perfectly. I was there, wasn't I? I saw...I can't even talk about what I saw. It makes me sick to think about it."

"Come now, Harry. How about if you let her explain, then we can discuss this like adults instead of hot-headed children." Moody thumped over to where Harry stood and placed a hand on his shoulder. Harry shook it off.

"If she wants to tell you, let her. Another time." Harry turned back to Hermione and lowered his voice, put every ounce of venom in his face he could muster, and finished,

"For now, I want you out. And don't come back. You can meet with someone somewhere else to give your reports. I never want to see your face again."

Bursting into tears, or at least making a noise that would sound like she was bursting into tears, Hermione covered her face with her hand and turned, running from the kitchen. She slammed the front door on her way out of the building, then immediately Apparated away before someone could come looking for her.

When she landed in her cottage garden, she smiled at the memory of everyone's shocked faces, wiping the few tears that had actually slipped down her face. A few deep breaths calmed her before she walked to the cottage and inside. Severus was in the front room, settled down on a sofa with a book.

He looked up. "I take it all went as planned?"

"Perfectly. I probably should have waited a little longer before showing up as I doubt they will get much done at the meeting now. Harry looks like the biggest git who ever lived, but they'll get over it."

Severus smiled and held out a hand, inviting her to snuggle up beside him. "Next meeting tomorrow, then?"

Hermione nodded but didn't accept his invitation. "Tomorrow evening. Ron worked out for Tonks and Remus to be at Headquarters in the morning though, so I'll swing by there and lay out the true scenario for them before the meeting. And we've got some errands to run."

"No. You aren't going out without an escort again, not even Disillusioned or in disguise. Your wandering days are over." Severus closed his book and stood beside her, his face carefully bland and his emotions shielded.

Glaring at his demand, Hermione put her hands on her hips and looked up into his face. "It's perfectly safe for us to go about Muggle London; it's not like we're going into Diagon Alley where everyone will recognize us. I can't be seen with Harry anyway, not if we want this to come off."

"It's perfectly safe in Muggle London?" He lifted his eyebrows at her. "I believe you were in Muggle London when Draco saw you with the twits you call friends and decided to visit your parents? And you were in a Muggle restaurant two days ago when you were beset by Death Eaters, were you not?"

Feeling the blood drain from her head, Hermione took the chair nearby. "That's low, bringing up my parents like that."

"Be that as it may, you cannot go out alone anymore. The boys shouldn't be out without guards either. I know Potter thinks he's invincible, but the four Death Eaters at that restaurant didn't have too much trouble taking him down, even with you and the proprietors to distract them, not to mention the Muggles."

"You cannot dictate to me..."

"I can and I will if you force me to. I'd rather not. Think, Hermione. Just think for a few minutes about the danger you put yourself in, our baby in, me in, if you get caught out with those boys. We can't afford to be foolish. Things are getting desperate here, and Potter's dueling skills need some work."

"Thanks, I hadn't realized that." Her sarcasm was laid on as thick as possible. He didn't so much as acknowledge her comment.

"You look tired. Perhaps it is time we turned in for the night." He closed his book and set it aside, then offered a hand to her.

Still irritated with his high-handedness, she looked at the hand, then up at his face. She stood and turned away, heading toward the bedroom. "So long as you don't think you're going to be doing anything besides sleeping in that bed tonight."

"Hermione, we didn't do anything interesting last night either." He reached out and ran a finger down her neck, bringing shivers to her back.

"And we probably won't be doing anything interesting in it tomorrow night, or the night after that. In fact, we may not do anything interesting in it again before this baby enters Hogwarts." Hermione used her wand to change her clothes to a pair of flannel pajamas.

"Be reasonable, will you. I'm sorry I kept it a secret from you. It was wrong."

"Yes, well you aren't the one who will suffer from swollen ankles and indigestion, are you? You won't be blowing up like a balloon or waddling to the bathroom every half hour because the baby is sitting on your bladder." She slipped between the blankets and turned her back to him. "And you won't be getting up to breast feed the baby at two and four in the morning, either."

"You're just being overly dramatic now." He stood behind her; she could see it in the mirror as he set his hands on his hips, anger rolling from him.

She really didn't care. "Good night, Severus. Sleep well." Then she practiced her wandless magic, guttering all the candles in the room at once.

He grumbled and mumbled behind her, changing out of his clothing the slow way, then grabbed his pillow from the bed and took it to the living room. Hermione smiled to herself and thought about all the ways she could make her husband's life miserable as her pregnancy progressed. And to top it, she couldn't believe he was going to dictate to her about where she could go.

Now that she had been put more or less under house arrest, she wondered how she was to get those books on pregnancy. With her final conscious thought, she decided to ask Tonks to pick them up. It would be good to have another woman to talk to who knew everything about her situation.

The next morning, Hermione showed up at Grimmauld Place at breakfast time. Severus spent the night on the sofa, which he had transfigured to a bed. The room was narrow enough, however, that there hadn't been room for a particularly wide bed, and he had acted more than a little disgruntled when she met him over the breakfast table before leaving.

Hermione felt the tiniest niggling of guilt for that, but it was easily pushed aside. She hadn't kicked him out of the bed, after all. He was welcome to stay, he just wasn't welcome to do more than sleep in it.

She had Disillusioned herself before leaving the cottage and making her way across the street to Headquarters. Remus and Tonks were sitting with Ron and Harry at the breakfast table when Hermione arrived. She looked around and came to stand behind Harry, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Hermione," he said after he jumped at her touch. "No one else is here, just show yourself."

She turned her wand on herself and came back into view. "Hey." She sat beside Harry and reached for the plate of bacon. "Glad you two could meet with me this morning. We've got a lot to cover."

Remus stared at Hermione, then looked at Harry, who had turned back to his breakfast again. He returned his gaze to Hermione again. Finally, he looked at Tonks, as though to ask if he hadn't understood her explanation of the previous night's events.

Tonks sat with her mouth open slightly, clearly unsure about what she was seeing. "Wait a minute," she said after a moment. "You two had a big argument last night, and Harry told you never to come back. Now you're best buddies again? Not that I'm complaining, but what's going on?"

"It's all a sham. We've got to put on a show, after all. Please pass the milk, Ron." Hermione poured herself a full glass and took a nice long drink. She could pass on eggs and toast, since it had only been a short time since she ate last, but she couldn't pass up bacon.

"What do you mean it's a sham? Do you want to explain yourself?" Remus set down his cup of coffee.

"Eat your breakfast. Then you, Tonks, and I will go into the library for a chat." Hermione picked up another slice of bacon and savored it while two curious adults watched her as they all ate.

When it came time to go into the library, Ron planned to come along. Hermione shot a look at Harry, and he nudged Ron up the stairs saying he needed a partner for dueling practice, and since Ron already knew the story, he didn't need to stay and listen.

After warding the library door and placing an Imperturbable Charm on it, Hermione turned to Remus and Tonks.

"So what's going on, then?" Remus asked as Hermione took the seat across from the two of them.

Hermione looked at Tonks and took a deep breath. "I'm sure you've figured out that Severus was always my contact in Voldemort's camp. And you probably made the connection that he and I, well, that he's my soul mate." Tonks nodded, and Hermione let out a breath of relief. "What you don't know is that we're actually married." Hermione revealed her ring and then gave a very brief rundown of her history with Severus. When that was through, she turned to their plans, Voldemort's decree, and the events in the Chinese restaurant. She didn't mention that she hadn't planned on getting pregnant or that it had come as a complete surprise to her. As far as she was concerned, no one else needed to know that.

"So why is it you don't want the Order to know the truth?" Tonks asked when Hermione was done explaining.

"The small meeting we've got planned for this evening is to explain some of this to those we trust absolutely. There can't be the slightest hint of the truth get out to Voldemort. We figured the easiest way to keep our secret is to only impart it to those we must."

"So are you telling the Weasleys about being married and pregnant then?" Remus gave her a doubtful look.

Hermione shook her head. "Those at the meeting tonight, which won't expand much beyond the Weasley family, will only know that we're putting on a show for Voldemort, and to spread the word of our falling out as far and wide and subtly as they can." She remembered Bill's strange behavior the other day and wondered if he had realized she was pregnant. She trusted his discretion and planned to feel the situation out a bit before bringing him into things any further.

"I hope this doesn't backfire," Tonks said, looking as though she was having difficulty taking it all in.

"Me too. I'm glad I've finally told you; I knew you had your suspicions," Hermione said.

"Yeah, and you'll need a woman to talk to. What are you going to tell your mum?" Tonks said.

Remus walked across the room to give the women privacy. Hermione appreciated his tact. "I have no idea. I keep pushing that concern away, as I could still miscarry, and it's not safe for me to tell mum about my marriage to Severus yet, though we are planning a visit so she can meet him. I'll be so glad when this is all over and I can have one story for everyone, instead of trying to remember how much each person knows."

"That must be difficult. And then to find out you're pregnant. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to know you are actually married to him, since I know you haven't exactly been celibate, but it'll add more difficulty later, if we can't get him cleared and safe from Azkaban."

"Tell me about it. And my powers are getting weaker because of the pregnancy, which is something I hadn't counted on, but it doesn't seem to have surprised Severus." She found herself slightly bitter on this issue as the war was getting hotter and there had been a couple attacks lately that she hadn't been able to warn the Order about, either because it would point to Severus, or because he hadn't been aware of them at the time. She wanted to be active in this war.

Tonks waved her hand in dismissal. "Oh, that's temporary; by the time you reach three months, your power will return, and by the end of your pregnancy, it will be stronger than ever. Mum said the first trimester you share your power with the baby and the next two it shares its power with you."

"Really? I didn't know. After all, Muggle pregnancy doesn't work that way." Hermione bit her lip, then plowed on. "Can you do me a favor? I can't go back out into Muggle London unescorted anymore and wondered if you had time and could run to Flourish and Blotts for me?"

AN: My humblest apologies. I was certain I posted up this chapter the morning after posting the corrections on chapter 41, but apparently, it never made it past my wall of good intentions.

As always, a big thanks to those who took the time to review. Thanks to my beta, countrymouse, and to the fabulous admins who have so much on their plates and still take time to clear our stories.

43: Another Meeting At The Burrow

Chapter 43 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 43: Another Meeting at The Burrow

Once she had finished up with Remus and Tonks, Hermione joined the boys upstairs where they were working on their dueling. She watched for a moment until Harry managed to trip Ron up and knock him flat on his back.

"Good job," she said when she was sure she wouldn't get hit by a stray hex.

Harry looked over at her, panting slightly from exertion. "Not good enough, though. I seriously doubt hexing Ron is going to be as difficult as hexing Death Eaters or hitting Voldemort with that curse you're working on."

Hermione considered for a moment, then decided to come clean. "Actually, I'm not the one working on the spell. Snape is." She saw the argument forming on their faces and didn't give them a chance to complain. "You know he has much more experience creating spells than I have. I know he said he's starting to get close on the second one, the one Harry will use. I hoped we could test them on the twins once we've got everything together. If identical twins don't share blood, who does?"

"Come on, Hermione, you left the most important spells we will cast in our whole lives up to Snape to create? What were you thinking?" Ron got off the floor and wiped his hands on his trousers.

"I was thinking that he was on our side and that he could create the spell faster and more accurately than anyone else we know."

"And how do you know that's true? I mean, he didn't warn us of that attack on those ships in the channel a few days back."

It had been Hermione's decision not to warn the Order about those, with Severus urging her to keep quiet. He had told her, but he was one of only two Death Eaters who knew about the attack in advance. As much as they wanted to warn someone, it simply wasn't safe. Instead, he had set off an alarm in the selected ships an hour before the attack, which forced most of the Muggles to vacate. It was the best they could do under the situation.

Unfortunately, there were still over forty dead, and nearly double that injured, though thousands of lives had been saved. It would be a long time before she forgot the guilt of that decision. "If Snape were keeping those kinds of things to himself, he would now be dead. The fact that he isn't dead means he's honoring his vow. Can we please drop it? We need to make some decision about the next Horcrux."

Ron grumbled under his breath, but didn't continue the conversation. He seemed utterly unconvinced, but walked over to the paper that listed everything they knew about Hufflepuff's cup. "I say it's in the school. No other location has come up, regardless of how many questions Fred and George have asked. He received an award for service to the school; it could be there, or maybe in the Slytherin dorms. I think we need to ask McGonagall, see if we can get in to search."

Hermione met Harry's eye, then turned back to Ron. "I'm with you. He won't have hidden it someplace totally innocuous, but somewhere that mattered to him. Your locations are spot on, and it feels right, that he would leave it at the school. He would have placed it when he came to interview with Dumbledore. Maybe that was the whole purpose of the meeting...to get him close enough to place the cup."

"Yeah. Dobby could probably get us in without McGonagall's permission, but I'd rather go about this the right way, in case we get caught. Filch is still on patrol, after all." Ron pulled a face at this.

"The next order of business is how we're going to get better at dueling," Hermione said. "Harry's right. We're all going to have to start dueling people who are significantly better than we are if we're going to improve more rapidly. I think we've learned all the curses we'll need, and we're doing well with silent spell casting, but we've got to get better and faster at it."

"Then it's time we brought in Remus, Charlie, Bill and some of the others. We'll ask them about that tonight as well." Ron nodded in agreement.

Wanting to prepare themselves, the three of them set about reviewing all the spells they knew to refresh their memories.

The meeting at the Burrow started pretty much the same way her meeting with Remus and Tonks had started. Hermione walked in a few minutes after it was set to start to be sure everyone was there and took a seat beside Harry...who obligingly poured her a cup of tea. Mouths dropped, people stared, questions were asked, but Hermione quickly took control of the discussion. They laid out the censored bits of information they had given Ron, then explained the need for secrecy.

"So you want us all to pretend as though you and Harry still hate each other," Bill asked.

"No, I want you all to pretend that Harry hates me, even though I feel a little guilty about hurting him and wish he felt OK about my decisions, but that I've made them and will stand by them." Hermione finished her cup of tea and floated the pot back toward herself for a refill.

"And we're all supposed to be shocked by the fact that you have a relationship with Severus, then?" Molly asked, a bit of disapproval in her voice, despite the fact that the relationship had been presented as fiction.

"No, none of you are supposed to know Harry even knows about the relationship. You're all very surprised by Harry's anger and don't understand what's going on."

"But if we find out from another source, you would prefer we either don't believe what we've heard, or grow angry at you for seeing the, er, traitor too?" Charlie this time. Hermione got the definite idea that his intended adjective had been much stronger than the one he had settled for.

"Exactly." When she was sure everyone understood the situation, she turned the conversation over to Harry, who brought up the need for dueling practice. Once that was settled and a schedule set up at various locations, the meeting broke up.

"Er, Professor McGonagall, may we have a word with you?" Hermione asked before the older woman could leave.

She looked surprised by the request, but gamely followed the three of them outside where Ron explained what they needed, more or less. "You see, we think the next artifact is hidden there and want to search a few places in the castle."

"I assure you if something of that nature had been left in the castle, someone would have found it by now," the new headmistress said.

"That's what you all said about the Chamber of Secrets too, and you were mistaken. We've isolated a few locations we'd like to search, but we'll need access to the Slytherin dorm area, and a few other spots in the school."

"This is highly irregular." She pursed her lips for a long moment. "I suppose I can change the password to 'Slytherin' for the next few weeks and tell the house-elves and Filch you will be coming. Whatever you're doing, don't hesitate to ask for help."

"We've had Bill assist us on previous occasions. If we need his help again or yours even, we'll be sure to ask," Harry assured her, grinning that they had gotten permission.

"Well then, you can come by as soon as tomorrow evening. Now if we're finished here." Gaining everyone's nod that they were finished, McGonagall Disappeared.

The three of them wandered back towards the Burrow, but Bill came out and looked around the back yard, stopping when his eyes landed on Hermione. He walked over, never taking his eyes off her. "Hey, I wondered if we might have a word."

"Go ahead," Hermione said.

Bill looked nervously at Ron and Harry, then back to her. "I'd rather we speak more privately."

Certain she knew what he wanted to talk about, Hermione nodded. Harry wasn't so inclined. "What do you need to talk to her about that you can't say with us standing here?"

Hermione turned toward him. "I'm sure Bill just wants to discuss my health after those healing charms he cast the other day. I know the diagnosis charm produces very detailed results."

Ron looked even more clueless than before, but understanding came into Harry's eyes, and he tugged Ron away, saying something about meeting her back inside.

She and Bill turned and walked further from the Burrow. "So you know then? I wasn't sure if you did," he said.

"Yes, so does Harry, and Remus and Tonks. You didn't mention it to anyone?"

"No, I got the feeling the other day that you weren't aware of your, er, situation."

"Honestly, I didn't find out until a few days ago. I wasn't sure until we were at the restaurant." Hermione crossed her fingers behind her back, as though that would make fudging the truth OK. Her not being sure and not having a clue were really very different things. "That's the big shock that was supposed to have pushed Harry over the edge, actually."

"And your soul mate, does he know? Have you discussed marriage? I know the bond is really strong and that he can't get out of it even if he wanted to, but he needs to take responsibility for his family, you know."

"Yes, he's taking responsibility, we began discussing marriage within days of the enchantment taking effect, and I assure you he has no intention of allowing his child to be born out of wedlock." She rubbed her fingers over her forehead, feeling a headache rising behind her eyes. "I can't wait until this is all over."

Bill's eyes narrowed at her, and he crossed his arms over his chest as if just realizing something. "How did Snape know about your possible impending pregnancy? He would have had to demonstrate some kind of reciprocal interest to you to have truly disgusted Harry."

Scanning her mind for any possible explanation, Hermione began, "Well, you see..."

Bill held up a hand. "Wait, never mind. I don't want an answer to that question. Just keep it to yourself, will you? I'll pretend that the question never occurred to me."

"You certainly are anxious not to receive answers to things."

"It's how I lived so long with the twins without strangling one of them. Don't ask, don't tell. It's the safest policy. Just know if you need anything, to let me know. Don't wear yourself out, and be careful. It's a dangerous game you're playing." When she nodded at him, Bill changed the subject. "So have you pinpointed the final location, then?"

"We think so. We think it's at the school."

"And Dumbledore never ran across it? You're mad."

"Perhaps, but it's the most logical place to start. We'll get back to you when we find what we're looking for."

"I'll be waiting." Bill turned back toward the Burrow, and Hermione followed along, walking in silence.

Before they reached the door, Tonks came out. "Hermione, I've been hoping to catch you before you leave."

Letting out an annoyed breath at yet another interruption, which was sure to bring Ron out looking for her when she wanted nothing more than to sleep, Hermione made herself smile and face the Auror. "What's up?"

Again she walked away from the home while Tonks reached into her jacket and pulled out a tiny bag. "I picked these up for you today, had a hard time keeping Shackbolt from seeing what I was buying. Nosey tosser. Anyway, enlarge them when you get home and take a look. I think I covered all the basics."

Recognizing the bag from Flourish and Blotts, Hermione smiled. "That was quick; thanks for your help. Oh, and Bill knows about the pregnancy, but not the marriage. Ron knows about the marriage, but not the pregnancy, and neither know who the father is."

"But Harry knows everything."

"Yes, Harry knows everything." Hermione sighed. "I'm going to get a headache trying to keep this all straight."

"Better you than me, girl."

When Hermione arrived back at the cottage, Severus was sitting in a chair in the cool evening air next to a lit lantern reading a book. He looked up at the crack of Apparition, then returned his attention to his book. Too tired to deal with his petulance, she walked right past him and into the cottage.

She moved around the cottage, taking care of the little details like putting things away, sliding books back into place from the stack she had set out the previous day. Her body was weary from the dueling practice earlier in the day, and her muscles ached from the stress of wondering how the meeting would go.

She stepped into the shower to wash off the grime and sweat of the day, slid into one of the slinky nightgowns her husband had bought for her, as there was nothing else in the cottage, then eased her tired body between the sheets.

Though her body was tired, her mind wouldn't stop. Her mind was constantly considering all of the variables they had to work with, trying to figure out how to tweak the odds in their interest.

"I could hear that amazing brain of yours working from the front porch."

Surprised from her train of thought, Hermione looked over to see Severus standing in the doorway to the room, silhouetted by the kitchen light. He had removed his outer jacket and vest and undone the top two buttons of his shirt. His shoes and socks were missing as well. For Severus Snape it was remarkably relaxed. "There's a lot going on."

"Indeed." He hovered in the doorway for a long moment. "You asked me to find out about the Chans, why the Dark Lord wanted them."

She tipped her head to the side. "Yes?"

"Apparently Mr. Chan is especially talented with Arithmancy, and the Dark Lord wanted someone to calculate the best way to break Potter. You needn't worry about the couple, however; they haven't returned to their restaurant and are unlikely to before Potter sends the evil git to eternity."

"Thanks. I appreciate you finding out for me."

"It wasn't difficult; several groups of Death Eaters were discussing it. I have already sent Lupin a note to inform him to protect other powerful Arithmancers. The longer it takes the Dark Lord to snatch another, the better for our side." When she only nodded at his explanation, Severus watched her for a long moment, searching her face. "Are you going to make me sleep in the front room again?"

"I didn't make you in the first place. You're welcome to sleep beside me, there just won't be any other activities going on here for a while."

"For how long?" He walked over slowly, every movement beckoning to her senses. His long, lean form enticed and excited her as it prowled toward her. Then he leaned down to her, his expression smoldering.

Hermione could feel his desire running through her and that it matched her own, egged it on and began the spiral that would soon become unstoppable, but she ignored it as well as she could while the pitch slowly rose. "Not long." She allowed her voice to almost purr.

"How long?" His purr matched her own, and he ran his fingers down her arm, leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

She placed a hand on each of his arms and ran them across the soft fabric to his chest, thoroughly enjoying the feel of it and his muscles under her fingers for the moment. "Until you fully appreciate the seriousness of your mistake." She pushed with all her might, off balancing him so that he nearly fell over.

He growled, turned and stalked out. Just before the front door slammed, he called out. "If you need me, you know how to let me know."

Clenching her jaw as pain washed over her...both his and hers...she turned her face into her pillow in hopes she would be able to deny the existence of the tears welling in her eyes if they weren't running down her face.

The next day was exhausting as Hermione fought alongside Harry and Ron, dueling Kingsley, Remus, Charlie and Bill in the paddock at the Burrow. Though they found themselves flat on their backs with all kinds of creative, but not painful hexes, they managed to hold their own most of the time.

They broke for lunch, then started up again, working through the afternoon with breaks for the older men to give them pointers periodically on dueling stances and to show them new hexes and jinxes the trio hadn't encountered before.

By bedtime, Hermione was completely exhausted, but she returned to her empty cottage, soaked in the luxurious tub and went to her huge bed, wishing her husband were there to snuggle up to. She knew it was partly her fault he wasn't, but wasn't ready to back down yet.

When morning arrived and Severus still wasn't at the cottage, she searched for him in her mind and realized he was close by, probably at the manor house she had never seen. She hadn't thought about where he might be staying. He had his home in Spinner's End, but he hadn't stayed there, instead he had stayed close by. For the first time, she allowed herself more than a passing thought, wondering who owned the property. Why had this sweet cottage never been cared for properly before, and why had she never seen the owner?

She rose and got ready for the day, sitting down to a hot breakfast, thanking her lucky stars for Twinkie after the way she had tossed and turned the night before. There was still a bit of conflict inside her, telling her it was wrong to be grateful that a house-elf had to be indentured to the property, but she didn't have enough energy to really mean it.

Today she would go with the boys to Hogwarts to begin their search of the castle. The job seemed insurmountable, even with the parameters they had placed on the search. Then there was the dinner party her mother had hoped she would bring Severus to that evening. With everything else going on, she had forgotten to ask him. But she couldn't put it off any longer, and she didn't want to lie and say he hadn't been able to make it if she hadn't even asked him. There were too many secrets and lies she was keeping from her parents as it was.

"Severus," she spoke aloud. "Please come see me." She added an emotional tug to the request and returned to sipping on her tea, trusting that he would follow through with his promise to come if she called him.

A couple minutes later she heard the front door open and close, then his footsteps in the other room. The swinging door to the kitchen opened, and he stood before her, his hair in disarray, his clothing rumpled and his face impassive. "You called, my lady?"

Her irritation mounted at his butler-correct tone, but she pushed it aside. "I've been meaning to ask you for a couple days if you would join me for dinner at my parents' house this evening. They have been requesting an opportunity to meet Sebastian."

"It would serve you right if I came as myself instead." His voice was filled with vitriol, though his face continued to be impassive.

Hermione pushed her bushy hair back from her face with one hand and sighed. "If you don't want to go, if you don't feel you can play the doting lover, just say so. I wouldn't want to tax your acting abilities by making you pretend you felt something for me besides lust."

"My acting is superb, as you are well aware. I'm afraid I haven't a clue what to say to Muggles. I've known so few. I haven't really conversed with one since I moved away from home the last time."

"They haven't changed all that much. Not really. They still eat and sleep, breathe and talk about the stock market, the green grocer's and the latest football game. You do still remember what those things are, don't you?"

He growled at her. "Do not patronize me."

"Then don't act like a fool. Are you coming or not?" She wrapped her shaky hands around the tea cup, hoping to hide her emotional and physical state.

His eyes narrowed at her and he seemed to study her. "You're not well. Go back to bed."

"I'm fine." She stood, ignoring the wave of dizziness that came over her.

"You're not fine." He stepped forward and grabbed her by the shoulder, steadying her before wrapping his other arm around her. "You're going back to bed."

"I can't go back to bed. I have work to do, Horcruxes to track, evil wizards to destroy. There's no time for me to be sick." Her protests continued all the way to the bedroom, but she didn't put up more than a token fight.

"It appears that saving the world, both wizarding and Muggle, will have to wait an hour or two. Your morning sickness is starting to kick in." He lowered her to the bed, touching her with his wand to change her clothing back to what she had worn the night before.

"I don't have morning sickness, a bit of evening nausea, yes, but nothing in the morning. It's all your imagination. That feels good." She closed her eyes as his hand ran across her forehead and he muttered a charm to determine her health. His hand was cool and calming.

"Just a temporary setback. You'll be better in no time, my sweet. Lay back and rest; you worked yourself too hard yesterday anyway and could use a little more sleep." He muttered something more under his breath and she drifted off.

When she awoke again three hours had passed, and Hermione found her husband sitting on the bedcovers next to her, reading from the latest issue of *Ars Alchemia*. She took in a deep breath and rubbed her eyes.

Alerted by the noise and movement, Severus looked over at her, then placed his cool hand on her forehead again, casting the same charm to check her health. "You should be feeling far better now. Any difference?"

"Did you cast a charm to make me sleep?"

"Yes; you didn't sleep well last night. Kept waking me with your worry. After the beating you took at practice yesterday, I couldn't let you run around at half strength. You look better now though; you have all your color back. Would you like some tea?"

Hermione wanted to be irritated that he had 'helped' her back to sleep when she had so many things to do, but she felt so much better, she found she couldn't complain. "Yes, please." She sat up in bed and leaned against the headboard.

When Twinkie popped into the room a few seconds later, it was with a steaming tea set and platter of finger foods. "Twinkie is here to serve you, Master and Mistress. So good to see you feeling better, Mistress. The tea will be just the right thing for you. Let Twinkie know if Mistress needs anything more."

"Thank you, Twinkie, that will be all for now." Severus picked up the pot and one of the cups to begin pouring. Twinkie bowed low and vanished.

"Strange elf, that one." Hermione took the offered cup of tea and drank nearly half of it before turning back to her husband. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I don't like to see you ill." He nodded slightly, but wouldn't meet her eyes.

"I don't like to be ill." She smiled slightly at him, then took another sip and allowed her eyes to wander to the clock on the wall across from her. "Oh, no. Is it really that late?" Hermione set the cup on her nightstand and made to get out of bed.

Severus grabbed her upper arm and prevented her escape, not hurting her, just restraining her. "You aren't going anywhere until you've eaten something."

Irritation poured out of her, but he didn't bother to acknowledge it. "I was supposed to meet Harry and Ron at Headquarters hours ago. They'll be wondering where I've gone, if I'm all right."

"They'll be fine. I sent my Patronus to Potter when you fell back asleep. He knows you are indisposed and will join them at your destination sometime mid day. He returned the favor, saying you can simply call for Dobby when you reach the destination, and he will guide you to their location."

Relieved that the boys wouldn't be worrying, at least, she settled back against her pillows, her head on the cool wall. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

There was a long pause. "Yes I did. As you stated the other day, I got you into this position without your consent. I knew there would be limitations, illness, and stress for you if we created a life together, and I didn't take the time to consider that you would need to be part of that decision. Even if our hand had been forced, I should have spoken with you about it. I will strive to be what you need of me as you deal with the drawbacks of your physical condition."

A long moment passed as Hermione tried to assimilate what he had said. "I appreciate it, Severus. I don't want you to think that this child is completely unwelcome." She placed a hand on her stomach and tried to take it all in. "There's a part of me that wants this child, very much, because it came from you."

"A very small part wants the child, however."

Hermione looked over and searched his averted face, studied the careful way he set his tea cup back onto the saucer. When she sensed something more, she focused in on his emotions, broke through the bridge and felt anguish, regret, resentment, sorrow and longing.

She placed a hand on his arm, then leaned over and kissed his cheek. "A growing part. Give me time to get used to the idea."

He nodded, but said nothing and did not meet her eyes.

Several minutes passed in silence as she ate a few things from the tray of food Twinkie had brought, then rose from the bed feeling many times better. "You're going hunting then, I suppose?" he asked when she moved toward the chair where her clothes lay folded.

"We all do what we must." A tap of her wand and her apparel switched again.

He rose behind her; she heard the sound of his clothing shifting, brushing together. "You will be careful."

Picking up her brush, she began to attack the mat on the side of her head. "Yes, and I'll have the boys with me. I could hardly get into trouble in an empty school."

"You'll be with Potter and Weasley. I don't believe you could help getting in trouble with them under any circumstances."

That brought a smile to her face, mostly because his comment lacked venom. "And you may be right." Another moment and her hair was in some order, and she turned to face him. "Will you be about to meet my parents for dinner tonight, around six?"

"Unless I'm called away. I'll be wearing appropriate Muggle apparel and my most conciliatory manner. I promise." He reached out and rested both his hands on her shoulders, then bowed down and planted a soft, brief kiss on her lips. "Take care of yourself. I'll see you this evening."

Relishing the contact, Hermione leaned in and laid one more short kiss on him. "Until tonight."

When he let go, she smiled, then Disapparated.

He pursed his lips together, tasting her on them, and smiled. All was not well, but perhaps it could be mended after all.

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44: The Search For The Cup

Chapter 44 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 44: The Search For The Cup

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Hermione popped into view on the edge of Hogwarts grounds. Her stomach turned as she managed to replace the air that Apparition had squeezed from her lungs. Head reeling, she set her hands on her knees and prayed the Apparition sickness would pass after the first trimester of her pregnancy ended. After a moment, her world came to a stop, and her stomach settled; she looked at the school. It seemed impossibly far away, so she looked around her, then Disillusioned herself before changing into her Animagus form and flying to the school. The building was dark and silent, seemed almost foreboding with her knowledge that it held only a handful of living human inhabitants.

It didn't take long for her to reach the front door in her avian form, and she soon found herself standing before the huge heavy doors. She was grateful to find it took no more than a tug before the doors rotated open. Few of the usual sconces were lit this time, far fewer than normal, but she had to remind herself there was no one in the building to need the light.

"Dobby," she called after an uncertain minute.

There was a slight crack, and the small house-elf appeared before her in his usual odd clothing choices...a mishmash of colors and patterns. "Miss is here! Harry told Dobby to bring Miss to him as soon as Miss arrived." He took her by the hand, snapped his fingers, and she found herself standing in a dorm. The effects of Apparition were far less this time, and she wondered if it was the elf magic or the relatively shorter distance that was the cause. She thanked Dobby and let him go. Judging by the green and silver bedding and hangings around her, she must be in Slytherin.

"Voldemort might have slept in one of these beds," she whispered to herself, shivering slightly at the thought.

"Yeah, unreal, isn't it?" Harry's voice came from behind her, causing her to jump. "Glad you could join us. Feeling better?"

"Much." She turned to face him, and he brushed her bushy hair away from her face. It was a gentle action, one that concerned and warmed her.

"Glad to hear it. I'm sure you can tell you're in the Slytherin dorms. We finished the trophy room earlier. Ron's already done the common room and is on the second round of boys' dorms. I took the first floor and am working on the third now. We can't get to the girls' rooms; you'll have to cover them."

"If the idea is for him to put the cup somewhere that means something to him, it'll have to be in the boys' side, since he couldn't get into the girls' dorms if you can't."

Harry blinked. "Right, should have thought of that. Well, do you want to head up a floor and see what you can find?"

"Sure." Hermione turned and headed out into the hall, hurried up the few steps to the next level and noticed the sign that said 'Third Years'. She wondered if the signs were for the past school year, or the next one coming up...which should have already started.

The room was long and cold, the hangings coated with a light haze of dust as she walked down between the rows of beds. Sixteen beds, sixteen Slytherin boys this age. That was about standard, somewhere between sixteen and twenty of each male and female in each house for each year, at least on average. Beginning at the far end, she took the space one area at a time, casting charms along the way, checking in corners and under beds, shooting spells into the rafters.

More than half an hour passed as she canvassed the room, then finished, closing the door behind her again. She hurried up the stairs to the next room where Ron was working, but as he was closely focused, she continued on. Harry worked in the fifth years' room, and she continued to the last room on the boys' side. The sign denoting that the room most likely belonged to the boys her age made her shiver slightly.

As she made her way down the aisle, she counted the beds. The number for the Slytherin boys was exactly right, and she wondered idly which had been Blaises' bed, which Crabbe's and Goyle's. The thought made her a bit ill, so she pushed it away and focused again on what she was doing. As she neared the end of the room, Ron pushed open the door.

"Harry said you were here. Glad to see you're feeling better."

"Yeah, just needed a bit more sleep, I guess." Hermione didn't take her eyes off her work, but finished the job, then turned back toward the door to find Harry standing slightly behind Ron. "No luck then?"

"No. Dobby said he'd bring us some lunch if you'd like to stop. It's after noon." Harry motioned toward the stairwell with his head.

"I'm starving," Ron said, turning toward the stairs.

"As long as we don't have to eat it in this room. Creeps me out." Hermione followed behind. When they entered the common room, she took a closer look around and decided it wasn't that bad. She had never seen it before, but it wasn't quite as horrible as the descriptions Harry and Ron had given her when they visited it during second year. The ceiling was low, and the room dark and dungeon like, though whether that was because it had always been that way or because of the limited torches that had been lit, she wasn't sure. One thing she was sure of, she was glad she was a Gryffindor. She wondered if the thought of those she had grown up with living in that dorm room at the top of the stairs had been the main issue that bothered her, rather than the room itself.

They settled down at the same sofa and table that Harry and Ron had sat at while pretending to be Crabbe and Goyle in their second year. Dobby brought piles of sandwiches and another plate full of assorted biscuits along with a carafe of pumpkin juice. "You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble," Hermione protested.

"The house-elves is happy to serve you, Miss. They is missing having all the students to serve and want to help you bring the evil wizard down," Dobby said anxiously.

"Well, tell them we appreciate their hard work."

"Dobby is doing it, Miss. Call Dobby if you needs anything else." He bobbed his head and, with a snap of his fingers, disappeared.

Ron was already halfway through his first sandwich when Hermione turned to him. She grimaced at his piggy eating habits and returned her gaze to the platter of food. It was safer that way.

Several minutes passed as they ate, each lost in their own thoughts. The sandwiches were gone and the biscuits were making a vanishing act as well when Hermione turned to the boys. "I think we're going about this all wrong."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Well, if there was one room in this huge castle that would be a symbol of Tom Riddle's power and purity, do you think it would be his dorm room? Or the trophy room? No, it wouldn't."

"Well, that should be obvious, since none of those places was the hiding spot for the cup," Harry said.

"Think." Hermione gave them both an exasperated look. They had all been so dense. "What would symbolize his power the best? What was his major accomplishment in school? His claim to fame, if you will."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "I thought we figured the Chamber of Secrets was already covered by the diary."

"We might have been mistaken though, mightn't we?"

"So you're suggesting we poke around the Chamber then?" Harry asked.

"It wouldn't hurt to try. I know you said it was big, but maybe we can narrow our search a bit after taking a look around. After all, there were already some powerful protections on the chamber itself. One had to be a Parselmouth to get into it. And then there's the basilisk, which can turn anyone to stone with just a look. Who would try and get past that monster? Even if someone figured out that he had placed a Horcrux there, who would survive the search?"

"Brilliant, Hermione. Just brilliant." Ron grabbed the last two biscuits from the plate and stood up. "Let's go have a look."

"Hermione can't go down there. It could be dangerous," Harry protested.

"Like danger ever stopped her before." Ron shrugged and headed for the door.

Harry began to protest again, but Hermione grabbed his arm and shook her head. "He doesn't know, remember?" she hissed low so Ron couldn't hear.

"We should tell him," Harry whispered back as Ron exited the common room.

"Not now." Seeing Harry's mutinous glare, she relented. "He's going to go all mental on me when he finds out. Let's just wait until we take care of the Horcrux. If we don't find it by the end of the week, I promise to tell him anyway."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Harry nodded, and Hermione heard Ron calling to them from the hallway, asking what was keeping them.

It took more than ten minutes to reach Moaning Myrtle's bathroom on the second floor. Hermione was glad to see no evidence of the ghost when they walked into the neglected bathroom. Though the house-elves did a smashing job of keeping the rest of Hogwarts in good repair and cleaned up, they neglected the haunted bathroom, which was usually fine as no one ever wanted to use it. Not when you knew a whiny ghost might appear from the u-bend any moment.

Harry walked along the group of sinks and came to rest at the one with the snake scratched in the copper pipe. He hovered for a long moment, as though uncertain about what to do. "I can't help but wonder what new horror might await us down there."

"No new horror is waiting. The only one in that chamber was the basilisk, and you've killed it, so you've nothing to worry about." Hermione walked up and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know I can't imagine what you went through going down there the first time."

"It's imagining Ginny, seeing her there again in my mind, this time knowing how much I love her, how I might never have known her if things had gone differently." His voice was low, filled with pain.

"You saved her, mate, and she's safe at home, being prodded through her homework by Mum right now," Ron said.

Nodding and squaring his shoulders, Harry began the strange hissing noise of Parseltongue. A moment later, the sink began to recede and exposed a large pipe. Even after having the boys describe it for her, Hermione hadn't been prepared for the sight. It was dark, dirty, and long. The last thing she wanted to do was go sliding down it.

"I'll go first, mate." Ron swallowed nervously and approached the pipe.

"I can go first," Harry protested.

"No, you follow Hermione. She's never been down there before." With that, the most chivalric thing Ron had ever done, he jumped, landed in the pipe and began to slide.

Hermione waited for the count of ten before following, to allow Ron to reach the bottom and scoot out of the way. Trying not to think about what creepy, slimy things might have used this pipe for a home recently, she settled in the pipe and pushed off, screaming slightly when the downward angle grew steeper than she had counted on. She lit her wand tip, but she was moving so fast she couldn't process what she was approaching until it was almost past. The motion made her head spin slightly, and she focused on the dark hole ahead of her.

She reached the bottom and landed on her bum with a thud, hearing the cracking of animal bones beneath her posterior. "Ewww!" She accepted Ron's hand up and moved out of the way only a few seconds before Harry came wooshing down to join them.

When he stood and brushed himself off, they looked around. "Much changed?" she asked lightly, though she knew it couldn't look better, by any means.

"Nope. Maybe dirtier, but I doubt it." Harry gave her a searching look, as though to ascertain she was really OK; she nodded that she was, and he seemed to accept it.

They climbed over and around the rubble left over from Ron's wand backfiring after Gilderoy Lockhart had tried to cast a memory charm on him. They waded through the dirt and animal carcasses, passed the huge snakeskin the basilisk had shed before the boys' previous visit in the tunnel and finally arrived at the large door that blocked the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry hissed again, and the door unlocked, then slowly swung open. Hermione caught her breath as she looked on at the many pillars lining the room and the carved serpents everywhere. A huge carving of Slytherin's head held court at the back of the temple-like chamber, his mouth closed, eyes focused. There were some minor imperfections in the carving, and Hermione wondered if Harry had done that with Gryffindor's sword when he had battled the basilisk or if they were simply due to the passage of time.

They walked to the center of the chamber and stopped. Hermione turned in place, looking around her in awe. It must have taken Slytherin years to put the place together, she figured. "Where do we start?"

Ron grimaced. "It's huge. It could take us days just to cover the chamber and immediate tunnels, never mind any other tunnels that might shoot off from it without coming back."

"We could try Accioing the cup," Harry suggested. "That worked with the comb."

"But not until after we removed the curses and wards on it," Hermione said, taking another step toward the giant head. "And it could have a curse on it that could kill you if it came into contact with your skin before being removed."

"Right."

"Let's get busy then. We won't take any of the tunnels yet, just the outer walls of this chamber." Ron walked to the wall to the right of the door they had just come in and began casting the spell Bill had taught them. Harry started on the left and began working in the opposite direction. Considering the options, Hermione decided to work on the pillars and carvings not attached to the walls, and then move on to Slytherin's head.

Two hours passed as they worked methodically around the space. Hermione grew weary; her arm ached from holding her wand up to swish and flick. Her back and neck ached from standing, and her feet hurt because so much time had been spent standing rather than moving around. Still, she had managed to clear up the inner carvings and the exterior of the head. Ron and Harry had both made exceptional progress on their journeys around the room and were expected to meet up at the head in a few minutes.

Deciding to take a break, Hermione transfigured her handkerchief into a large fluffy cushion and sat down. Soon she was lying down, and the next thing she knew she was being shaken awake by Harry.

"What's up with you, anyway? If you aren't feeling well, maybe you ought to get back to bed," Ron said. "I'm sure Dobby could get us some Pepperup Potion from the infirmary if you need a boost."

"Nonsense. It was just a power nap. I feel better all ready. Find anything?" The sooner she turned him from thoughts of Pepperup Potion, the better, as she wasn't supposed to take it while pregnant.

"Zilch," Harry said. "You're sure you're fine?"

"Of course. I just didn't sleep well last night. Too much on my mind. There's nothing to worry about. Now, where is our next most obvious search location?"

"In the head." There was no hesitation in Ron's pronouncement, though he seemed to catch Harry by surprise.

"In the head?" Harry echoed.

"Yes. The basilisk came out of it. So it might be the home of the basilisk. Again, another protection against the cup being removed."

"I'll never fit up there, though. Even at eleven or twelve it would have been difficult, but now. You must be joking." Harry shook his head.

"You might not be able to fit in your current form," Hermione said, catching onto Ron's plan. "That doesn't mean you couldn't as a capuchin."

"But I can't do magic as a monkey."

"Technically, a capuchin isn't a monkey, though it is in the primate family."

"She's moving into lecture mode," Ron said with a groan. "Better save us all the aggravation and at least take a look around. Maybe it will be big enough in there that you can return to normal size if you need to test it."

"Right, whatever. I'll go." Harry turned toward the face and hissed.

The mouth lowered, revealing the opening the basilisk had emerged from all those years before. Harry straightened his shoulders, cracked his neck and put on his most determined look. "I'll be right back." After stowing his wand in his pocket, he began shrinking until it was Harry the primate rushing across the room to the opening.

Something didn't feel right to Hermione, and only moments before Harry reached the mouth, she screamed out, "Wait, Harry, not yet. Wait!"

He came to a halt only inches from the opening, and Hermione and Ron rushed over. When Harry returned to his usual form, he looked irritated. "What?"

"We haven't tested the opening or tunnel through there. There could be traps. We need to at least send in a couple charms to check first, make sure it doesn't kill you."

"You're mad. Nothing's going to be wrong with it. It already had a powerful guardian, didn't it?" Harry asked.

"Yes, and one Horcrux should have been plenty to protect Voldemort from death, but he didn't stop at one, did he? He made six instead."

Harry looked at Ron, and they had this silent conversation of the kind that only best friends could have with only facial expressions. She understood the conversation perfectly, though it still irritated her that they didn't just talk out loud. When he looked back at Hermione, he nodded. "An ounce of prevention and all that."

He turned and cast the detection spell they had been using, and the mouth flared up nearly midnight blue. Whatever was on there wasn't in the least friendly.

They stood in silence for a long moment before Ron spoke up. "So do we use the one-way shielding charms while Harry tries a few things out on it, or do we go get Bill?"

"I'm all for finishing this now," Harry said.

"Same here. If we keep the shields up, we should be pretty safe. We could try a few of those spells Bill was running anyway, see what pops." Hermione shrugged, open to either avenue.

Harry nodded. "We'll give it a nudge or two then. Each of you stand on opposite sides and cast the shield."

In a few seconds, the shield was up and reinforced by both casters; then Harry lifted his wand and sent a few shots of light at the opening. The first two spells ricocheted off the statue opening and then off the shields, taking out chunks of rock along Slytherin's face. The third went on through, seeming to do nothing. Harry paused to give the spell a moment to work, then there was a huge explosion, throwing all three of them back and spewing rock as the top of Slytherin's head burst into hundreds of pieces.

Hermione had just enough time to cast up another shield over herself as the rubble crashed around them, enough time to glance to the side to see Ron groaning at the foot of a column, then she was overcome by a wash of magic and passed out.

Severus was completing the final thirty stirs on the Felix Felicis for the day when Potter's Patronus flew through the ceiling into the basement Potions lab. He looked up in surprise, then asked it to wait for a moment. He had never known a Patronus to wait for anything before, but strangely, it did as it was told. For exactly a minute, by his calculations. Severus finished the final stir, removed the rod from the brew and set it in the sink for rinsing before turning to the Patronus. "Go ahead. This had better be good."

Harry's voice came through the Patronus when the large buck opened its mouth. "Hermione has been transported to St. Mungos. Something went wrong in our activities today. I thought Sebastian would like to know." Finished with its message, the shimmering white being melted back through the ceiling.

"Thought I might want to know? As though it were only a passing trifle to me that my wife is in hospital when she was supposed to be safely ensconced at Hogwarts?" Severus Apparated to the top floor of the cottage, then changed his appearance to that of Sebastian. The idea that something might have hurt Hermione, hurt their baby, was enough to make him feel panicky. Even more horrified by the response than the cause...his emotional response shouldn't have happened as their bond was only artificial, chemical, not emotional, for all that it sometimes seemed otherwise...he took several long, calming breaths, then Apparated from the cottage door to St. Mungos, praying he wouldn't get caught going out in public like this. Knowing if he did, it would be worth it if he could first reassure himself that Hermione was OK.

After waiting in an interminably long line with a sneezing, rashy baby and three whining, unwashed children...not to mention their cranky parents...Severus was finally given Hermione's room number and sent on his way to the fourth floor. As no one but Potter would know his true identity, he didn't bother to restrain his worry for her too much. It would make more sense for him to appear distraught if she were his fiancée...the lie he had to tell at the front counter to get them to tell him where in the ruddy hell she was. He could have sworn at the Welcome Witch as he fixed it so she no longer remembered he had ever come by or that Hermione had been in the hospital that day, but that would have caused a scene, requiring him to adjust even more memories. It wasn't worth the effort.

The room number came up and he pulled the door open. He nearly lost his heart when he saw her lying helpless in a bed. Her skin was pallid, her eyes closed. Her eyelids looked thin, purplish in the yellow hospital lights. A glance to the side proved Harry and Ron lay in the next two beds over, though they were both alert and watching him. He scowled at the two of them, which appeared to dampen their greetings before they could issue any, then turned his eyes back on his wife.

When he reached out and brushed his fingers along her arm, her eyes opened, and a smile came over her face. "Severus." It was a whisper, so soft he could barely hear it. He didn't have time right now to worry about whether Weasley had heard it or not.

He knelt beside her bed as there was no chair nearby and cradled her cheek in his hand. "I thought you said you couldn't get into much trouble in an empty castle."

She smiled softly. "As you pointed out, trouble has a knack of finding us, wherever we may be."

"Do they know what hit you?"

Harry spoke up this time. "A particularly nasty curse that's supposed to slowly drain your magical power. Thankfully, Hermione and I had shields up when it detonated, deflecting it mostly. The Healers say we'll all be back to normal strength in a couple days. We should be released shortly."

Anger began to grow in Severus's chest, but he wasn't able to let the three of them know how foolish and irresponsible they had been, as Molly and Arthur Weasley rushed into the room at that time, bringing confusion and noise in their wake.

He ground his teeth together, feigning polite greetings upon being 'introduced' to the married couple, was forced to answer several questions, then managed to pull the hangings around Hermione's bed so they might have some privacy. Only seconds after the hangings pulled closed, a Healer in the Healers' distinctive lime green robes stepped into the area around Hermione's bed and hustled over to check her out.

"You should go elsewhere while I evaluate her," the woman said, eyeing him distrustfully.

"I'm not going anywhere," Severus said.

"I really must insist..."

Hermione interrupted the woman before her husband could start hexing. "I want him to stay; there's nothing I need to hide from him."

"She's my fiancée," Severus said by way of explanation.

The Healer's eyebrows lifted. "Well, I certainly hope you intend to make that more official before things get too far along here." She placed a hand on Hermione's belly and glared at him.

"You needn't worry about that." He glared back at the woman, incensed to think she would doubt his honor.

"Good." The woman nodded, then turned back to Hermione, her tone softening dramatically. "Now, dear, since you're in your first trimester, you will find your power almost completely drained over the next week or so as your body routes most all of your available magic to the baby, as your power level is so much lower than usual."

"Will it hurt the baby, to have my power so low right now? Will it prevent the child from receiving the full power it should have gotten?" Hermione's eyes were wide with worry.

"No, the child should be fine. There might be an incremental power loss of one or two percent, but as you're such a powerful witch, a Muggle-born, and it is clear the, er, father," she spared a glance at Severus now, "is also fairly powerful, the child will probably still be well above normal."

Severus prompted her to tell him everything Hermione might need to know about the expected results from the blast, how to compensate and any additional treatment she might need, including names and dosages of any potions they intended to give her. Throughout all of this, he kept meticulous notes. If it irritated her, he didn't really care; he needed all the information he could get.

When they were finished, Severus rose with the Healer, following her out of the room. "Excuse me, but who else has been in contact with Hermione? I do need to know who to thank for their efforts on her behalf." He smiled his most charmingly.

The woman pointed to a couple of nurses who were whispering together at a kiosk and then mentioned the name of the Healer who had first treated her when she had been brought in an hour earlier...by a house-elf, no less. The woman seemed shocked by the fact that a house-elf had been employed as transportation. Everyone knew they were for cleaning, after all.

Smiling and thanking her graciously, Severus said goodbye, waited for her to turn her back, then performed a small memory charm, removing any reference to Hermione's existence in the hospital. He walked by the nurses' station and did the same to them, leaving behind an indistinguishable haze that would do the same to anyone else who might come to stand there in the next hour. Finally, he continued on to admitting to take care of any staff there.

When he came slinking back to her room a few minutes later, the Weasleys were still there and had apparently removed the curtain from around her bed. "We need to go now, sweetheart," Severus said, pulling back the blankets from her bed.

"What do you mean? The Healers said none of them could be moved for several more hours, probably not until morning," Molly protested.

"Certainly, Madam, you can understand why it is that she cannot be known to have been here in the company of those two." He gestured toward Harry and Ron. "It would defeat the purpose of the whole charade."

Molly nodded and acknowledged his point. "Good." He pointed his wand at the paper on the clipboard at the bottom of Hermione's bed with her statistics and treatments so far written on it. He Summoned it to himself, folded it and placed it in his pocket along with the information on her future treatment. "After we've left, please do the appropriate cleaning charm on her bed, remake it and pretend as though there were only the two boys to begin with. I have already taken steps to remove her visit from all records and memories but yours."

"Was that really necessary?" Arthur asked. The oldest Weasley had always been one to avoid fudging over the edge of the line too far unless completely necessary.

"Only if you want your informant to stay alive." Severus turned back to Hermione, plucked her out of bed and Disapparated without another word.

When they appeared back at the cottage door, Hermione wondered if she could make it into the bathroom before she vomited or if Severus would be forced to clean up after her. It was late afternoon, and her body was beginning its usual rebellion. Side-Along Apparition was worse for causing nausea than self-Apparition, but this was even worse than usual. She supposed that was partly due to the curse. "Best get me to the loo."

Severus growled and hurried through the house, reaching the bathroom just in time. He set her carefully onto the floor with her head by the toilet, where she proceeded to vomit up everything she had eaten that day. When she finished, he rubbed a cool, wet cloth across the back of her neck and around to her forehead.

"I didn't realize you were still so sick, or I would have waited a bit longer before bringing you home." His tone was apologetic as he picked her up and carried her back to the bed to lie down.

"I wasn't, it's just Apparition makes me sick lately. That's the first time I've thrown up though." Hermione ran the backs of her fingers over her forehead, almost dazed in her reaction.

"The baby," he deduced.

"Yes." She felt the tug of guilt from him and knew he was blaming himself. At the moment, she couldn't feel bad about it.

"So what were you doing? What happened?"

"Slytherin's head blew up, surprised us all; big chunks of rock; bright flash of light. My head hurts."

He soothed her, then pulled out his potion interaction reference along with her treatment record and the list of treatments she would need to find a headache remedy that wouldn't interfere with the medication she was supposed to be taking. "Just a moment, it won't take long for me to prepare something for that head; then we can talk a bit longer. You had your potions just before I returned to the room, so we'll have a couple hours to straighten this out before I have to start work on your healing draughts."

Hermione listened to him go down the stairs into the cellar, then allowed her eyes to drift closed while she reviewed what she knew of the day's events. After the blast, she had awoken in St. Mungos with a Healer fussing over her, running his wand along her body as he muttered a diagnostic spell. He had lifted a brow when he realized she

was pregnant and told his assistant to make a note of that on the board she was holding. Ron had appeared in the room a moment later, brought by Dobby, who then disappeared again, reappearing a bit later with Harry in tow. She made a mental note to buy the crazy elf at least two outfits for Christmas along with two dozen of the most loud and obnoxious socks she could find in London.

When the doctors had moved to put her in a room of her own, Harry had insisted the three of them be placed together, regardless of their genders. She had seen the shimmer of silver exit his wand as the Healers took her to her room on the fourth floor.

She thought she was becoming uncomfortably familiar with the fourth floor lately.

Soon Severus was returning to the room, a cup of puce potion in his hand. He helped her sit up, then held the cup to her lips while she drank it. "I'm not completely helpless, you know," she said after she finished the dose.

"I know. I don't want you to drain yourself. I never thought I'd see you so magically weak. When I think of what might have happened today." He broke off, his eyes haunted as they looked into hers.

The previous few days had been especially difficult ones for the two of them. One thought in all the hundreds that jumbled through her head stood out though. "And the baby. Would you still want it if it turns out to have the magical ability of Filch?"

Severus flinched, then appeared to be considering it. "I can't imagine any child of ours turning out to be a Squib, even with the possible reduction of powers the Healer mentioned. Though I would prefer the child to be as brilliant as yourself, any child of yours would be loved regardless of magical talent."

"Truly? You won't feel embarrassment if the baby makes Neville look like a powerful mage?"

Again, Severus flinched. "Please don't say things like that. It's not funny."

"No, it's not." Her voice was flat, even to her own ears. "You need to decide what you want, Severus. What you can live with. We won't have a choice in the matter anyway. I...I don't want you to resent me, to resent Harry and Ron for doing what we had to do today if the child isn't as magically talented as you'd like him or her to be. And it wouldn't be fair to the child if you resented it either."

"Hermione, I could never..."

"Don't say you could never. None of us knows what we are capable of until that defining moment."

Her words hung in the air a long time before he asked her to tell what had happened. She obliged, starting from the moment she had left the cottage. He made no comments about her activities, only nodding in the appropriate places.

"I suppose I ought to owl your parents and request a postponement of our dinner," he said when she was finished and feeling tired again.

"Oh, Mum will be so disappointed. But I'm not up to it tonight. Just tell her, oh, I don't know, that I've come down with the flu or something, that I've been ill for several hours and that we will try to reschedule when I'm feeling better. And tell her I'm sorry." She was sorry, having looked forward to getting the initial visit out of the way, though she would just as soon not introduce them to their new son-in-law anytime soon. Of course, if she put it off too long, she might be introducing the baby and his father to her parents at the same time.

As she allowed her eyes to drift shut, she figured that would probably be bad form.

Severus had finished making the potions she would need over the following days when his mark began to burn. He hissed and clutched at his arm, then took the medicine, along with the paper detailing the dosages, and placed them on the night stand. The burning was insistent. Hoping the summons was not a result of Hermione's activities that day, he changed clothes and Apparated.

AN: So they've found the final Horcrux (not counting Nagini). Hope you enjoyed this chapter!

Thanks to countrymouse for betaing my story, and to AngelMischa for her unending patience with my punctuation problems.

45: Meeting the In-Laws

Chapter 45 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 45: Meeting the In-Laws

Severus stood before the Dark Lord after being called from Hermione's side. The gathering was large; nearly a hundred followers stood in ever-widening circles around their mad leader, anxious to do his will. For his part, Severus would far rather be curled up in bed with his wife, spend a day becoming best mates with James Potter's brat or even praising Longbottom on his superior brewing skills. He would rather be doing almost anything, if it meant he was no longer tied to the dark leader.

After intelligence...if it could be called that...was received from several sources who were working on specific projects, the Dark Lord turned toward Severus. "My most faithful follower, Severus, I have heard that Potter and his side kick are in St. Mungos after a spell went badly wrong. What do you know about this?"

Infusing his voice with all the deference he could, Severus knelt before the leader and cast his eyes to the ground. The less effort to keep up his Occlumency shields, the better. "My Lord, since Nott told Potter of my relationship with the Mudblood, I have been cut out from news in the Order. However, I know that Potter and his friend have been playing around with new spells and hexes, and I imagine that is all this was. It wouldn't surprise me that one or both of them tried a spell they were in no way prepared for. Their skill level is really quite pathetic.

"The Mudblood regularly beat them in duels, and her skills are paltry. I've been studying her memories at night via Legilimancy, but have found nothing useful this week. She spends her days studying Runes and other trivialities for the N.E.W.T. exams she is foolish enough to believe she will have the chance to take."

The Dark Lord laughed. "I suppose you're right about the spell landing them in St. Mungos. And now, my minions, we have an attack to launch. It appears a school full of children in West Surrey is having an activity tonight. We will blow it to pieces, show those foolish Order members that we cannot be stopped."

He began to direct the others on their individual missions while Severus silently, wandlessly caused his shortened ink-filled quill to begin writing in the diary under cover of his oversized cloak. He hoped Hermione got the message.

Hermione was half asleep when she received the notification of new writing in her diary and really didn't want to get out of bed. Knowing it was most likely an emergency, however, she rolled over and pulled the tiny diary from the pocket of her jeans. Without her wand, she expanded the diary and then flipped through to the most recent page. As she read, she grew ever more worried about the plans Voldemort was enacting. She grabbed a paper from the nightstand and began writing orders, specifying those things that were going on. The question was getting it to someone who could do something about it, and fast. "Twinkie!"

"Yes, Mistress?" the house-elf asked when it appeared in her room a moment later.

"I need you to take this note to Auror Tonks right away. It is a great secret and the paper can only go to her. Can you do this for me?"

"Yes, Mistress, of course, Mistress. Twinkie will do anything Mistress needs."

Hermione knew it was a risk sending the note by a house-elf that was not her own, but the elf seemed totally devoted to her, and there wasn't time for a Patronus, even if she had enough power available to send one. Hermione couldn't go anywhere without her powers, the Floo made her ill, and owl travel would have been interminable. "Then have her send back a message to me so I know she received it."

Twinkie took the note and nodded, then with a snap of her fingers, disappeared. Five of the longest minutes of Hermione's life passed as she waited for word back from Tonks. Meanwhile, she continued to take notes on specifics the Order and Aurors might need and added a thanks to the diary so Severus would know she had received the message. When Twinkie returned, Hermione let out a relieved breath and turned to receive her answer.

"The Auror Tonks read the note and said to tell Mistress that Kingsley saw the books she bought Mistress and thinks they were for herself." The elf gave her a confused look, but Hermione laughed.

"Oh, that's going to be a fun issue to unravel. But it's for another day. Could you find Tonks again if I have another note for her after she's moved?"

"Of course, Mistress." Twinkie looked so happy that she was being put to work, like a child just given a ten-day pass to Walt Disney World would look positively sullen in comparison.

"Good." A few minutes later Severus' quill stopped, and Hermione finished copying the information, then had Twinkie deliver it as well. Tonks was in an especially good position to solve tonight's problems...being on the job as an Auror and a member of the Order...to call for extra reinforcements on both hands, especially if there were as many Death Eaters involved as Severus had indicated.

She fell into an exhausted slumber some time later, though she had been certain she wouldn't sleep a wink before Severus returned.

For his part, Severus was hoping he could Apparate out of the melee that was bound to hit the school when the Aurors arrived. All the spying in the world did no good if you were killed in the crossfire or caught and hauled off to Azkaban. And he didn't want to go to Azkaban; he wanted to go back to his wife's bed, whether she ever let him get intimate with her again or not.

Finally, the signal to Apparate to the school was given. Severus Apparated outside the huge structure from which the sounds of grinding rock and teen laughter were pouring.

The assault on the school lasted only a few minutes before Aurors and Order members arrived on scene. Severus had managed to send nothing more serious than a mild stinging hex at the students, while protecting some of the others from harm by shutting them into a large closet and locking them in with a silencing spell so they couldn't alert other Death Eaters to their presence. From time to time he banished more students there.

When the Aurors arrived, all hell broke loose among the Death Eater ranks. Though a few popped out of the area the second opposition arrived, the majority stayed to fight. Their master would be very displeased if they didn't acquit themselves well against the Ministry.

Having nothing to lose, Severus temporarily 'lost' his mask when he turned and found Nymphadora Tonks across from him. He nodded only slightly, replaced his mask, then took aim, stunning a Death Eater over her shoulder. His next hex eviscerated Hestia Nott over Tonks' other shoulder. With the slightest lift of an eyebrow, Tonks moved into action, deflecting any hexes actually sent her way toward other Death Eaters and intentionally shooting spells past him toward people behind him. All in all, Severus counted twelve on the Dark Lord's side taken out during their little 'duel.' When the call to return to their master's side came, he allowed a smirk on his face, met Tonks' eye, then Disapparated.

When he arrived back at the cottage several hours later, as the Dark Lord had chosen to punish his followers for their failure before releasing them, he found Hermione sleeping soundly. The vial from the first dose of her medicine sat empty by the bed. He was covered in dirt and had been sprinkled by blood in the battle. His cloak was worn in two places, and he was sure there were holes from hexes that had flashed through it, but miraculously missed him.

In short, he felt filthy and exhausted and utterly unfit to lie beside his wife, despite the fact that he needed her. He pulled a hand through his hair and stripped, then got into the shower. He left his clothes in a jumble on the bathroom floor. Twinkie would take care of them soon enough.

Severus crawled into bed sometime later and felt his wife wrap herself around him, drawn to him despite herself, even in sleep. Taking advantage of the contact, he pulled her even closer and buried his nose in her strawberry-scented hair.

He was home.

Hermione awoke with her face buried in her husband's chest, his arms wrapped around her in his sleep. This was what she had missed so much over the previous few days...just having him close, smelling him next to her in bed. She felt him press his lips to her forehead in a gentle kiss, and she tipped her face up toward his to take the next kiss on her mouth.

He didn't push for more than a few sweet kisses, something she was grateful for as she still felt rather awful from the events of the previous day and hoped no one wanted her to get out of bed that day. "Good morning, wife."

"Good morning, husband. How did things go? Did my message to Tonks help?"

"Beautifully. There will be some casualties on the Muggle side, but considerably fewer than I expected. Thankfully, some of the others decided to play with their quarry for a while before following through with orders to execute anyone or destroy the building. Aurors arrived and deflected our attack. I'm not sure how they made out in their ranks, though I know some did not make it. The Dark Lord's ranks were seriously depleted, as nearly a quarter of those on the attack did not make it back to their master's

side afterward, whatever the reason."

"That's something then. Do you have any injuries that need attending?" She ran her fingers around his side as if checking for injuries, but knowing she was hitting his ticklish spot. She was so relieved that he was alive and well and that disaster had been at least mostly averted.

"No, damn it, leave me alone." He squirmed and visibly fought to keep the smile away from his face.

She merely grinned in response and ran her fingers along the area again. That resulted in his leaning over to restrain her, which brought them in close physical contact again, which resulted in him kissing her. This of course led to more kissing, and shortly after she decided to lift the injunction against more than kissing, he pulled away.

"I better go get your next dose of medicine, and I'll see if Twinkie can bring us some breakfast." Disentangling himself from her arms, he removed himself from the bed and padded to the kitchen in his pajama pants.

Hermione lay back in the bed and considered her own heated body. Did she want to complete what they had begun? Did she feel up to it? When her hormones calmed would she be glad they hadn't crossed over that line again yet? The power of their bond thrummed through her from their contact, but part of it had been well satisfied with their kisses and caresses. Before he returned with her medicine, she felt her body's exhaustion lulling her back toward sleep.

Still lucid, she heard him return to the room and opened her eyes to watch him cross the floor, enjoying the innate grace he always displayed. He held two potions this time and set them carefully on the night stand before settling on the bed beside her. "Still tired, I see. I thought things might be going too far for your strength. Here, take these."

He passed her the two potions. The first was bitter and burned the back of her throat. The second soothed, minty and sweet. Twinkie appeared in the room a few minutes later with a tray of eggs, bacon and toast and a second of tea.

"Eat, Hermione. The baby needs sustenance," Severus cajoled when she ate nothing more than a slice of toast and sipped on a cup of tea.

"The baby isn't sure if he or she wants real food at the moment. The baby is fairly certain the thought of bacon makes him or her want to scream in protest." She had been fine until the scent of bacon had filled her nostrils and turned her stomach.

"One bite of egg, then, and see how it feels." He coaxed a small bit of egg onto his fork and lifted it to her mouth. As that not only tasted great, but didn't disturb her stomach, she allowed him to place a heap on her plate and finished the entire pile off.

"Now," he said when she had finished, "back to sleep with you, and we'll see how you're feeling when you wake again."

Severus tucked her back into bed, placed a kiss on her forehead and left the room. As Hermione drifted back into sleep, she wondered if her husband had been replaced by some sweet mutant, then decided not to worry about it yet. If he didn't return to his own taciturn self soon, she would test him for the Imperius Curse.

Or maybe not.

By the next evening, Hermione was feeling much more herself, though she could still only do small bursts of magic through the day. She spent half the time sleeping and the other half reading theory towards preparing for her N.E.W.T. exams.

Hedwig had arrived with a note asking how she was doing late the day after she came home. She had responded that she was recovering fine, that Sebastian was taking good care of her and that she would visit in a couple of days.

She hadn't seen the *Daily Prophet* since the attack on the school and imagined they were stacked up somewhere else in the cottage. As she had only left her bed to go sit on the swing in the garden in the evening for a while, she hadn't taken the time to look around for the copies she knew must have come.

Since Hermione was nearly back to full strength, she and Severus had determined they must go visit her parents. Having received an invitation for that night, she prepared herself.

Jitters both from her husband and herself kept Hermione's stomach on edge all afternoon. At least she had prepared her mother for the seriousness of their relationship, but still, she and Severus had decided not to tell them of the marriage or the baby just yet. There was too much at risk if someone, somehow, managed to get through the wards on the home.

Hermione finished getting ready for dinner, then began to wander the cottage, fussing with the placement of doilies and knickknacks while she tried to keep her mind off the meeting. There was still half an hour before they would Apparate to her parents' back yard.

When she came across the two copies of the *Daily Prophet*, her heart dropped to her feet. She sat and read every word. In the attack on the school, ten Death Eaters had been killed by stray hexes and eighteen had been taken into custody. A full list followed, along with a list of the dead and wounded on the Aurors' side. Dedalus Diggle, dead. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Sturgis Podmore critically wounded, but expected to recover, more or less. Other names she had only heard also on both lists, along with some she had never heard before.

Still the list of dead and wounded on her side was far shorter than that of the Death Eaters. Severus had told her the three Death Eaters who knew about the attack in advance had been killed when they returned to their master. The newspaper stated that a detection charm had been placed on the school so the Death Eater's arrival was detected. No word of her helpful notes to Tonks. Good, it was better that way.

She was crying, grieving over losing Mr. Diggle, an excitable man who often wore a purple top hat. Hermione didn't know him well, by any means, but his loss was still great and weighed on her.

That was the way her husband found her, newspapers still clutched in her fingers, slumped on the sofa in the front room, tears on her cheeks. "I hoped you wouldn't stumble across those for another day or two. Not until you were stronger." He sat beside her and slid an arm around her shoulder.

"Dedalus Diggle. Dead. Kingsley and Sturgis in St. Mungo's. Didn't you think I'd want to know?" Still, she leaned into his warmth and comfort, her nerves over the visit to her parents forgotten.

"I knew you would, which is why I didn't throw the papers out, but knowing while you were so ill wasn't going to help. It would only distress you and make your convalescence last longer."

"I want to go to the funeral."

"And so we will. And tomorrow you may send another owl to the Burrow or Headquarters and find out how the others are faring. Perhaps by Friday I could take you to visit the others. I'm sure you and the boys have scheming to do."

"And I have questions about our search that I can't ask by owl post," she agreed.

"Good. Now, dry your tears and clean up your face before your parents think I've been treating you badly. We'll be late if we don't hurry out soon." He feathered the hair back from her face, pressed a soft kiss to her mouth, then released her.

Hermione swallowed hard, reading the desire for more in his eyes, felt it in her blood, and stood, moving to the bathroom to repair her face for the trip.

For the trip to her parents, the two of them had worn casual office clothes. He had on a gray jumper with black flecks pulled over a white linen dress shirt and a pair of black trousers. Hermione chose a demure white blouse over a pleated forest green skirt. Severus glamourised himself, disillusioned them, then Apparated the two of them behind a large bush in the Grangers' back yard.

He held Hermione close for a long moment while she allowed her stomach to settle, the spinning in her head to calm. "Better?" he finally asked.

She lifted her forehead from his chest. "Yes. I'm ready to go in."

"You say that as though you are trying to convince yourself. If you're going to be this nervous, I'm going to second-guess this visit." His mouth was lowered to her ear, his breath hot on her neck as he spoke, making her shiver.

"Too late, we're here now."

She felt him nod against her neck, she couldn't see his face any more than he could see hers. Then he returned them to visibility and released her. When he appeared to expect they would approach the door without even holding hands, she took his hand in hers. "You have to act as though you like me if you want my parents to buy it."

"Really? So are you saying if I hex you in their house they won't believe that we're in love?" His sneer at those last few words was only in his voice, his face stayed perfectly pleasant.

Deciding the pretence that their bond was all due to the potion had gone on long enough, Hermione made a mental note to make him face facts when they reached the cottage again that night.

He lifted his hand to knock on the front door, but she headed that off by opening the door herself. Her parents didn't stand on ceremony with family members, and she wasn't about to start just to please her socially backward husband. "Hello, Mum?"

"Hermione!" Her mother's voice came from the kitchen. "Come on back."

Pulling her husband along behind her, Hermione made her way down the hall to the kitchen. They walked in to find her mother stirring something red in a pot, while another boiled nearby and a spicy scent emanated from the oven. Her father was setting the table with the good china.

Setting down the last crystal goblet, her father came over and gave her a hug. "It's good to see you looking so well. Sebastian's note had downplayed your illness, but I knew you would have come if you weren't quite ill." He stuck out a hand toward Severus. "It's good to meet you, Sebastian, I'm David, and this is my wife, Jane." He gestured to where his wife was pouring the linguini out of the pot into a colander in the sink.

"Just a moment; I'll be right there." Hermione's mother put down the empty pot on a trivet on the counter and came over. She gave her daughter a warm hug, then shook hands with Severus. "It's good to meet you. Hermione has mentioned you several times."

"Indeed? I'm not sure whether that would be a good thing, or a bad thing." He smiled congenially down at his wife.

Hermione nudged him back in the ribs. "Well, I didn't tell them about your ticklish spot, if that's what you mean." She watched his eyes narrow as her elbow hit that particular ticklish spot, then she smirked at him.

"Well, dinner's not quite ready, but I have some antipasto." Jane Granger pulled a tray of finger food from the refrigerator and handed it to her husband. "Take those into the living room, and I'll join you in a few minutes."

The three of them adjourned to the other room and settled around the coffee table. Severus and Hermione took the love seat, leaving the larger sofa available for her parents.

None of them touched the food, looking across at each other a bit nervously instead. "Mr. Granger," Severus finally began, "I find myself in a strange situation. I admit I haven't been in this position before as I've never felt about another woman the way I feel about your daughter. I don't really know how these things are done."

Her father smiled, almost reassuringly. "I've never met a young man who was interested in my daughter before, so we're both in a new situation. Why don't we start out with how you met? Hermione mentioned that your glamour changed your age, but I get the feeling you are out of school, aren't you?"

"Yes, I produce many of the potions that her school nurse uses in the hospital wing, and in fact have used my expertise to help your daughter through many of her ailments over the years. We met through my association with the school. I never saw her as anything more than one of the students until this spring when she caught my eye and then my heart."

Hermione thought the words unbearably sweet and unbearably insincere for a man who believed that their attachment was simply potion-based. She decided that was fine, as it was going to come to a raging halt in a matter of hours. She took his hand in hers. "I always admired his talent, but we never had a real conversation, one not focused solely on academic interests, until March. With school still in session, we wrote letters for months, not seeing each other as much as we would have liked."

"It seems that has changed." Her father observed their clasped hands. "I wrote to Arthur Weasley when I got the note about your illness, Hermione. Arthur assured me he had seen you, you were going to recover completely, and that you were in good hands. Please forgive me, Sebastian, for not taking your word for it. I had never met you before, and Arthur and I have been acquainted for some years now."

Severus nodded, though Hermione had felt the initial irritation in him when he heard her father had looked elsewhere for reassurance.

"He also made some mention of your relationship that made it seem more significant that it appeared. But he didn't tell me exactly what he meant. Could you clear it up for me?"

Oh, bother. "We'd be happy to, Dad, but we should wait for Mum to join us, don't you think?"

He nodded his agreement, and Severus began shooting questions at David about his work and hobbies. They discussed the month-long trip to Majorca her parents were planning on leaving for in less than two weeks. Slowly, the three of them began demolishing the tray of antipasto.

Dinner was delicious: linguini with her mother's from-scratch sauce, fresh garlic bread from the oven and tiramisu for dessert. After Hermione and Severus made short work of the dishes with their wands, the four of them took their dessert and coffee to the living room to talk.

"So, now things have calmed down," David said after their desserts were gone. "What was it you wanted to speak to us about?"

Hermione licked her lips, still not sure what to say, how far to go when Severus spoke up. "Mr. and Mrs. Granger, as I mentioned to you, sir, I have never felt about anyone the way I feel for your daughter. Last spring we were affected by a potion that is attuned to the individual person, their capabilities, strengths, needs, intelligence, in short, everything that makes that person who and what they are and it directs them to another who is compatible with them.

"I understand the sentiment around the term 'soul mate' is hackneyed and overused in your society, but in our society it is literal. Especially with the use of this potion. Though I admired your daughter's intelligence, and she is really quite lovely, I had not noticed her enough to be attracted to her before this potion affected both of us, and a bond was formed between us. She makes me very happy, and should I live through this war, I want her by my side forever."

Hermione was surprised by the direction the conversation had gone. She hadn't expected Severus to be so forthright with them; he had skirted around the truth a bit, preparing them for the truth of his identity when the time came. "And I can't imagine living without him."

He gave her hand a squeeze and sensed his approval. "I hope we would have your blessing for the kind of marriage we hope to share some day."

Jane Granger gasped and tears flooded her eyes. "My baby. Married. But she's not even eighteen yet."

"Two more days, Mum. It's not really that far away."

"Yes, but still, you're barely more than a child. It was one thing when you were getting serious, it is another for you to be discussing marriage. You still have another year of school left."

"And I'm working on completing my schooling. Right now I'm nearly half-way through the curriculum for several of my classes, and Sebastian is helping me with some of the others. Next spring, assuming everything turns out well in this war, I expect I'll be allowed to sit my N.E.W.T.s the same as if I were in school this year."

"But advanced education, Hermione."

"Mrs. Granger..."

"Please stop with the Mr. and Mrs., will you? If you plan to marry my daughter, I expect you ought to be calling us by our first names," her mother interrupted.

"OK, Jane. There are no colleges or universities in the wizarding world. Instead any advanced learning Hermione receives will be through apprenticing or on-the-job training. I assure you, she will have her pick of opportunities when her N.E.W.T. scores are released."

"You are determined to wed then?" her father asked.

"Yes. There will never be another woman for me. We are soul mates." Severus brushed his free hand over their clasped ones. "She is all I will ever need or want."

The ring of sincerity in his words was so strong within her that Hermione felt tears prickling her eyes. "Ditto," was all she could manage through a throat that was closing up on her. She caught his eye and leaned in, brushing her lips over his cheek.

"Well then." Her father cleared his throat a moment later, distracting Hermione from the little bubble of joy in her heart. "Under those circumstances, I suppose I have a few other questions for Sebastian. If you are marrying my daughter, I believe I have a right to know your true name."

"That's not possible yet, Dad. We can't tell you." Hermione didn't wait for Severus to explain. "Surely you understand that it's better if you do not know. He is a spy. His identity must be protected, and our being together could prove dangerous for him."

David's eyes narrowed at them. "Why is a spy making potions for the school?"

"Very astute of you, Mr...er...David. Spying doesn't pay a great deal of money, you see. Or rather, none at all. One has to pay the bills somehow."

Her father frowned at them for a long moment, then nodded. "Then at least tell me how old you really are. I know you're older than she is. By a long way if your manner of speaking is any indication."

Severus and Hermione looked at each other uncertainly for a moment, then he returned his gaze to her parents. "I'm thirty-eight."

Both her parents turned toward Hermione. "Are you out of your mind?" her father asked.

"Thirty-eight, but dear, that's more than twice your age."

"Dirty old lech."

"Enough!" Hermione stood and faced her parents, interrupting them before they could go any further. "You more or less understand the quality of this bond between us. Neither of us looked for the connection, but we've made it. When I'm a hundred and twenty, do you really think anyone is going to care that he's a hundred and forty?" When they didn't respond right away, she nodded. "That's what I thought. All right then, it's been a great evening, dinner was delicious as always, Mum, I'll be in touch. Please take the time to think this over. I love him."

Severus stood and wrapped his arms around her, said goodbye, then Disapparated them from the room.

They reappeared in their garden a moment later, and even when the effects of Apparition faded, Hermione didn't let go or untuck her face from the soft yarn of his jumper. After a long moment, Severus nudged her back and looked down into her face. "You've had quite the evening, haven't you?"

"Between the newspapers and the visit with my parents, it has been a bit wrenching. Though I think the visit was going quite well for the most part. When they get used to the idea of us marrying and our age difference, things will be better."

"No, then you'll have to tell them we were married months ago without their knowledge or blessing and that you're already pregnant."

She groaned and tucked her head under his chin again. "Don't remind me."

"Wouldn't it have been easier for you to just tell them everything at once?"

"Possibly, if it wouldn't endanger your life." She felt his cheek glide over the top of her head, then he pushed her back again.

"Let's go inside. Or would you rather sit on the swing in the other garden?"

"Outside, I think. You'll stay with me for a bit?" She wasn't through talking to him tonight; they had some unfinished business.

"For a while. I have some work to do on both potions downstairs."

"You never mentioned what the second one was, only that I wasn't to go within twenty feet of it."

"And that will not change. Twinkie has been ordered to forcibly remove you from the cellar and seal you out of it if you decide to disobey me on this. What is in that cauldron could kill the baby with just a sniff."

"I'll remember that." By now they had gone through the cottage and come into the secluded back garden which was considerably tamer than before. The weeds were missing and plants were trimmed back to sanity, though she had allowed some of its wild look to remain, as that was what gave it half its charm.

They sat side by side, and Hermione set the swing to rocking, enjoying the cool night and scent of open blooms in the air. "I've been thinking the time has come to clear the air a bit."

He turned and lifted a brow at her. "I thought all of our secrets were out in the open now."

"All except your one. This isn't so much a secret from each other, really, but the truth has been generally avoided. I'm going about this all wrong."

"Try harder."

Feeling the amusement under his words, she elbowed him, not hard enough to hurt, just enough to constitute an empty threat. "OK. Over the past six months, you've done your best to ensure that I realized any kind action you did, any sweet words you spoke, were a direct result of that potion we took, that none of it came from you, but I don't believe it." She looked him in the eye and squared her shoulders. "I love you Severus Sebastian Snape. I love you for you over and above whatever the potion has made me feel. If the potion were nullified tomorrow, I would still love you. What's more, I know you love me too."

"You're daft. If it weren't for the potion, I would be your most hated teacher, the one who killed Dumbledore, the man you all revile. But you would feel nothing more for me."

"Now you're the one acting daft. I didn't say I would love you regardless of anything even if we had never been dosed. I'm saying my feelings have developed to the point where I love you now. And it is love, not simply enchantment. When you said to my father tonight that you never felt for anyone else what you feel for me, you meant it. When you said I made you happy, and that you needed me, you meant it. Six months ago the only thing you needed me for was a little physical release so you could continue to think straight. Now we depend on each other for far more."

"You love me?" He all but snorted after he said the words. "You love me so much you threatened to give me a frontal lobotomy, make me a eunuch, and denied me my right to the marriage bed. Obviously I should have realized what you meant when you said those words."

She shoved at his shoulders. "I threatened to make you a eunuch and give you a lobotomy because you were treating me like a tart, calling me that nickname when you didn't have any good reason. It was nasty and cruel. And I simply want you to treat me like your partner, your equal when we have to make important decisions about our future. I have a right to decide if I want to carry a child and what to do with my body. You have a responsibility to give me that right, to treat me as an intelligent equal in this marriage."

"I am nasty and cruel at times, my lovely. I'm sure everyone in the Order would be happy to verify that fact for you if you've chanced to have forgotten it. And this marriage will be more equal when survival for this war and the chance to live it together are granted. Until then, the marriage is unequal...deal with it."

"Sod it. I want you to take a long look at what you're feeling, what we've been through, and figure it out for yourself. Even if you're going to act nasty and childish, you need to know I still love you, even when I might not like your behavior in the least." Hermione stood and flounced into the cottage.

It was still early for bed, but between the stress of the day and the lingering effects of the spell on her body, she decided to turn in anyway.

Still, she didn't sleep until Severus slid in beside her more than an hour later.

Thanks to RobisonRocket and countrymouse for their help with this chapter and thanks to all my reviewers!

46: Birthday Surprises

Chapter 46 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 46: Birthday Surprises

Dedalus Diggle's funeral was held on Hermione's birthday. She and 'Sebastian' went arm in arm, though he glamourised her to look older, blonder, and even a bit taller. After all, she wasn't supposed to be in company of Harry and Ron, and she wouldn't want to cause trouble in public. So they went together and spoke to no one.

They rarely spoke to each other, in fact. Though they were physically there for each other, offering comfort, it was generally silent. The two of them still hadn't discussed the results of her confrontation about their true feelings for each other. She was determined to give it more time; he was determined not to speak about such nonsense at all.

After the funeral, Severus took Hermione to the Burrow for a small birthday party. Not only did she not want to deal with crowds of people like Harry's party had included, but it seemed somehow wrong to have a loud party shortly after a funeral...even if there had been a greater number of people who knew she and Harry were still talking. That left Tonks and Remus, the assorted Weasleys, Harry and Professor McGonagall on the list of those invited. Not that sixteen, with herself and Severus, was an inconsiderable group.

The look on Harry's face when she brought Sebastian into the Burrow, holding her hand, was priceless. His face turned red as he forced himself to greet Severus politely, as one would a slight acquaintance who was involved with one of your best friends. A moment later, he glared at Hermione for inviting his least favorite person in the world, regardless of her husband's real affiliations. He and Severus spent the rest of the party pretending the other did not exist.

Molly Weasley, on the other hand, threw her arms around 'Sebastian' and gave him a rib-splitting hug. "Oh, I know her parents are a little leery of Hermione getting serious so young, but after all, these are war times, and you never know what might happen. In fact, it would be best if you married up as soon as possible. I've been trying to get Remus and Tonks to set a date all week. Under the circumstances, it would be the best thing, don't you think? I don't hold with this Muggle fascination for staying single until one is well into their twenties, or even in their thirties. No, we should start our families while we're still young enough to enjoy them, don't you agree?" She sent a dirty look at Charlie, who...twenty-five and still single...was trying valiantly to ignore his mother's rant.

Hermione said something non-committal and offered herself up for a hug so Molly would stop touching her very uncomfortable husband. Though he held Hermione regularly, he still was far from a demonstrative person in general.

There were several other references to Tonks and Remus 'needing to get a plan in place, put their lives in order, it was time, after all,' before Hermione realized what the big deal was. Kingsley had seen Tonks buying the books on pregnancy. Obnoxious, gossiping man. And once again, Tonks and Remus were stuck in the middle of a fiasco because of her. Not knowing how to extricate herself, Hermione sighed and decided to figure it out later. When Severus heard the reference too many times, he sent her a confused look. She bent over and explained, and he smirked in understanding. At least one of them was enjoying the others' discomfort.

All was well after that until Harry, Ron and Bill started discussing their expectations for completing their project at Hogwarts the following day.

"Oh, I want to come along. I'm feeling perfectly fine now!" Hermione's face was bright and hopeful until 'Sebastian' spoke up.

"You most certainly will not go back there."

She blinked at him in surprise, both in his words and the underlying emotions behind them. "Of course I will, it's my project too."

"Of course you can come, Hermione. We wouldn't want to do it without you. That's why we waited so long." Ron sent Sebastian a sour look.

"You cannot go. You still aren't completely healed from your last adventure there." Sebastian lowered his voice, trying to avoid the attention they had already garnered from everyone in the room. He was angry and something else she couldn't place.

"I'm a grown woman; I'll go if I want to."

"How are you going to get there? Apparate?"

The bastard knew she couldn't Apparate on her own yet. "I'll Floo to the Three Broomsticks and fly over from there." Of course she didn't mean on a broom.

"The cottage Floo is not connected to the network."

"Is she staying with you?" Molly asked. "You know it's highly inappropriate for you two to be sharing quarters without a chaperone. I really must insist she stay here or return to stay with her parents now that she can't live at Headquarters." She fell silent when Hermione held up her hand to hush the woman, without taking her eyes off her husband.

"I'll create a Portkey if I must."

"An illegal Portkey? Do you know how?"

"I can learn in a night. I'm sure you have all kind of books that could teach me illegal things." She was a bit nasty about that, but knew it was true. Whether those illegal things included Portkeys was another question.

"Really, Hermione, maybe you shouldn't..." Bill didn't get very far with that thought.

"You can't help them; you already admitted your powers aren't back up to strength, which means you probably couldn't produce a Portkey in any case. This whole conversation is completely pointless. You aren't going." Severus stood so he could tower over her. At least that was the reason she chose to assign for the move.

She stood as well, determined not to let him dictate to her. "You can't keep me wrapped in cotton wool, you know. I'm not a fragile child."

"Maybe you should stop thinking about yourself and what you want, and start thinking about..." He stopped mid sentence and stalked out of the room. He hadn't finished the thought, but she heard the words 'thinking about our child' echoing in her ears anyway.

The silence around them was deafening. Hermione closed her eyes after he slammed the door behind him, and she didn't open them again for a long moment. When she heard a throat clearing, she lifted her head and looked around the room, giving them all a tight smile. "I guess I better go talk with him."

The door clicked behind her as she pulled it closed. She saw her husband walking along the shrubbery which led to the chicken coop. He had his hands clasped behind his back and was looking at the ground. His emotions were in turmoil: Anger, worry, irritation, fear.

As he was walking a rather leisurely pace, for Severus I've-got-to-make-every-move-with-precision-and-haste Snape, she figured it wouldn't be long before she caught up. When she did, Hermione fell into step beside him, offering him the chance to speak when he was ready or to stay silent a while longer if that was his preference.

By the time he spoke up, his emotions had calmed, but the fear was still present. "I can't stand the idea of you walking into that trap again," he finally said. "You and those twits put our baby at risk, put yourself at risk." He stopped and turned toward her. "Put the whole damned war against Voldemort at risk because you didn't call for help when you needed it."

"I never thought of you as the type to be so anxious to be a father," she said lightly, though she didn't meet his eyes.

"Nor did I, but the more I've thought about it, the more I've grown to like the idea." He reached out and touched his finger to her chin, lifting her eyes to his own. "I love the idea of seeing you grow lush with our child, for what it will mean. For our future when it is so uncertain." His mouth twisted in irritation. "I find myself in one of my most hated positions."

"Having the eyes of every Weasley in existence know your private business?"

He glanced toward the house and grimaced. "That too, but no, even worse is having to admit I was wrong and you were right,"

She brightened at that admission. "You're going to let me go?"

He pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her, and leaning down so their lips were only a breath apart. "No, my sweet. I'm going to try and keep you wrapped in cotton wool as much as I can because I love you. It isn't just the enchantment, and if it were, it wouldn't have worked on us anyway. You make my life worth living and give me hope for a far better future than I've ever imagined. That's why I want you to be careful, need you to be careful...far more alert than you've had to be in the past. I wouldn't have a reason to continue on without you and our child."

His lips finally made contact with hers, and she was sucked into the sweetness, a sweetness that had never existed before, a joy she hadn't been able to fathom, as they shared the blinding power of hope between them. The kiss deepened even more, and their hands began to caress each other. The kiss deepened and grew stronger, almost fierce in their longing for one another. As she was about to ask him to Apparate them back to their cottage, she heard someone coughing behind them.

"If that's Umbridge, I say we start with the Cruciatus Curse and work our way to *Avada Kedavra*," Hermione muttered when Severus pulled away.

"Lucky for me I'm not Umbridge, then." It was Remus standing behind her.

"What do you want?" Severus asked as he slid the hand that had been on Hermione's breast down around to the small of her back.

"First off, I'd prefer if I didn't have to worry about you two stripping down to nothing here where anyone could see you. Second, we all wondered if you were going to come back, though I warn you, Molly is bound to start in on you about getting married right away, tomorrow if necessary. She's upset enough about the two of you 'living in sin'; if she had even a hint that it's you having the baby and not us, she would be strong-arming you into a ceremony today. And we all know that's not possible right now. I swear since Bill's wedding ended, she's been chomping at the bit to plan a second one."

"Well, as we're already wed, I don't think we can help her." Severus said, though he didn't release his wife.

"And as you are unable to tell her the truth about that, it is unlikely to help you. Are you coming back to open presents at least? This is Hermione's birthday party, and a party without the guest of honor can be so dull."

Hermione groaned and pulled away from Severus' chest, putting her hair and clothes back to rights. "With the twins around, no day could possibly be dull."

"Too true. Though the two of you managed to add some excitement to this gathering." Remus smiled and turned back to the house.

Severus lifted his wand at the man's retreating back. Hermione placed her hand on it and pushed it down. It took surprisingly little effort. He grumbled, "Come on, just one little hex. I promise not to do anything permanent to the man."

"If you're not careful, I'm going to start calling you Ronald."

He scowled and resheathed his wand in his sleeve. "Fine. It's your birthday, ruin my fun if you must."

"I must." She took his wand hand in hers before he could reach for the wand again and tugged him along. "So what is the father of my child going to give me for my birthday?"

He smirked. "I've been working on it for a while, but you'll have to wait to find out. Now is not the time."

When they returned to the party, Harry looked about ready to vomit, and Tonks looked very amused. Hermione supposed the whole lot of them had been standing with their noses pressed to the window glass, waiting to see if they would hex each other or make up. It looked like Harry would almost have preferred the first option.

Severus and Hermione returned to the cottage well after dark had fallen, but the cottage had lights burning in the windows. "Sometimes I love house-elves," Hermione said with a sigh.

"Do you mean if you had a chance to let Twinkie go, you wouldn't rush right out and hand all elves clothes?" His voice was teasing as he held the front door open for her.

"Perhaps not, as long as they were well cared for, wanted to be there and received the kinds of benefits even elves deserve."

"Like holidays off, medical care and retirement benefits."

"Exactly."

"Hmmm. House-elves can make very accomplished babysitters, you know." With the door shut and warded behind them, he twirled her into his arms.

While he nibbled on her neck, she fought to maintain her higher brain functions. "That may be, but when we eventually leave this place, we won't be able to take Twinkie with us, will we?"

He shut her up with a kiss, leading her toward their bedroom in the back.

Morning broke over the nearby hill, and Hermione awoke in her husband's arms, sighing from bliss. She knew the boys would be at Hogwarts collecting the cup today...with Bill's help this time...and that she wouldn't be going with them. At the moment, she felt too self-satisfied to care. Every intimate moment with her husband was more perfect than the last, more fulfilling in some different facet. If this continued indefinitely, she was bound to become thoroughly impossible to live with, so full of contentment and joy, she would drive everyone but Severus away from her.

"Smug, I see."

Hermione tucked herself more securely in his arms. "Very. Good morning, my love."

"And good morning to you too, my love." He hummed softly after finishing his greeting, causing the skin of her neck under his lips to vibrate and goosebumps to appear. Then again, it might have been the words he'd used. My love. He actually meant them now, they weren't sweet nothings, words for show.

"And what have we in store for this beautiful day?" she asked, turning in his arms to face him.

"Wondrous revelations, something I meant to show you last night, but ran out of time. No matter. It will be all the better in the daylight, and Twinkie will still have all in readiness." He kissed her again deeply, drowning her in its sensuality. As she allowed herself to be dragged under, he pulled away. "Best be getting up and ready. Much to do, you know."

She groaned, but after a moment, propped herself up, then got out of bed and padded to the bathroom for a shower. *This had better be good.*

When they were both dressed and had finished breakfast...her stomach may have been a bit picky at that hour, but tea and toast were still more than welcome...Hermione sat back in her chair and watched him for a long moment. "So, what's this surprise you have for me?"

His face stayed blank, but he didn't block his emotions from her, which told her he was both excited and nervous. "If you think you're ready," Severus stood and took her hand, leading her from the room and out of the cottage. When they reached the front gate of the garden, he tucked her hand in his elbow. "Fancy a walk?"

She furrowed her brow at him and cocked her head to the side. "Sure." She had no idea what he had up his sleeve, but she was willing to take some time figuring it out.

They walked east over the rolling ridge and through a thickly wooded copse. When she came out on the other side, she gasped as the manor house the cottage was attached to came into view. It was a magnificent edifice, all white marble, three stories high, and at least three hundred foot wide, from her best guess. Windows seemed to be everywhere, glistening in the sunlight.

The gardens were bursting with flowers, more organized than the one around the cottage, but not really formal either. A large fountain erupted at one end of the courtyard and poured down into a pool of water, which fed a small stream. It then emptied into a pond of at least twenty foot in diameter. There was the glimmer and flash of ornamental fish in the pond when the two of them grew close enough to see them.

Benches were scattered around the extensive grounds under trees, near a natural stream, beneath arbors, by the rose garden. A huge white gazebo held court on the far end of a large expanse of grass, and one end had stairs along the entire side. "Those walls fold out so the stairs can be used by large crowds entering and leaving," Severus said, noticing her attention on them.

"It's incredible. Who lives here? This isn't Malfoy Manor is it?" The belated thought had dread filling her stomach.

A sardonic eyebrow lifted. "You can't honestly think I would put you so close to scum like that and at their mercy."

A moment's thought and she shook her head. "No, of course not. It's only that maintaining such a home would require great wealth, and Malfoy was the only wizard I knew whose family bragged of their money."

"There are other families in the wizarding world with power and wealth. This home does not boast nearly as much of either as the Malfoys had at their disposal a couple of years ago. This is the sole remaining holding of a once-powerful wizarding family, whereas the Malfoys have at least half a dozen similar or gaudier structures that I'm aware of. Probably more. Unless Narcissa gets another child from her husband before he comes to an ignominious end, those holdings will be split up at her death. Especially if her death is brought on by the Dark Lord's demise. These holdings will revert back several generations, or be held in trust for the next heir, when he or she comes of age, depending on the situation."

Fascinated, but not fooled into thinking he had answered her question when he hadn't, she pressed again. "But who lives here?"

They had arrived at the garden doors to the home, and Twinkie pulled them open. "No one has lived here in years, except for the house-elves." He guided her into the salon, which was large, light and airy. The furnishings were covered in rich fabrics and shined with polished woods. A huge crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling and sparkled from an unknown source of light; the candles were not lit at the moment.

He took her from room to room: a huge library with two floors, two dining rooms...one for entertaining, another 'smaller' one for family gatherings of no more than twenty. Bedroom suite after bedroom suite, parlors and sitting rooms, a billiards room and quiet nooks. And out of every window was another slice of the magnificent gardens.

Hermione was enjoying the tour, but she still had no idea why they were there or who owned the place. He had been most evasive on that point, but she was sure there was a reason. She could feel it bubbling inside him.

As they turned back toward the huge sweeping staircase that led to the front entrance, Hermione noticed the row of house-elves lining up between the bottom of the stairs and the entrance.

Severus stopped at the top of the stairs, and she was able to count no fewer than twenty-five house-elves; some looked to be merely children. Twinkie stood at the head. "What are they all doing down there?" she asked. A house-elf's first duty was to remain invisible in most wizarding houses.

"They are waiting to meet their lady." He turned her toward him and looked into her eyes. "This home has been the property of the Princes for generations. It is where my mother grew up. My mother's death predated those of my grandparents by several years. They had been unhappy with her choice of husband, had denied her any part of her inheritance if she married the crude Muggle. I don't believe they would have minded if he had been Muggleborn, if he had been talented, good, kind, intelligent...in short, all the things you are. But he was none of those things. He was loud, abusive, and a drunk. They weren't so happy with me either, hearing rumors of my activities in the Dark Arts."

Hermione found herself blinking rapidly, trying to take it all in. "But they left you the home anyway."

"No, my sweet. They left you the home, the money to maintain it, and everything that went with it. The home would only go to my wife, not to me, and only if she was good, pure, talented and had integrity. You have all those things in spades. If I had never married, or had married the wrong sort of woman, the property would have gone to the next closest relative of any good report. It's a kind of magical binding that doesn't require solicitors and courts to enact."

Hermione felt faint. He must have sensed it, because he swept her into his arms and carried her down the stairs. It was all very much like a Muggle romance, except that when the house-elves began to gather around them, eager to help, he snarled at them to make way and carried her into the nearest parlor.

When she was lying on a sofa and had managed to regain her head a bit, Hermione clasped her husband's hand. She didn't meet his eye, but instead, focused on his long, perfect fingers and tough calluses. "So if all you needed to do to gain such wealth was to marry, why did you not do so years ago?"

"Come, Hermione, think for a moment, would you? By the time my grandparents, whom I had never met, died, I was already acting as a spy, and it was before the Dark Lord's first defeat. What woman fitting that description would have had me? And how would I have kept her safe if she was willing to marry me? The only reason we are not both dead now is because the Dark Lord thinks you have been deluded into believing in me, and he has no idea of our true situation."

It made sense, but she was still trying to take it all in. "So why didn't you show it to me before?"

Twinkie came over, his head hanging in shame. "Do not blame the master for this, mistress. Blame Twinkie and the other house-elves. We will all shut our hands in the oven if Mistress likes." The other house-elves around her nodded gravely. "The house was not ready for Mistress to see when Master came to visit after he left the castle. We had to punish ourselves most severely for not being prepared as good house-elves should."

"They had maintained the structures and basic work in the yard, but it is frustrating for house-elves to work on a house when it is uncertain there will be someone to see it in the next several decades...that was one reason Headquarters was such a mess when it came back into use. The Manor has been polished to a rare shine, the yard manicured, and many other tiny details seen to while we honeymooned in the cottage. Twinkie was quite upset to see you were working in the garden yourself, blaming himself for not having it, too, in readiness in the few days notice I gave for the cottage to be prepared, until I told him how much you enjoyed your work there."

"I really have enjoyed it, and the work you have done on this place is incredible. I forbid you to punish yourselves for not having it ready when we first arrived. I much prefer to stay in the cottage for the time being, as it is cozier, though we may find uses for the main house soon. Very soon. And I intend to use the library's considerable offerings starting immediately."

Severus chuckled in her ear. "Of course you will, my little bookworm. Would you like to go up there and begin scanning the shelves while the house-elves prepare us a light luncheon?"

"As soon as I have met them all, I would." Though her world had turned upside down yet again, Hermione told herself she should be getting used to such upheavals. There would be time to digest all of this later.

Harry, Ron and Bill were back in the Chamber of Secrets, rubble was strewn everywhere from the blowing up of Salazar's head, but the bottom half of the carving was still in place. Bill cast a charm on the mouth opening once again and began removing the few curses that remained.

In twenty minutes Harry had changed into his capuchin form and climbed inside the structure, returning in a minute with the cup in hand. When he changed back, they exchanged smiles and began the journey back up to the school so they could deliver the final blow on this Horcrux.

Hermione and Severus were tucked up in their bed at the cottage that night...at Hermione's request, as she was still trying to take it all in. "You told me once that I couldn't give Twinkie clothes because the owner swore he couldn't do without the elf. But I'm the owner."

"And by marriage that makes me, more or less his owner as well, and neither of us could direct the house-elves as efficiently as he does. He runs the house and sees to every detail, so I repeat: we really can't do without him. Enact any holidays off you wish, offer them health care and any payment for their services that you can get them to accept, but please don't let them go. Remember how Crouch's elf couldn't find another place and wallowed in depression? Do you want to do that to any of those bright, smiling elves?"

He really was a master manipulator. She sighed. "Of course not. We'll see what they need, what they will accept and go from there. You indicated there were sufficient funds to run the estate. How sufficient?"

"I have only taken a passing look at the books. The funds grew while the home was empty as it had no witches or wizards to care for and house-elves are fairly self-sufficient, but if we live on the estate, the growth of the funds will at least slow if not stop outright. You will have to take a look and determine what you want to do with what there is and what it will take to maintain the estate. You really owe it to my progenitors and to our children to pass the place on in a healthy state."

"Blue bloods and their worries about passing wealth along." Her comment was more teasing than anything. She wanted to see the home prosper and grow under her hand and intended that it should be so. "I'll look at it and see what I find. Aren't you intending to take over that aspect?"

"Only if I must. You are the true owner, after all."

Hermione blinked, then accepted the reality of the statement. She now owned a manor house and twenty-five house-elves. Who would have thought?

AN: A big thanks to ll of my reviewers for your kinds words. Thanks to my beta, countrymouse, and to LadyInTheCloak for helping me repent the errors of my ways. lol

47: The Final Horcrux Falls

Chapter 47 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 47: The Final Horcrux Falls

Several more days passed before Severus declared Hermione ready to return to dueling practice with the Order members. Even then, he did so with the caveat that the 'instructors' understood to use only Level One spells on her, as her health was delicate. Bill and Remus would be involved in this round again, though other members had taken turns training the boys while Hermione was recovering. The two of them knew to take her pregnancy into consideration.

Severus would have preferred Hermione didn't participate at all, but agreed she couldn't stay in hiding her entire life and needed to be able to defend herself. Even cotton wool wouldn't stop every jinx, she had reasoned.

The paddock at the Burrow was still the best place for the dueling to take place, as it was large, surrounded by trees, and a delineated area. The day was cooler than the first time they had met for practice, a fact Hermione appreciated. She, Harry, and Ron entered the paddock knowing their trainers would already be in place, though a look around them revealed nothing.

A flash of light shot toward them from the right, and Hermione rolled onto the ground. The hex zoomed above her and she jumped up again, flashing her shielding charm before another hex could hit her, then zapped something back to where the hex had originated. The boys scattered as they were pulled in different directions.

Bill came into view and engaged Hermione in a focused duel for several minutes before he disarmed her. He helped her up, dusted her off, and they began again. The players changed, moved around the field and occasionally went two on one. At the end of two hours, the three younger Order members were standing together, back to back, facing their opponents. Exhausted, numbed, Hermione fought to keep focused when everything seemed to be coming at her at once.

Then a blue flash of light made it past the shield Hermione was trying to erect again and hit her, causing her whole body to cramp up. She rolled onto her side and began to pant as the cramping increased even though the curse was no longer being held on her.

She screamed out, and Remus called an end to the battle. Bill dropped down on his knees beside her and called *oufinite incantatem*...which did nothing...then began a diagnostic spell. He murmured a few other spells, and she felt the cramping ease. The pain calmed and Hermione was able to hear Remus cussing Kingsley for using whatever it was he had shot at them.

"We said only Level One spells on her, Kingsley. Do you know what that means?"

"It wasn't a dangerous spell; if she had only been worn out from her previous illness it shouldn't have been worse than a Level One. The only reason it would be different is" He didn't finish the sentence as understanding lit his eyes and he came to the right conclusion.

Remus's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, exactly. And if you share around this bit of gossip like you did the last...mistaken...bit, I promise you'll be sorry. Sebastian is a force to be reckoned with and appears to be quite protective of his lady, to my everlasting surprise."

Hermione saw Harry catch Remus' eye, and they nodded knowingly at each other. She couldn't blame them; even she was sometimes surprised by the gentleness, the possessiveness her husband displayed when he felt it warranted.

"There you are. You'll be fine, but you really should see a mediwitch, Hermione." Bill helped her sit back up so she could look at the circle of men surrounding her.

"You're starting to sound like a broken record." She smiled vaguely and met the other men's eyes. "I'll be fine, really."

Charlie's eyes narrowed and he put his hands on his hips. "You're pregnant? What is this, an epidemic?" Obviously Charlie knew what spell had been cast and its possible side affects.

"You're what!?" This from Ron, who looked almost apoplectic.

It was with some self control that Hermione managed not to bury her face in her bent knees and pretend the world wasn't there. Instead she looked at the sky, as though calling on a higher power. "That's it. Tonight I'm going home and working on memory charms. I'm not going through this again. Bill, how are *you* at memory charms?"

When he shook his head at her, she sighed and glared at the men around her. "No one else can know." Then, muttering under her breath, she added, "This is totally getting out of hand. And no, Charlie, Tonks isn't pregnant...she bought those books for me. It's too bad someone could keep their gob shut instead of gossiping around." She glared at Kingsley as she said this last bit.

Kingsley looked away, appearing rather embarrassed. It was too little, too late by her book.

"Memory charms are illegal without Ministry approval," Remus reminded her.

"So is harboring a known felon, but that doesn't seem to change any of our minds, does it?" She extended a hand to Remus who helped her up from the ground.

"You're pregnant? Really? Harry, our Hermione, she's..."

"Yes, Ron, she's pregnant, that's the little secret Voldemort wanted to cripple me with at the last minute, that's what I'm not supposed to be able to talk about. Can we focus here on whatever that spell did to her and if it's going to hurt the baby?"

"You knew and didn't tell me? I can't believe you two." Ron's face grew red with anger, and he turned his back on them, even though he didn't walk away.

"You really should see a mediwitch, Hermione," Charlie parroted his older brother. She wondered if he said it only to distract everyone from Ron's behavior.

"Yes, yes, we've established that. No doubt S-Sebastian will ensure that I do so at the earliest opportunity."

"Yes, I shall."

Hermione sighed in resignation when she heard her husband's voice behind her. She should have known. After all, he would have sensed the curse through the bond. He placed one arm around her back and used his free hand to lift her face to his view. "Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine."

"You'll not be continuing these lessons if people can't remember the specifications for *Level One hexes only*." It came out as more of a growl than anything.

Weary, both from the fight and in expectation of dealing with this new development, she nearly whined. "Are you going to drag me to St. Mungo's?"

He grimaced. "If I have to. I hate that place, but as I'm not aware of any better options right now, we'll take our chances. Unless Minerva knows someone; I'll Floo her when we get home."

"I think the three of them have outstripped our ability to do much more training anyway. They got us as many times as we caught them," Remus said, giving Sebastian a significant look. "I really think they are in need of advanced training from a better, more ruthless duelist than ourselves."

"Who, Flitwick?" Hermione quipped, and ignored her husband's derision at her comment.

"Perkins, who works with my dad did some training earlier this week. He's brilliant with a hex," Ron said.

"When did he join the Order?" Hermione asked.

Ron shrugged, "A while ago. I think he was at the meeting where you put on the show with Harry."

Severus's eyebrows lifted in surprise at Remus, as he was ignoring the other conversation going on. "You don't mean you want ~~they~~ to train them?"

"Snape is more familiar with the kind of fight the kids will have."

"We're not kids. We're adults," Harry said, his irritation obvious.

"Yes, Potter, start a tantrum now if you want everyone to remark on how adult you've become." Severus stared him down for a moment, then nodded. "You have been working on your Occlumency, I see. Any improvement is significant at this point. I suppose Hermione can see if he'd be willing to train the boys. As I said before, she's through with this kind of training. I'll work with her myself when I'm assured she's completely recovered from today's debacle. And if he does take it on, remember that most of the Order doesn't know he's on your side and keep the trainer's name a secret. Better yet, let people think they've finished training."

"Maybe you should train us all. I don't want to learn from that git," Ron said.

Amusement entered her husband's eyes, but he said nothing.

Hermione noticed Bill's eyes narrow on her husband, focus in more closely, then settled back on her, his suspicions clear to her. When she thought he might say something, she headed him off. "Don't ask, don't tell; remember, Bill?"

He looked at her for a moment, then nodded. "Right, good idea." He turned away. "Guess we ought to be going. I could use a shower."

Remus agreed. "I think we could all use showers. Hermione, let the boys know when you've made arrangements for their further training. As much and as often as possible."

She nodded and said goodbye before Severus Apparated them away to the sound of Ron saying to Harry, "I still can't believe you two didn't tell me."

They did find a mediwitch that day without going to St. Mungos. When Hermione had Flooed McGonagall from the manor house...which unlike the cottage was connected to the network...the Headmistress made the suggestion that she contact Poppy at home, since the mediwitch was looking for work until the school reopened. Though Hermione felt strange going to the woman about her pregnancy without being able to tell her about her marriage, she couldn't deny that Poppy Pomfrey knew her job and always managed to keep her questions and comments to herself. She was also quite gossip-proof which had come in handy on more than one occasion.

Hermione was given a clean bill of health if she took a day to rest. Madam Pomfrey told Hermione to either stop dueling practices or to stick to Level One hexes only. Trying to keep her eye-rolling to herself on that point, Hermione nodded and said she would.

Severus used the house-elves to ensure Hermione took the day of rest, not allowing her to get up for anything, making sure she was waited on hand and foot.

It seemed house-elves were good for babysitting adults too, to her great annoyance.

The following afternoon, Hermione and Severus determined the best place to hold their duel with the boys would be on the manor grounds. There was plenty of room to run, and the entire estate was unplotable and protected by the Fidelius Charm.

Hermione Apparated over to Headquarters shortly before dinner and informed the boys they would begin dueling practice the next morning at nine.

"Nine?" Ron had whinged. "I have to ruin my digestion by seeing Snape at nine?" Before she could snap at him for that comment, he continued on, "I really wish you'd told me about you having a, well, a baby. You just have so many secrets." It was positively calm and collected from Ron. She had come expecting him to blow up at her.

"They're getting fewer and fewer every day," she said more to herself than anyone, but Harry laughed. She glared in response. "I'm sure we all have our secrets, and since I'm still in the first trimester, there's always the chance that the baby won't make it, especially with everything coming up. I don't want to spread the word until things are more certain."

"And until you can announce to Ron's mum that you're already married and don't need her rushing you off to the altar, thank you very much," Harry said.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, and that. I guess I always knew I couldn't keep it all a secret from everyone, not when we all live in each other's pockets like this, but I still hoped I could make these announcements when I want, how I want."

Harry laughed again. "That would be like me melting into the woodwork at a Ministry function. Not going to happen, Hermione."

"Yeah."

Ready to go home again, Hermione showed them the note Severus had written. ***Hermione's field is located in Northwest Northumberland.***

"Why is it called Hermione's field?" Ron asked.

She grinned. "Because it is." With that cryptic comment, she set the Disillusionment Charm back on herself in case someone came in unexpectedly and made her way to

the front door.

The boys had whinged about having to be at the practice field at nine, but Hermione had already been up and dueling her husband for over an hour when they Apparated into the otherwise empty, rolling meadow, surrounded by woods. Sweat was dripping off her face, her shirt was soaked and only sheer bad temper was keeping her upright after the punishing workout Severus had run her through. Though he hadn't used any serious hexes on her, he had still put her through the ringer.

Severus cast jelly legs and a light stinging hex on her. The second of the two got past her shield and zapped her arm. When he followed up with another jelly legs, she hit the ground hard on her bum and groaned as her legs went wild.

"Tomorrow we'll start earlier." Severus ended the jinx before he walked over and stared down at her, not offering her a hand up or any outward sympathy at all, though she felt some through their bond. He was himself, or at least looked himself and had put his nasty professor persona on when they arrived on the field. It was most effective in this situation, even as she knew it wasn't the real man. "You will go rest for three hours before allowing anyone to bring these twits lunch."

"Do you always have to be such a bastard?" Ron asked, extending a hand to Hermione to help her up.

"Yes. Now that I'm warmed up, we're start with straight dueling this morning and will work our way to dueling in the wood before the week is out." He pressed his lips together in a scowl. "I have also completed the second spell you will need in the final battle. After lunch we'll go over it so you can take it back to the Order for practice for the final battle. The day is drawing near, and we must all be prepared." He turned to Hermione who was still standing next to him and scowled. "I told you to go away."

She allowed a scowl of her own and nodded. "Yes, Professor. Please try not to kill them today; it will significantly diminish your enjoyment of tomorrow's expected torture." Then she Disapparated, appearing by the side of a sinfully steaming tub of water Twinkie must have prepared for her in the cottage. It was amazing how thoughtful her husband could be, as she hadn't been the one to request the bath, though it had been her intent to seek one. Letting out a sigh of pleasure, she dipped her hand in the fragrant, bubble-filled water.

"Twinkie," she called out.

"Yes?" Twinkie asked as he popped beside her.

"Thank you; the water is perfect. Please have a picnic lunch prepared for Severus, me and my two friends at noon. I will go out to join them at that time, so please make sure I am awake twenty minutes before that."

"Of course, Mistress. Twinkie is so pleased Mistress likes her bath. If there is anything else Mistress needs, Twinkie is always here." The elf wriggled with excitement.

Hermione smiled, glad she could make the elf so happy. "Thanks, Twinkie, I'll be sure to call if I need anything else."

Twinkie disappeared and Hermione stripped her clothes off and slipped into the bath. Absolutely sinful.

After a long soak in the tub and a refreshing nap, Hermione woke ready to eat and looked forward to seeing what condition her friends were in after three hours of training with her husband.

She had felt his feelings of approval, disdain and derision during her waking hours. The second two she had expected, the first had come as a surprise, though a welcome one.

After instructing Twinkie not to treat either herself or Severus with unusual deference in front of the young men, Hermione had appeared with the elf, who was carrying a large basket of sandwiches, fruit, drinks, and biscuits. A flash of magic zoomed toward her, but before Hermione could react, Twinkie lifted a hand and redirected the spell away from her.

"You must be more careful around the young woman, you must," Twinkie said with a stamp of her foot.

"Sorry, Hermione," Ron called out, running away so she wouldn't be caught in the cross fire. He ducked when her husband sent a spell at him.

With two more slashes of his wand, Severus took out both boys and bowed to them. "An improvement over this spring, but hardly a match for the Dark Lord, boys. Rest, have something to eat. We'll discuss strategy after we've all eaten."

He turned to Hermione and nodded. "Miss Granger, set it up wherever." He looked collected, but she could sense his weariness and his face was covered in sweat. She would have felt worse for him if he hadn't been taking on two young men in a duel, and obviously holding his own. The fact that the boys weren't staring bloody murder at her husband told her he had managed to put personal grievances away for a time to actually train them, and not just shoot hexes at them as quickly as he could get them off.

"Please join us." She put on a show of forced civility, then turned her back on him and began setting out the food. "Thanks, Twinkie, I'll let you know if I need you any more."

"Yes, Mistress," she said in a low voice and, with a smile and a snap of her fingers, disappeared.

That night as Hermione and Severus lay entwined in their bed, he felt his mark burn. He groaned, then rose. "He is calling. I'll see if I can get near Nagini, or what I can learn of her whereabouts. We need to do something about her soon, before the final battle, as I can't ensure she will be present then."

"Be careful." She had been nearly asleep, but she woke completely when she felt the twin burning on her own arm.

"Always. Try to sleep; I'll be back as soon as I can." He pressed a kiss on her forehead, then strode from the room. While he donned his Death Eater robes the Muggle way, he donned his persona as well. It had to be flawless, as close a fit as his true self, as though what he was when he was with Hermione was the sham instead of the other way around. By the time he was dressed, he was ready.

He Apparated into the cemetery around Riddle House and held in a groan. It was pouring rain in this part of England and his boots sunk several inches into the muck. The Dark Lord seemed to have a perverse pleasure in making his minions be as uncomfortable as possible. The leader would invariably be protected under an umbrella charm, as warm and comfortable as could be, while his followers would be expected to drench themselves. He cast a surreptitious water-repelling charm and hoped it held the rain off for the duration of his stay.

Severus made his way across the grounds to where the mad man was holding court. He bowed on one knee and kissed his master's robe, then waited for direction. "Severus, welcome, please stand at my side."

Grateful he wasn't receiving an immediate punishment for some imagined shortcoming, Severus complied and spent the next several hours just on the edge of the umbrella charm with the rain diverted from the Dark Lord pouring down his back instead. He listened to a mix of the Dark Lord's propaganda and reports his followers were giving on their progress on various projects and wished for once that he weren't so highly placed in the ranks. It would have been mind-numbingly dull if he hadn't spent his time writing notes magically to take back to the Order. Every few minutes he cast a surreptitious water-repelling charm on the paper in hopes of keeping it dry. Time alone would

tell if he had been successful.

When everyone else had finished and been given their punishment...usually *Crucio*...or rewards...the lack of *Crucio*...the Dark Lord turned toward Severus. "And what news do you have for me?"

As the rain had finally cleared up, Severus pushed back the hood of his cloak as though he had nothing to hide. "It appears that the Potter brat has been planning a trip to visit his parents' graves soon. The Mudblood does not speak with him, but is in secret owl contact with the Weasley boy."

"He plans to visit Mummy does he? In Godric's Hollow? What a fitting place for him to die. It has a certain lovely symmetry to it, doesn't it?" His eyes seemed to glow in his snake-like face, lending him an even more horrific appearance than usual.

Severus bowed his head in agreement. Earlier that afternoon when they had planned this tidbit of information, Hermione had said nearly the same thing about the Dark Lord dying there. "It does indeed."

"Good, good. Get me specifics and bring them to me as soon as possible. I want this over with in a matter of weeks, not months or years."

"As do I." Severus kissed the man's hem again, then backed away. Throughout the meeting, he had watched for Nagini, knowing the snake wouldn't be happy about the wet, but hoping to catch sight at least. He had spent a considerable amount of his evening hours over the past week researching curses to destroy the snake with and the timing was right for a certain curse that would cause a slow, almost unnoticeable decline in the snake until the last moment. If Severus hadn't been around the animal several days before its death, hopefully he wouldn't be looked to for explanations. *Sectumsempra*, his own invention, would be quicker, but would tip his hand too early if employed today.

Accordingly, he left what remained of the gathering, walking in the direction of the Riddle House. He slipped behind a tree and cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, then waited.

Over half an hour passed before Wormtail walked into the cemetery, followed by Nagini, the nine-foot snake who hosted the Dark Lord's final Horcrux. He walked closer to intersect the snake's path and silently cast his curse, managing to gain no attention for his actions. When Wormtail and the snake were a sufficient distance away, he Apparated back to the cottage.

First order of business, he thought as he opened the cottage door, was a vial of Pepperup Potion, the second, a hot shower, followed by wrapping himself in his wife's arms, and sleep.

The next day's training for the boys went much the same as the first, despite Severus's lack of sleep. He put off his duel with Hermione until after the boys had left, however, though their regular schedule returned the following day. They had one week before Nagini would be dead, one week to train properly to face the Dark Lord. Severus wasn't sure it was possible to get the Order prepared in time.

By the end of the week, the boys were holding their own against Severus, at least jointly, anyway. It helped that they were holding their Occlumency shields tight so he didn't get a hint of their plans. Hermione suspected Harry and Ron lay in bed at night discussing strategy for overcoming the big bat on the morrow.

Still, after lunch there were more strategy sessions. Severus taught new curses and hexes to them and prepared them better for battle. He offered useful criticism on the morning's training and showed them alternatives. The evenings were spent practicing the spells Severus had produced using the twins as targets for the spells to be sure everyone could channel their emotions properly, and though Harry had no one to practice the second spell on, he reviewed the words and wand movements with Severus several times.

On the day Severus knew Nagini would die, he and the Order set the date for Harry's visit to Godric's Hollow. Then he had Ron write a letter to Hermione and owl it over to her, so he could use it as proof of the boys' plans.

Severus knew the Dark Lord would be angry about the loss of his snake and so had prepared himself by removing his most dangerous memories into a Pensieve and dressed himself carefully for his impromptu visit to the evil leader. He was just kissing Hermione goodbye when his arm began to burn and with a regretful look, he Apparated to the Dark Lord's feet.

"You are quick to respond, Severus." The snake-faced man said when Severus had finished kissing the hem of his robe in the yard of the Riddle House.

"Yes, my Lord. I was planning to stop by. I have definite information to present to you." He kept all fear and knowledge of what was going on to himself. The Dark Lord's anger was palpable.

"Good, good. When is it to be?"

"Tomorrow is his parents' wedding anniversary. He intends to spend the afternoon by their graves." He produced the letter Weasley had written and passed it over. Tomorrow was no special day, in reality, but it had been an excuse for Potter to be at the cemetery. They had discussed putting the inevitable meeting against the Dark Lord off a few more days, but decided the less time the man had to make a new Horcrux to replace Nagini, the better.

The man's eyes narrowed and an evil grin filled his face. "Very good. You have done well, Severus. Better than some. That is well as it gives me a second reason for our meeting tonight."

When the man indicated for Severus to stand on his right hand, Severus was able to look about him at the room. He saw the few others who were already present, and watched those who had yet to arrive pop into view and make their obeisance. There was a long line of Death Eaters, with nearly all who remained in his service and out of prison attending.

It took the better part of an hour for the greetings to be made before the Dark Lord began to explain their purpose there. "Tonight you have all come to see the punishing of one who has had great elevation in my ranks, but who had betrayed me."

A shiver ran down Severus' back and neck, as the description fit himself, but he knew he was in favor with the man, and reminded himself again that the spell he cast on Nagini could never be traced back to him.

The man who used to be Tom Riddle lifted an arm and cast a summoning spell which shot into the house. A moment later, two Death Eaters in full Death Eater costuming exited the house with a bound man between them. The reason why the man was not struggling became apparent when Wormtail came into the torch light: he was unconscious. A sensible precaution in Severus's opinion, considering his Animagus form.

When Wormtail was placed at his master's feet, one of the men cast *Enervate*, and he awoke slowly. The Dark Lord waited until he was fully conscious before beginning to speak. "I have trusted Wormtail with one of my most precious possessions: My snake, Nagini, yet he has allowed this valuable asset to sicken and die. His punishment cannot be harsh enough, nor the importance over stated. He has failed me almost as surely as if he had turned traitor."

And then the torture began. Severus watched on passively, though even the sniveling rat's torture disgusted him. No matter how Wormtail may have deserved punishment and death for other things, Severus couldn't enjoy the sight before him. Then again, he didn't feel all that bad either. He supposed that made him quite beyond the pale, but as he couldn't change it, he chose to ignore it instead.

It was well past midnight when he returned to the cottage, but Hermione was still up, as she had promised to be. She sat on the sofa, idly paging through a book of charms when he entered the cottage. She smiled when she saw him and snapped the book closed, hurrying to stand.

"Is it done, then?" she asked.

"Yes. The snake is gone, and the time of war is set. The Dark Lord has chosen to take only his dozen most trusted into battle as he's only expecting Potter to be there and is bringing us along mostly to prove his invincibility. He'll almost certainly impose some Anti-Apparition and Anti-Portkey charms to ensure Potter can't get away, so we need to be sure the Order is in place early, just in case. I am, of course, required at his side."

Hermione let out a deep breath, sorry he would be forced to be there, but glad he would be fighting at her side. "We knew that would probably be the case, right? After all your hatred for the Marauders, you would be a valuable asset in the war."

"Yes." Severus finished shedding his outer robes, then began work on the inner ones. He felt dirty, not fit to lick her boots, but he needed to spend the night in his wife's arms, for the next day might bring their end. He didn't allow it to horrify him, as nothing could change it, and there was nothing else for it.

He took her hand and led her toward the bathroom, where they both undressed and got into the shower. And when they returned to their bed, perhaps for the last time, he made slow, passionate love to her, wanting her to understand just what she meant to him, to have this memory to hold onto if she lived and he did not. Perhaps the beauty of it would give her a few more months with their child.

Four chapters left, well, three chapters and an epilogue. Next up: The end of the evil Tom Riddle.

Also, thanks to my beta, countrymouse, and to RobisonRocket for their help with their chapter.

Chapter 48: Going to Battle

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See Chapter 1

Chapter 48: Going to Battle

When the morning of battle arrived, there was no time for a repeat of the previous night's performance, no time to lie and drowse in Severus' company as Hermione would have liked. They had a meeting at the Burrow paddock at nine, as Headquarters was not sufficiently large for the group they hoped to gather. Severus would have to meet with the Dark Lord and his minions an hour before they were due to appear on the field, but he would make a showing at the Order meeting first.

"It's time we got up, my sweet. We've a big day ahead of us," Severus said, though far from nudging her to stand, he slid a hand over her belly and caressed it. Hermione knew he was thinking of the new life inside her, and he was wondering if he would be alive to see it, or she to bear it.

She knew because she often wondered the same thing herself.

After another long moment, he extricated himself from her arms, and she let him go. The whole cottage seemed to be thick with silence, as though it were a heavy layer of fog filling the rooms. They went about their usual daily tasks with little or no talk, though Hermione often caught him stealing looks at her, as she stole looks at him.

So much of their time together had been spent with secrets keeping them apart. Now that they were finally in accord, they had to face a battle they may not survive. Hermione wouldn't allow herself to dwell on it, however, as she didn't need to be emotional today. This day of all days, she needed a clear head.

Breakfast passed and after gathering the vials of Felix Felicis, they walked from the cottage hand in hand, then stood in the little path between the door and gate. He drew her into his arms and cradled her head against his chest. "As I will not be able to publicly take you in my arms again before battle: Be brave, be careful and know that I love you far more than life itself."

Tears welled in her eyes and she fought them back, knowing it would do no good to cry right now, though she could feel the emotion choking them both. "And you: Be brave, be careful and know that I love you, too, more than life itself."

He lifted her chin and placed an intensely passionate kiss on her mouth, then finally drew back. She let him go, knowing she would already be late. He would Apparate over a few minutes after she did.

"You'd better go."

She allowed a twisted smile in reply, let go of him completely, and Apparated to the front steps of the Burrow. As she crossed the street, she forced herself to focus on what lay ahead that day instead of what she had left behind and feared never to have again.

The Order meeting was just beginning in the paddock when Hermione walked in, and after setting the vials to the side of the entrance to be passed around before they left, she quietly slid into an empty spot on the ground beside Harry. He looked over and smiled, then threw an arm around her shoulder in a half hug and turned back to Mad-Eye, who was addressing the group. Hermione knew there was confusion in some of the Order members' minds about her relationship with Harry since most had not been brought back into their secret yet. That would be solved soon, however.

When Hermione sensed Severus's approach from the house behind her, she shrugged off Harry's arm and smiled when he looked back at her. Mad-Eye glared toward the back of the group where Severus was standing and changed topics. "As most of you know, we have been receiving information from an informant over the past several months. What the majority of you don't know is the informant's name. About two months ago, Severus Snape," He paused while a murmur of surprise ran through the crowd, then continued, "took an Unbreakable Vow before more than a dozen of our Order members.

"In it he pledged to continue the fight against He Who Must Not Be Named, to tell us of all actions within the Dark Lord's camp that he was aware of, and to fight to end the madman we go against today. As much as I would prefer to do otherwise, I would ask that you withhold your hexes until this meeting is over. He has come to give us the final information we need from Voldemort's plans. Miss Granger, if you would stand and question him for us."

Hermione stood and turned toward her husband, her blandest expression in place. "Severus Snape, please tell everyone present everything you know about the Dark Lord's plans for today's encounters and what he knows or expects to encounter to the best of your knowledge."

Someone in the back shouted out, asking why Hermione was asking the questions and not Mad-Eye. Hermione turned to the man and answered, "I am the one he took the vow to, so I am the only one who can ask him and expect a full answer. Now, if you'll let him report?"

Severus scowled at her, then told her everything he had told her the night before. He highlighted the members who would be there, their strengths and weaknesses. He managed to do so with a minimum of vitriol at people who asked questions, choosing to ignore them for the time being, if not permanently.

When he finished his narrative, Hermione asked for clarification on a couple of the questions, then asked if there were any others. Elphias Dodge, a silver-haired man, stood and asked, "If you are really on our side, why did you kill Albus Dumbledore, and how are we supposed to believe that you are really on our side now?"

Hermione nodded at Severus. "Tell him." He glared at her for allowing his privacy to be invaded like this, but turned back to the man.

"You are aware, I imagine, of the results of breaking an Unbreakable Vow?" Severus waited for the old man to nod that he did know. "I had one with Dumbledore as well, and he ordered me to kill him if it became necessary to do so to preserve my life so I could continue to spy for the Order. If I hadn't done so, I would be dead now. And if I were lying to you now, I would also die in front of your eyes, as Miss Granger has ordered me to tell you what happened."

"How do we know you didn't use a spell on her to believe you made the vow, when you actually didn't?" Another voice called out.

"All here who witnessed Snape give Hermione the vow, stand!" This was Harry's voice, and he stood as he spoke. When everyone else was standing, Harry continued. "Unless you believe we were all ensorcelled, you have it on good authority that Snape has been providing us with useful information over the past several months, as many of you know, having had your lives saved by his forewarning."

"But what of the attacks you didn't prevent?" another asked.

"Contrary to popular belief, the Dark Lord does not tell me every secret he holds, nor can I speak of every one, if I am to maintain my fiction of being his loyal bootlicker. As he expects me to arrive beside him any moment now, I suggest you question Miss Granger if you have anything else you wish to know. She, at least, has been privy to everything I have learned since the vow." Then he Disapparated, leaving her with every eye upon her.

"We don't have time to bicker this out today. What you do need to know is that he has been feeding me information after every meeting with the Dark Lord. He has been training Harry, Ron and myself in field battle and taught me the Occlumency and Legilimency that helped prepare so many of you for today's battle."

Tonks stood and attracted everyone's attention. "At the Death Eater attack on the school, Snape took out more Death Eaters under the pretence of fighting me than any three other people."

"Really? He didn't mention that. He's also the one who developed the spell we're going to use today to defeat Voldemort once and for all. Oh, and while I have the floor, Harry and I were never really fighting; it was all a ruse for the Dark Lord's benefit. Now, if you will listen to Moody, we can finish our preparations for today." She sat again, her legs feelings somewhat weak from nerves.

"Very nice, Hermione." Harry patted her on the shoulder.

"Thanks." She touched his hand, then withdrew her own and turned to face Moody.

After collecting his Death Eater robes from the cottage, Severus donned them, downed his own tiny dose of Felix Felicis, and touched the tip of his wand to the mark on his left arm. When the squeeze of Apparition lifted and he opened his eyes to behold the field around Riddle House where the Death Eaters were gathering, he stared at the group before him. Apparently, the plans had changed. Instead of the dozen minions the Dark Lord had planned to bring, it appeared all of his followers were milling about. With a shudder, Severus saw a group of dark figures gliding across the farmland to the north. Dementors.

The meeting at the Burrow only lasted another ten minutes before everyone split into groups and was given directions of where to Apparate. The Felix Felicis was passed around in miniscule doses, with the hope that the few hours of protection each should give would be enough. The third set of batches wouldn't be finished for another week, so they had to make do with what they had. When Hermione looked around to be sure everyone was huddled with their groups, she saw Ginny running toward them. The younger girl was dressed in her school robes, stunning with her siren-red hair and her wand clutched in her hand.

Though Harry had repeatedly told Ginny she would not be accompanying them into battle, the youngest Weasley had obviously paid him no mind. She had been training with her older brothers and practiced the spell they would be using that day. Hermione figured the Weasley daughter was as ready as anyone could be.

"You're not coming, Ginny," Harry said when she reached them, though he had his back to her and hadn't looked in her direction.

"Yes, I am, and you can't stop me."

"You can't Apparate."

"Neither can Hagrid, but he's going with a Portkey group, isn't he? So will I."

This made Harry turn around, his mouth open, ready to tell her how wrong she was, but she didn't give him a chance. Instead she seized the front of his robe and pulled him close, laying a kiss on him that was so steamy it raised the temperature of several people around them.

When she let go, Harry stood dumbly for one or two seconds, then blinked. "You could get hurt. I can't bear to see you hurt."

"I can't bear to lose you either, but I want to be by your side, whatever that may entail. If I have to travel by Knight Bus, I'll be there."

Harry sighed and pulled her into his arms for a quick hug. "Be safe. I love you." His words were barely more than a whisper and only just reached Hermione's ears.

"Same to you." Then Ginny released him and hurried to the group that included Hagrid.

When Harry turned back to Hermione, she shook her head. "The Knight Bus. I knew there was an avenue I had forgotten to use against Se-Sebastian. I could have come to Hogwarts with you two after all."

Harry laughed, as she hoped he would, then turned his attention back to the group. "Are we ready then?"

"Are you going to marry my sister if you both live through this?" George asked.

"We have to both live through this. She's my soul mate." He grinned, then gave the signal and the group Apparated to the clearing.

Upon arrival, everyone but Harry used Disillusionment Charms and sequestered themselves into the woods. Granted, it wasn't very sporting to land en masse on the opposition, but this wasn't a sporting event, and Voldemort's ranks were attempting to do the same to Harry.

Hermione began to sense her husband's disquiet. Something was wrong, horribly wrong on his side of things. Her fingers twitched as she reached for her diary, stuck, as always, in her back pocket.

Other groups of witches and wizards appeared in clusters around the clearing and then one by one, disappeared beneath various charms. Harry walked over to his parents' gravestones and stood before them. Hermione saw his lips moving again, as they had on their last visit here. She hoped he was gaining strength from speaking with them. He seemed confident, under control, and Hermione wondered how much of that was confidence in his ability, how much was a feeling of safety because Order members would outnumber Death Eaters four to one, and how much was a façade. Ginny would know.

People around her found each other and their bearings and sequestered themselves in the trees. Somewhere nearby, she heard Mr. Weasley ask if anyone had seen Perkins; he had been with them when they Apparated out of the paddock.

Finally, words began to form on the page of her diary, and Hermione shared Severus's horror.

He's changed his mind. We'll be more than a hundred strong, with Dementors as well. Warn the others.

Hermione stood and cast Sonorous on her throat, then called out. "Plans changed; they have more than a hundred with them. Prepare your Patronus; he's bringing Dementors."

She heard audible gasps from those around her. Harry's eyes shot her direction, and she saw fear in them, the same slick, hot fear she felt in herself. Someone must have tipped him off; the tables had been turned. It was sure to get nasty real quickly.

As he finished putting the diary away, wandless and under cover of his voluminous robes, Severus saw a figure hurry up the stairs of the house and through the door. He began strategizing, trying to figure out how to even the odds a bit more. Almost two to one, plus Dementors. Severus wondered how many of the Order members could handle two Death Eaters at once. Granted, some of the Death Eaters were pathetic duelists, and most of the Order members would have Felix Felicis to help them along, but even so.

His attention was drawn when the Dark Lord walked through the front door of the house and came out onto the stairs to look down upon his soldiers. He had two masked minions at his sides and another came behind, Severus felt a greasy slick of uneasiness hit his belly, far worse than what he had ever felt before. Something here was not right.

The Dark Lord looked across the crowd, then called out. "We are going to battle today to slaughter those foolish few who think they are stronger than I. We will destroy the Potter brat and his supporters, and then march on the Ministry of Magic. The time has come. My right hand, my most trusted servant, Severus. Come here."

Severus strode over at a clip, not rushing, but not dawdling either. His feeling of apprehension grew as he drew closer, but he knelt at the bottom of the stairs. "My Lord, how can I serve you?"

"Am I, Severus? Am I your Lord? It seems there was more than one traitor in my battalion all this time. How long have you been working for the Order? All those times Bellatrix told me you were Dumbledore's man, and I didn't believe it. But you've been the one thwarting my plans all this time. You and that Mudblood. You made a vow to her, the filth that should be wiped from the Earth."

Knowing his remaining life span was numbered in minutes now, possibly seconds, Severus humbled himself even lower. "My Lord, who is bringing you such falsehoods, such lies at a time like this? It is a mistake."

"Liar! *Crucio*," he held the curse for the better part of a minute while Severus writhed and screamed in excruciating pain, hitting his head on the stairs more than once. After letting up for a few seconds, the madman continued, "I have seen it all, everything you revealed to those foolish Order members only minutes ago. And you didn't tell me there would be so many, that it was to be a crowd. You, the man who took down half a dozen of my followers at the attack on the school, you who developed some spell you have the vanity to believe capable of killing me. I know it all. *Crucio*."

It was too late. Severus wished he could see his wife, hold his baby just once. He would die here. But at least the Dark Lord was going to battle anyway. He would not have died in vain.

Before Hermione could finish tucking her diary away, her whole body was wracked with pain. It took only a moment for Hermione to realize Severus had been hit with the Cruciatus Curse. It went on and on, released, then struck again. She was panting, trying to handle the echo of pain that filled her, a mere shadow of what her husband felt. And then she felt a slicing of the skin on his arm, and she knew he had been outed.

With all her might, she wished him to appear at her side. Hermione envisioned him beside her, hoping Severus had been wrong about the bond between them, that she could wish him there. But it did no good. Desperate, wracking again with the pain of *Crucio*, she had an idea. "Twinkie!"

Severus groaned as the Dark Lord magically cut a meandering line down his sternum and toward his belly.

"I'm going to eviscerate you now. Then leave you here to die while I kill your Mudblood whore and your child. She, too, will pay for your treachery."

As the Dark Lord lowered his wand toward Severus again, there was a soft crack of Apparition and Severus felt his wrist seized and then the painful squeezing of being Apparated away.

They landed in the Weasleys' paddock with a thud, and Severus felt his head spinning as he gasped for breath.

"My master needs help!" Twinkie's plaintive voice cried.

"Oh, dear."

Severus held in a groan as he recognized Madam Pomfrey's voice and clipped step as she hurried over. He knew she had been at the earlier meeting, so she knew of his role, but he wasn't sure she wouldn't still want to finish the job.

"Well, you've gotten yourself in quite a state." Madam Pomfrey lifted her wand and cast a diagnostic spell, tutted, then began closing the wound on his chest, followed by the one on his arm. "I didn't think the fight would have even begun yet. How did you manage to get yourself in such a state?"

"Somebody . . . told . . . Dark Lord. Going to be . . . blood bath." He sighed as she finished the second cut, then cast a pain reducing charm.

"That does sound nasty. Let me get you a blood replenishing potion and some Pepperup. Then we'll see how you feel."

A moment after Twinkie disappeared, Hermione felt disorientation; a minute later the pain from the cuts slowly began to fade from top to bottom, one at a time and she knew Twinkie had been successful. He was safe. Her stomach rolled as she felt his relief, his worry, and she pulled out her pen and jotted a quick note to him in the diary.

Message received, we stand at the ready. Please be safe and return to the cottage. I will be with you as soon as I can.

There was the sound of wind in the clearing and the Death Eaters landed in a circle around their dark leader, wands lifted and pointed outward. This was it.

A barrage of spells shot from the woods toward the Death Eaters, some fell, others retaliated, and the fight was on. After a few minutes of fighting, Hermione realized being invisible gave them advantages and disadvantages. Order members' spells might hit invisible comrades, so she removed her charm and took on the Death Eater nearest to her.

Though Severus hadn't hit her with anything that might truly hurt her or the baby during their duels, he had honed her reflexes well. This was a good thing, because she soon found herself fighting two Death Eaters simultaneously. Her shielding charms were put to good use as she alternately protected herself and parried. Ron came up behind her, she heard his voice, caught the Death Eater to her right looking at him, and decided to keep her position for the time being, back to back at least no one would sneak up on them.

A cold finger of fear rushed down her back, and Hermione tore her eyes from her cowering opponent to see a Dementor drawing near. Thinking of her baby, of her husband safe in Madam Pomfrey's care, and of the future they might have together, Hermione shot a Patronus at the soul-sucking monster and then wrapped her opponent in ropes and petrified him. She banished him to the area they had designated for detainees and turned to the next robed man.

The fight seemed to go for days, but based on the length of time their dueling practices had seemed to last, Hermione knew it was a little more than an hour. When she and Ron happened upon Harry, she invited him into their circle and together they plowed through those who challenged them. Most of their opposition couldn't hold a candle to Severus in a duel. As they made their way through the fray, Hermione tried to take inventory of the Order members she knew personally.

Bodies lay broken and bleeding on the ground, not all of them wore black robes. When Hermione's eyes fell on Rubeus Hagrid's tortured face, which was nowhere near his body, her stomach turned, but when she saw Hestia Jones lying at a sick angle and covered with blood from dozens of cuts, it was all she could do to keep from vomiting.

She averted her eyes, focused on her opponents, and they pushed through the crowd, ever nearer to Voldemort himself. As they moved, she sensed those who had practiced the spells with them coming up behind, forming a large battling group around herself, Harry and Ron, pushing through with them. All of the Weasleys, excepting Percy, who had never re-established contact with the family, were there in various conditions. Minerva McGonagall limped over, but her wand was flashing like lightning.

Finally Severus felt strong enough to Apparate without splinching himself and stood up. "Twinkie, please return me to the field where the battle is taking place."

"I cannot allow that, Severus," Madam Pomfrey said as she hurried by. "You aren't well enough yet."

"I am well enough and I must be there. My whole future is at stake. Come, Twinkie." He held out a hand to the elf. "You may return here to continue assisting Madam Pomfrey if you like."

The elf brightened and Apparated them back through the wards over the battle field, dropping Severus not thirty feet from his wife.

Kingsley and Tonks were slowly making their ways over. Hermione blinked when she saw her husband join the fray. She caught only the slightest flash of house-elf as Twinkie appeared with her master, then Disapparated again. After all, house-elf magic was immune to most Anti-apparition wards. Though she could strangle Severus for joining them now when he was already weak, she was grateful he felt well enough to be here.

And then they stood before the snake-faced despot. His eyes narrowed as he saw Hermione and Harry working together to take over the ranks. "So, you have been putting on a show for me, have you? I have my own spies, you know, so I am not surprised. It won't work. By tonight you'll all be dead. Just like your traitorous lover, Mudblood."

Noticing that he had overlooked the way his ranks had been all but leveled through the fight, Hermione smiled. Harry responded aloud, though he was still fighting one of the Death Eaters. "As long as we take you with us, it won't matter in the end. There are far worse things than death, Tom Riddle." With that he blasted the black-clad woman across from him and turned toward Voldemort.

Hermione heard Bill begin to cast a shielding spell that would protect them all from incoming magic, but allow spells to go out, and Hermione and Ron began chanting.

"Partis meus diligo quod tripudium per alius."

After a moment, other voices joined them,

"Partis meus diligo quod tripudium per alius."

Then more and more joined until Hermione could hear more than a dozen voices chanting, sending Harry all of the love and joy they had ever felt. Hermione felt her husband draw close to her and lay a hand on the skin of her neck, the enchantment strengthening their feelings of love and loyalty.

"Partis meus diligo quod tripudium per alius."

The bubble inside Bill's shield seemed to light up far brighter than the sun, and Harry began his own spell.

"Partis meus diligo per meus frater obfirmo is in, planto him sentio is."

All wands pointed at Harry as the chant continued, and even without the spell being directed at her, Hermione could feel it building inside her, feel it swirling around her, could almost touch the bits of love and joy sparkling like jewels in the air she breathed. Then Harry started the chant for the third time, this time directing his wand at Voldemort, who watched them all with some fascination, but no concern. He always had ignored any magic having to do with love.

"Partis meus diligo per meus frater obfirmo is in, planto him sentio is," Harry all but yelled as a sparkling shower of magic poured from his wand and burst against Voldemort's chest, filling him, surrounding him, making him glow from the inside out.

Now horror filled the monster's face; anger sounded in his eyes, and he began looking around, searching for someone to help him, a way out. There was nowhere to go but out, however, and as his soul left his body, desperate for release from the overwhelming love invading every cell of his body, Harry ended the spell and performed a slicing hex on Voldemort's empty body, removing the head from his torso. There could be no return to that body for him.

Somewhere in the clearing, the sound of someone screaming, begging, pleading, poured around them, and with a pop, all was silent. The spell they had cast as a group slowly died in the air, losing ground. But even as the brightness ended, Hermione felt the residue streaming through her, renewing her after the awful battle.

Hermione's eyes left the broken body on the ground and turned about the clearing. It had been a blood bath, almost literally, as dozens of bodies lay around her on the ground. Death Eaters were standing in shock, unable to Apparate because of the wards the incoming Aurors were casting now that Tom Riddle's had ended. Some dropped their wands, others tried to fight and found themselves bound and piled with the others. Some Order members lay injured, but few were dead.

She turned, seeking out her husband, her emotions were too volatile to be sure if his were among them. He stood, right behind her, blood covering him and a stunned look on his face. Severus jerked with the after affects of *Crucio* and she realized he hadn't taken a potion for it. But he was alive. His eyes met hers and rather than join the pile up on Harry, she threw her arms around her once-hated Potions Master, in all his blood-spattered glory.

He pressed his lips to hers, murmuring disjointed, unintelligible words between kisses as she worked to relieve him of the heavy black cloak, covered in his blood. It could

stay in the field for all she cared. They had both come out alive. It was a miracle.

"We have to get you out of here. The Aurors..." Hermione was interrupted as her husband went limp in her arms, then slid to the ground, hit by an Auror's spell. "Twinkie!"

Nothing happened as a tall Auror she had never seen before approached. "He's a murderer and he's going to Azkaban. No need to worry little lady. We're here to protect you."

He cast a levitation charm on Severus's body and Hermione called for the house-elf again. "Twinkie! You can't take him, you don't understand. Where is my house-elf?"

"House-elves can't get through the charms we cast. And apparently you don't know who this is. This is Severus Snape, the man who killed Albus Dumbledore. He's a very dangerous man."

"This man saved hundred of lives protecting you and your family from the Dark Lord," she said, desperate, tugging on the man's arm. "You have to listen to me!"

"It's not my choice to make. He'll have his trial just like anyone else. You'll see. I have a job to do, Miss." He tugged again at his arm where she had latched on, determined not to allow the man to take away her husband.

Then strong arms came behind her, wrapped around her and grasped her hands, pulling them away from the Auror. "Hermione, not like this. We'll find another way."

"I can't let him take Severus. I can't."

"Not for long; we'll help you fight the Ministry."

Hermione turned into Bill Weasley's arms and grasped his cloak. She buried her face in his chest and babbled between her tears. "Bill, he's the one, my soul mate, my husband. They can't take him, I have to help."

"Shhh, I know. We'll help, I promise, but we'll do it legally. It's OK. Everything's going to be all right."

Ron came over and slapped her on the back. "We did it, Voldemort's gone forever, and the bastard Snape is going to Azkaban, too. What could make this day more perfect?"

Hermione extricated herself from Bill's comforting embrace, turned around and punched Ron in the nose. "Get away from me, you git. That's my husband they're taking to Azkaban."

Ron fainted dead away.

AN: Partis meus diligo quod tripudium per alius: Share my love and joy with another

Partis meus diligo per meus frater obfirmo is in, planto him sentio is: Share my love with my brother, Lock it in, make him feel it

My Latin translation was provided online at http://www.translation-guide.com/free_online_translators.php?from=English&to=Latin

I hope the hopping back and forth between scenes was clear and didn't confuse anyone. A big thanks both to my beta, countrymouse, and to RobisonRocket for their suggestions on this chapter.

49: Arranging a Trial

Chapter 49 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 49: Coming Clean and Arranging a Trial

Hermione had wanted to stalk to the edge of the wards and Apparate home, but it was impossible to get through the crowds of people around her. Aurors were questioning everyone about the day's events; Order members were congratulating her and each other, mourning over the dead, helping the wounded. Reporters were making their way through the crowd, snapping pictures right and left and harassing people for quotes. She didn't want to talk to anyone, though. Only her husband.

Tonks came over and wrapped Hermione in her arms. "Hey, I saw them take him. It'll be OK, I'll do everything I can."

"What if we can't get him released? What if he goes to Azkaban for the rest of his life? What about our baby?"

"Calm down. I know everything is a mess right now, but I'll make sure they take decent care of him. We'll see if we can get him a speedy trial so he can get out again. For now, why don't you go home and rest. I'm sure you're exhausted. Most of us will meet back at Headquarters later to compare notes." Tonks took her by the shoulders and led her toward the edge of the wards. "You have a baby to take care of, so make sure you do. Otherwise Severus will cuss you when he gets back home, and that man has a formidable temper."

Hermione nodded and followed directions, even though she was far from convinced by Tonks reasoning. She Apparated to the cottage, but after walking around what amounted to being a love nest she had spent so many hours in with her husband, she couldn't stay there. She didn't feel much like talking to anyone either, however, so she walked over to the manor house.

When she left the cottage, Hermione had thought she could use the walk to clear her mind, but when she arrived at the manor, she was exhausted, barely able to lift one foot in front of the other. One of the house-elves whose name she couldn't remember opened the door. "Mistress, you is here." The elf looked Hermione over, seeming to note her bedraggled appearance. "You needs a bath and nap. Brownie will take good care of you."

As if she had been summoned, a small female elf appeared at the front door and hustled Hermione up the stairs and down the long hall to what must have been the master bedroom. All the while the elf fussed over her, commenting on Hermione's appearance, how tired she must be, and how she must take care of the baby. Normally it would have driven her crazy, but Hermione only heard one word in four, she was so tired and in shock. As soon as they reached the room, Brownie waved her hand and water

began running in the bathroom. Another wave of her hand and Hermione's dirty clothes disappeared and a robe covered her.

"Where is the master?" Brownie asked as Hermione reached into the sinfully large tub and tested the water temperature.

Perfect, absolutely perfect. How did they always know? "He's been taken to Azkaban." Tears began to flood her face again. She was tired, hungry, and dirty and her husband had been carted off like a common criminal. Not caring if the entire staff of house-elves was watching, Hermione slid out of her robe and into the water until she was up to her chin.

"No, Mistress. He can't be."

"He is. They . . . I can't talk about it now. Later, after I've rested, had something to eat."

"Food, yes, Brownie will gets you food right away."

Hermione spent the rest of the day lounging around in the tub, lying in bed, and eating. She cried throughout the day, not only for her husband, but for the other losses they had sustained that day. Hagrid, sweet, loveable, gullible Hagrid. Hestia Jones, the pink-cheeked, black haired woman who had always had a smile for everyone. How many more were lost whom she didn't even know about? How many families had been destroyed today? Not only Order members, either, but those Death Eaters who regretted joining the Dark Lord, but had no way out. Their lives and families would be forever changed.

Harry sent Hedwig with a note asking her to come see him at Headquarters, telling her he would try to help. She read it, then tossed it to the floor. She was not up to dealing with the current round of problems.

When a special edition of the *Daily Prophet* was delivered to her that evening, Hermione didn't look at it. She didn't want to see the full list of dead and injured. She didn't know if she could take it. Then Twinkie came in with refreshments. While setting the table, he flipped the paper over to the front, and gasped. "Master, oh master."

Hermione snatched the paper up and found a screaming headline, "What's His Name Gone for Good." There was a picture of her, Harry, Ron and everyone else zapping Voldemort with the final spell, and the look of horror that had filled the madman's face as he realized what was happening. Clear as day was her husband standing behind her, assisting in the spell.

Below the fold was a picture of Severus, filthy and still unresponsive from the spell the Auror had used on him. The headline proclaimed: "Dumbledore's Killer Now in Chains: Dementor's Kiss Expected." The story said how he had been taken forcefully by half a dozen Aurors after they had torn him from the Imperioed Hermione Granger, whose friends had been unable to stop the evil professor.

Below that was a lead in about his secret life and predilection for teenaged girls; story, page three. Hermione glanced at the other stories on the page, but decided to push through to page three. There was a picture of her and Severus kissing like no tomorrow. Her face flamed as the gossip-mongering writer began spewing out hearsay, speculation, and flat out lies in a tale of a crooked teacher using his dark skills to seduce the sweet, innocent friend of Harry Potter and using her as his sex slave.

"Rubbish. It's all a bunch of rubbish." She tossed the paper across the room and rubbed her face. It was rubbish that would hurt their case, she knew. And if her parents got the evening's edition of the *Prophet*, as they undoubtedly would even in Majorca, they would have plenty of questions as well. She should really pop over there and face them in person, but maybe they wouldn't get this paper until tomorrow, and she could face them in the morning over breakfast. Or perhaps when she finished up at Headquarters, she should head over and see them tonight.

Deciding she ought to head over to Headquarters to let everyone know she was well enough anyway, and the rest could take care of itself, Hermione got out of bed and began to do her hair and makeup. "Brownie."

"Yes, mistress," the elf said when she appeared at Hermione's side.

"Can you and some of the others collect my personal items from the cottage and bring them over tonight and tomorrow. I'll need a few clothes right away to go to Headquarters, and I'm going to try and see if I can send some things over to Severus, wherever they're holding him. If you can gather his things as well and place them in the room here with mine, I'd appreciate it. There's no real rush on anything but a few of my outfits for now." She felt guilty asking the house-elves to take care of this for her, but she knew she didn't have the strength and patience to deal with the task herself, and Brownie looked so thrilled every time she was given a job to do.

"Oh, yes, mistress, as soon as we can, mistress!" The elf popped away and Hermione returned to trying to tame her hair into some acceptable form.

She had some things she would have to do in the immediate future. Of course she needed to care for the baby, care for herself. And if nothing else, she could spend the time between now and Severus' trial working on his defense. If things didn't go their way at the trial, it could be months before she saw him again. She could tell he was uncomfortable where he was, grieving. It made her want to pull the covers over her head. The thought of not seeing him, touching him for seven more months, was more than she could bear. Her hand itched to pick up her diary, but she knew he would have written if he had his on him, so he wouldn't get her message anyway.

Hermione was finished with her hair and rudimentary makeup when seven house-elves appeared in her room with all of her clothes and personal items from the cottage. She blinked, then realized she should have expected the entire task to be completed with alacrity. Without any directions, the house-elves began putting her things away in exactly the places she would have chosen, if they had asked. The house-elves at Hogwarts had never been so efficient, she was sure.

"Mistress," Brownie asked when they had finished. "We is going back for the master's things, but we is wondering if we should move his potions things. Master is brewing something, and we is not wanting to get into trouble for disturbing it."

"Leave the lab untouched. I'll go there myself on my way to see my friends and check the brew. We'll find somewhere to set up the lab here before he returns. Thank you for being so efficient; I couldn't get through this without you."

Brownie's face all but glowed. "Yes, mistress, we is happy to serve you any time." With a crack, all seven elves disappeared again and Hermione turned to her armoire, pulling out the first jumper and pair of jeans she saw. At this point, she really didn't care what she wore as long as it was clean. Though she could have Disapparated from her room, Hermione chose to walk down to the front door to give her more time to think and because she felt it was a courtesy to the elves if they knew she had left. Not that they had visitors to tell she was gone. No one but her and Severus could get to the house. Harry and Ron might, she supposed, if they had any inkling that 'Hermione's Field' was connected to the structure, but then, they didn't know the manor existed.

When she reached the front door, the same elf who had let her in rushed over to open it for her. When Hermione thanked the elf, she had answered, "Mistress is always welcome."

Hermione got partway through the door, then turned back and looked at the elf. "What is your name?"

"Cupcake, mistress."

"Cupcake. I'm not sure if I'll be back tonight or not, Cupcake, let Twinkie know, will you?"

"Yes, mistress, of course."

Nodding, Hermione walked down the first three steps, then Disapparated to the cottage door and walked in. "Cupcake," she muttered to herself. "Cupcake, Brownie, Twinkie. What is this, a Muggle sweetshop?"

During her visit to the cottage, Hermione realized the potion Severus was brewing was more of her prenatal vitamins. According to his notes, there were twelve more hours

for it to simmer, and then it would be finished. The Felix Felicis wouldn't be so easy. She made a note to herself to come back the next morning and take it off the flame, then Apparated to the park across from Grimmauld Place. Since the paper had reported the death or capture of over a hundred Death Eaters, Hermione figured she was safe crossing the street without a Disillusionment Charm. What she hadn't counted on was the reception she would get when she entered the house.

Mrs. Weasley was the first to come across her. The woman eyed her for a long moment, as if trying to piece together what she knew of Hermione with what she had read in the *Prophet*. Then she opened her arms and enveloped Hermione in a hug. "You poor, poor girl."

Hermione hugged her back, grateful for the understanding she was receiving. "Thank you, Mrs. Weasley."

"We'll make sure you get appropriate help, my dear," Molly patted her on the shoulder. "Kingsley!"

Hermione cringed as the woman all but shouted in her ear.

The door from the kitchen opened and the tall black Auror came out. "Oh, good, I was hoping to get a crack at you."

Confused, Hermione didn't say anything, just watched as he pulled out his wand. Mrs. Weasley backed off, leaving only one arm around Hermione to allow Kingsley better access.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking for curses of course," Mrs. Weasley said.

Kingsley began chanting something under his breath, and his wand tip glowed, but as far as Hermione could tell nothing happened. He tried something different, then a third spell.

"What exactly are you looking for?" Hermione asked.

"The *Imperius*, of course. We should have known all along..." Mrs. Weasley stopped talking in shock as Hermione shoved her away.

"Are you kidding me? Have you forgotten that little conversation we had in your house a few months back about how your sons were responsible for my having a soul mate, or finding my soul mate, or however you want to put it? How could you believe that Severus put me under the Imperius Curse when you know why I'm with him? How could you think, after everything he's done to help us, that he could be involved in something like that?" She stamped her foot and ignored the fact that it probably made her look like a three-year-old. "How can you believe that complete and utter *tripe* in the *Daily Prophet*?"

Throwing up her hands and stomping through to the kitchen, Hermione stopped short when Ron shot from his chair and stared bloody murder at her. "Snape? You and Snape? You did that? You're having his . . . Snape? It makes me ill to even think about it." He pushed past her and stomped out of the room.

"Rotten luck on the soul mate draw deal," Fred said, standing from his chair. "I think you were far too easy on us, under the circumstances. I best get back to the shop; it's another business day tomorrow." He grinned at the others through his flashing freckles and disappeared through the doorway.

Arthur Weasley stared at Hermione for a long while. Then, finally, "Are you all right?"

Hermione sat in a chair with a sigh. "Finally, someone who's reasonable."

Molly came bustling back into the room, Mad-Eye on her heels.

"I mean," Arthur continued, "you aren't under the *Imperius* or anything, are you?"

Hermione looked around at Charlie and half a dozen other Order members. Harry, Bill, Tonks and Remus were all missing from the room. Seeing everyone in the room seemed to think there was something wrong with her, that she had been ensorcelled or something, Hermione stood up, cast *Sonorus* on her throat so everyone in the house could hear her, then clearly enunciated, "For the last time, I, Hermione, am not under any kind of evil spell, I am not under *Imperius*. I have not been mistreated or taken advantage of by Severus Snape. I was affected by the Soul Mate potion the twits who run the joke shop decided to put in our school dinners.

"Albus Dumbledore himself married the two of us last March, and we are going to have a child together next spring. I love my husband and intend to fight for him in court. Thank you." She hadn't known how to end her tirade, but the thank you seemed enough. She ended the loud-speaker spell and turned to look at everyone in the room. "Does that clear things up for you? Oh, and for those few of you who haven't figured it out yet, Tonks is not having a baby, she bought those damned books for me."

She turned and hurried from the room, intending to leave the house she had mistakenly looked to for a spot of comfort and friendship and ran into Harry in the hall...literally.

When Harry was able to extricate himself from the jumble enough to see who he'd landed on, he smiled. "Hermione. I was starting to worry about you. All of that rubbish they wrote in the *Prophet*, you have seen the *Prophet*, haven't you?"

"Yes, and first thing tomorrow I'm going to file a lawsuit on my husband's behalf for defamation of character." Tears began pouring from her eyes, and she found herself wrapped in Harry's arms, sobbing.

"Hey, it's going to be all right. I know things look bleak right now, but we'll work it out, even if we have to steal him from the Ministry so you can run off together to Majorca or something."

That reminded Hermione. "Majorca. My parents are there. They expect me to pop in to visit sometime in the next week. I know they'll read this rubbish in the paper. How do I explain it to them?"

"They're your parents, they love you. They'll understand." This from Ginny, who had come down the stairs looking like she had just come from a good snog. Hermione took a closer look at Harry and noticed he too looked well kissed.

"Come on into the library and we'll see what's going on." Harry led her to the library and sat her in one of the chairs. "Tonks should be getting here soon for her dinner break before she pulls an all nighter. She'll have some idea where to start."

"I'd ask Kingsley if I could send some things to Severus, but he believed the rubbish in the *Prophet*." Hermione rubbed the back of her hands along her wet cheeks.

"We'll straighten all of that out soon enough," Harry said.

"So, you really married him, and you're going to have a baby?" Ginny asked.

With a great feeling of relief, Hermione began the whole tale from the beginning, skipping over the intimate portions. It felt good to finally come clean about everything, and she wished Ron could have been there to hear, but he was off sulking somewhere. She feared it was the end of things for their friendship. This might be too big a blow for him to get over. He was still reeling from the announcement of her pregnancy the previous week, and he had thought he liked the man she was married to then.

When Hermione did finally get home, she was again exhausted. Remus and Tonks had never shown up. Neither had Bill. Hermione figured they were all spending time with their loved ones, reaffirming their mortality and happiness at surviving. Damn them all.

Deciding her parents could wait until morning, Hermione didn't bother with the front door; instead she Apparated directly to her bedroom where she stripped down to her underwear and crawled between the sheets. If it hadn't been bad for the baby, she probably would have taken a sleeping potion. Instead, she lay awake a long time, then slept fitfully, reliving those last seconds with Severus over and over in her dreams. What if she had called for Twinkie the second it had ended? What if he had been glamourised to look like Sebastian? What if, what if, what if . . .

When the sun arose the next morning, Hermione was still tossing and turning from her restless night. Every time she had reached out for Severus in her mind, she had felt his misery, so eventually she had shut him off for a while, hoping it would allow her to sleep. Besides, that kind of depression couldn't be good for the baby.

Finally deciding at seven o'clock that she wasn't going to sleep anymore anyway, Hermione arose and got into the shower. It didn't take long for her to finish her morning routine. When she returned to her room, Brownie was waiting for her.

"Mistress, is you wanting to eat up here, or in the small dining room this morning?"

"Here, please." Brownie nodded and winked away, and Hermione talked to herself while she pulled clothes out for the day. "We'll have to find a breakfast nook here someplace. That dining room is ridiculous."

Brownie popped back with her breakfast tray and set them out on a small table in the corner. Hermione ate quickly, then debated on her next move. Should she try to find out what she could about Severus, or go try to calm her parents? The office she needed at the Ministry of Magic wouldn't open for more than an hour. It didn't take long to decide to track her parents down, then come back and see what Tonks had been able to find out for her. The woman had promised to help, after all.

After turning the heat off the vitamin potion, it took two dizzying Apparitions to get across the channel and to Majorca. Hermione ended in a wizarding pub near one of the beaches and stopped at the front desk to ask about the location of her parents' hotel and the closest owl mail station her parents could use. Luckily, both were within a few blocks.

When Hermione emerged into the sunlight after her stomach calmed, she turned her face upward and soaked in the heat it radiated. This was a beautiful spot, one she would have loved to visit under different circumstances. Tourist shops, food stalls, and hotel after hotel dotted the street. Between the buildings, she could see glimpses of white sand and blue ocean.

The walk to the hotel didn't take long, and when she arrived at the front desk, the woman called up to her parents' room right away to let them know she was there. Her father arrived at the front desk a few minutes later, explaining that they were still eating breakfast. Hermione smiled, as the Grangers were usually up and on their way much earlier in the day than that. He wrapped her in a tight hug, kissing her cheek and asking if she was OK. "We got last night's paper a little while ago. Needless to say, we were quite shocked," he said cryptically.

"Yes. Well, that rag is nothing more than a piece of rubbish," Hermione said as he led her to the elevators at the back of the reception area.

"Are the pictures rubbish too?" he asked blandly.

"Of course not. But ninety percent of the text was lies and speculation without any basis in fact. I promise to tell you everything when we can all sit down."

He didn't respond, but took her to the room where her mother was cleaning up from breakfast. She looked fresh and healthy, though there was a definite strain in her face that hadn't been there last time Hermione had seen her. Her mother wrapped Hermione tight in her arms, then set her back to look her over. "You don't look hurt. Even the cut from the picture is gone."

"Magic has its uses." Released, Hermione sat on the chair in the little parlor attached to the bedroom. Her parents took the sofa nearby.

"So?" her father asked.

With a sigh, Hermione looked at the rolled up paper on the coffee table and opened it. "I suppose there's nowhere to begin, but the beginning." She proceeded to tell about accidentally ingesting the potion, though she didn't explain how, and the results. She told of the Headmaster's demand of marriage and showed her wedding ring, then talked of the event Severus had been required to accomplish by both vows. She explained the strength and seriousness of an Unbreakable Vow, and then began detailing all of the things he had done to protect wizards and Muggles since Dumbledore's death. She talked of the meeting they had where he had made the vow to her, and of his work to create the spell that killed Voldemort. Then she told them of her experiences the day before, the battle, the final spell that ended it all forever. She didn't tell them about her pregnancy or the manor and house-elves. Those would wait for another moment.

When she was finished, her parents sat for a long time and internalized everything she had told them. When she thought they were accepting her story, she focused on the future. "So I'll have to return to England to see what steps can be taken to get him out of prison, to get the courts to release him to me."

"You don't mean you intend to help this man, to take him back after he's killed people. The man is a murderer; he's probably been using you all this time. I can't believe you married him and didn't tell us. If he's in prison, surely you can get your marriage nullified." This came from her mother.

"Absolutely. You can move back home and finish your schooling, then attend Uni," her father added. "We can get you a great psychiatrist to work out your confusion."

"I'm not speaking to a Muggle psychiatrist. They'd put me in the loony bin, say I'm mad when there's nothing wrong with me except that I'm not with my husband. I'm not going to Uni, I'm going to study for my N.E.W.T.s and work to get my husband out of prison."

"I'm pregnant. Neither of us had planned for this to happen so quickly, but there it is. You're going to be grandparents and there's nothing else for it. I love my husband, and I can't be separated from him or I will die. I mean that literally, Mum. I won't last through the four years of Uni without him. But before I die I will go slowly insane, leaving my child to become an orphan. I can't let that happen."

"Pregnant? Are you out of your mind?" Her mum shot from the chair, throwing her hands in the air, then lowered them to her own head to tug on her hair. "I thought you said it would be years before you got pregnant. He's no good for you."

"Mum, it happened, it sometimes does, even when one is on the pill or uses condoms." Hermione omitted the fact that he had deliberately gotten her with child. "I love him, I can't live without him, and I refuse to even try."

"Surely you're being overly dramatic," her mother said with a huff.

"I'm not. Just write and ask the Weasleys, would you? Or how about Minerva McGonagall; she's my professor. She's the new headmistress and with Voldemort out of the way, she'll no doubt be opening the school again before long."

"How can you go back to school if you're married and pregnant, Hermione?" her father asked. He and his wife were both very angry with her.

"I don't know, but I'm sure they'll work something out. I've got to go now and start work on trying to free my husband. I love you both, but I'm not giving up my life with him. When you really understand the seriousness of the situation, I hope you will forgive me for keeping secrets from you. There's an owl post near here where you can send me a message. I'll try and come back to visit within the week. Owl me if you wish to see me earlier." Hermione gave them the directions to the owl post, then Apparated away.

The Ministry of Magic was teeming with people, and Hermione noticed dozens of reporters standing together in a group. Disillusioning herself so she wouldn't draw any

unwanted attention after the lovely newspaper coverage she had received the previous evening, not to mention whatever had printed in that morning's paper, she shifted away from the crowd. Though she considered sneaking upstairs without having her wand weighed, Hermione decided to follow protocol and made herself visible when she reached the guard station, though she kept her face turned away from the reporters.

"Wand." The man said and Hermione gamely handed it over. She hadn't done so the last time she had been in this building, as it had been after hours and they were there on a mission to rescue Sirius. That had been a fiasco and a half, but at least the Ministry had no longer been able to deny Voldemort's return. She waited while the man dropped her wand in the strange brass scale and the bit of parchment came out of one end of the contraption. "Ten inches, vine wood with a dragon heartstring core. Been in use six years, is that right?" The man looked her in the eye for the first time.

"Yes. Can you tell me which floor the Auror Headquarters is located on?"

His eyes widened and she knew he recognized her. "You're Hermione Granger. You were at the battle yesterday. I read the *Prophet*..."

"The *Daily Prophet* publishes nothing but rubbish. Can I have my wand back?" Hermione held out her hand. The man gave it back but couldn't take his eyes off of her.

"Is it true you were put under the *Imperius* by Severus Snape?"

"Excuse me." Hermione brushed past him and made his way to the elevator, knowing she could ask someone else what floor to stop on. She wasn't about to answer impertinent questions like that. When she got into the elevator though, it told her at each level which offices were located there, so she was able to get off at the second floor and head in the right direction without meeting anyone else's eye.

The Auror Headquarters was hopping with people calling back and forth to each other, memos zooming around and Aurors talking to prisoners in a series of rooms to her right. Hermione wasn't sure where to go, who to talk to, until she saw a flash of pink above a cubicle a bit ahead and to the left. Bless Tonks' predilection for pink hair.

When Hermione arrived at the opening of the cubicle, Tonks was dictating notes to her quill about some Death Eater. She looked wan, as though she hadn't eaten properly and didn't sleep at all the previous night. Not a surprise, Hermione figured, but she still felt sorry for the woman. When the dictation was done, Tonks picked the parchment up, dried it with a tap of her wand and slid it into a file.

"Hello, Tonks."

The Auror turned toward her and then grinned up at Hermione. "Oh, it's good to see you. Sorry I didn't make it to Headquarters after all, Remus and I got, er, tied up." A glint in her eye managed to make her shamed expression not quite believable.

"I bet. Look, I need to know what the charges are against my husband, if he's being taken care of, if I can send him anything . . . Oh, and there was a small notebook, a diary on him when he was taken away, he needs to have that, as it's how we communicate."

"They took it away because they weren't sure what spells were on it. It didn't look dangerous, but it was clear the writing was made to look different than it actually was. I'll see what we can do about that though. He's being held in Azkaban, which without the Dementors should be a much nicer place to stay than the first time he was held there, anyway." Tonks pulled a face at that.

Hermione felt her stomach turn. He had been there once before, just after the Dark Lord's first disappearance. She had forgotten that. Even without the Dementors there, it must be horrible to be back there. "What can I do for him? Can I see him?"

"I'm afraid not." Tonks directed her to a chair nearby, and Hermione sat. "They aren't letting anyone in to see the prisoners. I haven't been able to get information about trial dates or anything. My worst fear is that they won't hold trials at all. Those found with the Dark Mark might get shunted into Azkaban without question."

"No!"

"Shhhh, calm down. I don't know what's planned at this point, but it could be a long time before they get to him, or it could be next week. I'm working on getting some answers, but it wouldn't hurt for you to go speak with Gawain Robards, he's head of the department. You're a famous witch now, you might garner his sympathy."

"Not if he believed that rubbish the *Daily Prophet* printed."

"Give him a little credit, will you. Precious little, but a little all the same. His office is down the hall; I'm sure he'd like to get your angle on yesterday's events anyway. There was only so much I could put into Severus' file from personal experience and have it come out positive, you know, but your testimony might help push his court date forward if you don't get shirty with him."

"Me, shirty?" Hermione feigned innocence and Tonks rolled her eyes.

"Of course, what was I thinking?" She nudged Hermione out the door so she could get more work done.

Hermione felt her stomach turning as she approached the head's office. A few Aurors seemed to notice her and watch her progress down the hall, but no one stopped her. She was sure some of them had recognized her.

When she reached the door, she could see through the window that Robards was speaking with an Auror, and she leaned back against the wall for the conversation to end. Nearly forty-five minutes later, the door opened and the Auror came out. He saw her, then blinked in recognition and turned back. "Hey, there's a visitor out here to speak with you."

"Not another reporter."

"No, someone who's been in the paper lately, as it happens." The man looked back at her, lifted a brown eyebrow and walked down the hall. Robards, a rotund graying man came to the door and invited her in. "Miss Granger, I've been wanting to talk to you."

"I'm sure." Hermione took the seat he indicated and folded her hands together on her lap so she wouldn't fidget. "I came to speak to you about Severus Snape."

"Want to add your testimony, do you? Well, here's the documentation. We'll want to know how long you were under the Imperius Curse, of course, and what things he had you do while you were under his control."

"Will what I write here be used in his court case?"

"Absolutely. Though some of the Death Eater's guilt is so clear they may not be going to trial. Waste of time and galleons of course when written testimony is sufficient." He waved his hand and smiled reassuringly.

"Do you expect Snape to be one of these?" Hermione asked opening her eyes wide, as though she couldn't believe her luck, while she was inwardly seething at the practices the Ministry was willing to go through, yet again.

"Most likely. He is the man who killed Dumbledore, after all. We have the Boy Who Lived as a witness to that. It almost makes me wish we still had Dementors in Azkaban."

Her hands shaking with rage, Hermione carefully placed the pen back on the paper on the top of the desk with only her first name written on the top. She folded her hands together again and blinked rapidly at him. "I'd really like to see him go to trial, Mr. Robards. I can't tell you how much it would mean to me for everything he has done to be brought out into the light of day. I'm afraid if I write it here, everything will be shunted away, and no one will know the kind of man he truly is. He should pay for everything

he's done in the eyes of the public, not just in the time spent in prison, don't you think?" She allowed tears to leak from her eyes. They were honest tears, even if the way she twisted things made them seem completely different than they were.

"Oh, well, yes, of course. You do have a point, though the media circus..."

"Will give him exactly the kind of recognition the secretive, manipulating bastard deserves, don't you think." She allowed a smirk to form on her face, as she was feeling a bit smug. The man was eating this up. "I can guarantee Harry Potter will be in favor of the trial and will certainly speak out if the Ministry doesn't follow through with the public's right to know the *full* truth. Snape's hated Harry his whole life and worked his hardest to make Harry miserable. Do you think it's right that Harry shouldn't have a chance to see Snape in court?"

The man's face brightened and he shook his head. "No, no I don't. You're absolutely right. I'll see to it that a trial is set shortly. Next week if at all possible." He stood and called down the hall to his secretary. "Have a trial date set for Severus Snape as soon as possible," he told her. Then turning back to Hermione, he smiled. "I'll send you information about the court date as soon as I have something official."

"That would be wonderful!" Hermione said through her tears and wiped her face. "Could you also send a full list of the charges brought before him? I'd love to know what all you were accusing him of, so I can come up with any testimony that might be fitting. I might be able to find additional people to testify on some points too. After all, before he murdered Dumbledore he was involved with the organization who took out Voldemort yesterday. I'm sure I can find information there you couldn't."

"You are a bright witch, you are. I'll do that as soon as possible." He shook her hand and led her to the door. "Keep in touch if you have anything more you'd like to tell us."

"Thank you!" Hermione smiled brightly through her tears; she turned and left the office, not allowing the anger and hatred she was feeling to enter her face until she was well away. Severus would have his day in court, and she would do everything in her power to ensure it was a fair trial. Hermione wondered how Rita Skeeter was doing for insider tips lately? She would certainly salivate at the opportunity to show up at the trial of Severus Snape.

First, she had to face that wall of reporters downstairs. And to make sure the Ministry was forced to hold the trial, she would announce to all and sundry that the date was being set for next week and the wizarding public had a right to see it. Purpose filled her chest, and Hermione considered her options for the best way to present it.

AN: A huge thanks to all my reviewers, my apologies for not responding to all of them individually.

Thanks to my beta, countrymouse, and to ladyinthecloak for helping me clean up my chapter.

50: The Trial

Chapter 50 of 51

See Chapter 1

Chapter 50: The Trial

Hermione's impromptu press conference in the Ministry of Magic after she left Gawain Robards' office would have been a great deal more fun if it been hadn't so important to her. Still, she managed to derive a bit of amusement by the way the press lapped up her words about how Robards had agreed that Severus Snape needed a full hearing. All of his deeds during the war needed to be illuminated so all wizardkind would see that the man who killed the beloved Albus Dumbledore got what he deserved. Her main goal had been to assure that the Ministry couldn't back out of holding the trial in a timely manner, as she was sure Scrimgeour would have tried to do.

The next morning, Hermione received an owl with a letter from Gawain Robards with the date and time of Severus' trial and the list of charges against him.

1-The murder of Albus Dumbledore

2-The Imperius of Hermione Granger while he was her Professor at Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry (A double offense as he was in a position of trust over her)

3-Attacking the students with his fellow Death Eaters at the Muggle school in West Surrey

4-Conspiracy to undermine the Ministry of Magic and the structure of the wizarding world.

5-Rape of a student while still her professor

She looked at the list and smiled. She had iron-clad proof that all of these charges were bogus, or at least enough to bring a bit more than a shadow of a doubt. Hermione looked at the diary sitting beside her on the nightstand and wished he had his copy to read. She had decided after returning from the Ministry the previous afternoon to write even if he didn't have his copy. Even if he didn't have the diary on him, he would know she had written him. Her goal was to give him hope, if nothing else. And Tonks was going to try and get it to him, one way or another.

Just in case the prison guards decided to taunt Severus with the news today about how she had pushed the Ministry to give him a quick trial, "So that every witch and wizard can have a full accounting of his deeds during this war," she wanted him to know her thoughts on it. And if he didn't get to read them until after the trial was over, she still wanted him to know her feelings during his incarceration. They were such a part of each other now, she had grown to where sharing everyday little thoughts and comments with him was more than second nature.

She had felt his gnawing hunger when she woke that morning, but it subsided shortly after, so she hoped that meant he had eaten and not that he had gotten beyond hunger. When she really focused on him, she felt his loneliness, knew he was cold and alone in the cell, or at least felt alone in it, even if others were present. She hoped he wasn't placed in a cell with any of the Death Eaters who would decide to take revenge on him for thwarting Voldemort. So far no one had hurt him...that was a relief in any case.

Hermione picked up the diary again and began a new entry. *Dear Severus, I don't know if you will be allowed to read this before your trial, but I wanted you to know that I've seen the list of charges against you, and they've got nothing on you except Dumbledore, but I think I have a way worked around that.*

We are going to get you out of there, even if I have to have all of the house-elves assist me in attacking Azkaban to break you free. But I don't think it will come to that. I miss you terribly and hope Tonks is able to get the diary to you like she promised to try and do. I'm taking care of myself and the baby so you don't have to yell at me about

it when you get out. I love you more than anything. Be careful and I'll see you next week.

Deciding that was enough for the moment, Hermione began carefully organizing her plan of attack against the charges laid at her husband's feet.

Severus had been in his cell for a full two days with his only word from the outside coming from what his jailers provided. The previous day they had tossed in a copy of the *Daily Prophet* with his picture splashed across the front page. Severus had read the story with great distain, but ripped the paper around the headline picture of them taking out the Dark Lord, and the one of himself kissing Hermione, and stashed them under his pillow. She was in them both, after all, and he needed to see her image, to be reminded of her kisses on the field before he had been hexed and carried off.

He had heard her protests. The hex the Auror had used had made him incapable of responding, but he had still heard everything. And he knew Bill Weasley had come to comfort her. It had made him angry, but not as angry as if it had been Bill's youngest brother. He had felt Hermione's despair that day and some the following day, but she had become determined as well, irritated and angry. Those last three were very encouraging.

The second morning when he had awoken, he had again been graced with a copy of the *Daily Prophet*, this time with a picture of his wife facing a crowd of reporters, righteous indignation shone on her face. He had been sure she was shouting his innocence to any who would listen until he read the headline: "Best Friend of Boy Who Lived Calls for Snape to Pay for Evil Deeds"

His stomach had dropped until he read the text of the story. She was quoted thoroughly throughout the story, but not once did she personally refer to his actions as criminal or wrong. In every quote she referred to his actions coming to light, people needing to know what kind of man he really was, his true motivations. The words were very carefully made to sound angry without hurting his case and made him smile.

His jailer was Matthew Smith, a Muggleborn Hufflepuff who had been dismal at Potions and graduated from Hogwarts some six years earlier. When the man had walked by and seen the smile on his face, he had shivered. That made Severus' smile turn a bit sinister. The man probably thought he was plotting against the little wench, but really, he was soaking in every word his wife said. The Ministry of Magic was going to be in for a big surprise if he knew his wife at all.

The day was starting to wane before Severus saw another human being. To his disgust, it was Nymphadora Tonks, the clumsiest Auror ever to finish training alive. "What do you want from me?" he asked as Smith brought her to his cell.

"A few minutes to interrogate you, Snape. What do you think I'm doing here, bringing loving words from your woman?" When Smith snorted, she turned and rolled her eyes. "Let me in there, then you can go away for a while. I'll be a bit."

"He's a dangerous criminal; I can't leave you alone in there, Nymphadora." They had been in school together, of course, though not the same year. Severus seriously doubted she appreciated the man's sudden protective streak any more than she liked him using her first name.

"Of course you can. I'm a tough little Auror and I've got the wand, one that won't respond to anyone but me. He's helpless." She wiggled her eyebrows and changed her hair to purple. "Besides, there are a few things I'd like to say to him that the Auror office might not be so happy about, if you know what I mean. It'd be better if I didn't have an audience."

Smith laughed one of those mean, he's-gonna-get-it-and-I-couldn't-be-happier laughs. He winked at her, then opened the door to let her in. "In that case, I'll take my time."

"I'd appreciate it." Tonks shot some ropes out at Severus, tying him to the bed and walked into the cell. When he protested, she cast a silent *Silencio*. "You'll talk when I say you'll talk. Thanks, Smith, I'll holler when I'm ready to come out."

Tonks circled the bed, watching Severus with a bit of evil in her eyes. When she finished the second pass, Severus heard the door clang shut behind her and she sighed and released his bonds. Whispering, she said, "I was starting to think he wasn't ever going to go away."

Reaching into her long jacket, she withdrew his diary. "I've got something for you here, and a special spell to make things a bit easier. Set your hand on it."

He blinked in surprise and yearned to snatch the book up. He knew Hermione had written in it twice and couldn't wait to read her words, but decided he best pretend it wasn't the one possession he wanted more than anything while he was in this hell hole. Besides his wife, of course. "You brought my notebook? What good is the ingredient list for the Draught of Living Death going to do me?"

"Thought it might give you time to refine your theories before you get the final pronouncement. Set your hand on it, I said." Her voice was tough, but as her back was to the door, her face was more apologetic than anything.

He was almost afraid this was a trap to get the spell taken off the book that made it readable only to himself. Then again, how could that hurt him? Besides the embarrassment of having his every thought opened to the perusal of Aurors, it would prove that he had been assisting the Order in the fight against the Dark Lord. Severus placed his hand on the book, and she muttered a charm he hadn't heard before. It grew warm under his hand, but other than that, he noticed no difference.

Tonks nodded and released the book. "I can't see it anymore, and neither will anyone else until I take the charm off of it. Only you can see it, so your jailers won't know you've even got it. Be careful that they don't see you writing in it if you don't want them thinking you've gone nutters. Hermione's worried you aren't being taken care of. Doing OK? I mean, other than needing a bath?" She wrinkled her nose a bit as she drew closer to him.

"The only thing I needed was this book. Thank you." He opened the book to the last page he had written on and found his pen still flattened in it.

"Do you need me to expand your pen?"

He shook his head, "I can do it without a wand. It's simple enough magic." He could do considerably more difficult magic than that without a wand, but there was no need to say so, not unless he wanted them to stick cuffs on him that would inhibit his using any magic at all.

"Good. Your court date is set, was announced today for next Tuesday; that's only five days. Hermione's already going great guns and is putting together a smashing defense, so don't worry too much. Even the murder charge has avenues she's been working around. It'll all be fine."

"Thank you," he said haltingly. "For coming here, for bringing me this." He hugged the book to his chest, and she blinked in confusion.

"I don't see anything, you must be going around the bend." She smiled at him, then stood from where she had been crouching in front of him. "Now I'm going to have to bind you again to make it look good, but put a pained expression on your face, will you? He has to think I've been torturing you all this time."

"With a silencing charm in place?"

Her grin was wicked. "Aren't Aurors supposed to be ruthless bastards?" She cast the rope charm on him again when he lay back into the same position, and he contorted his body a bit so the ropes were a little uncomfortable and put on a pained expression.

"Hey, Smith, I'm ready to go now," she called out loudly.

A moment later the door at the end of the hall opened, and the man stuck his head through. "Did you need something?"

"Yeah, I'm done here."

The man walked over and let her out of the cell. When the clang of metal on metal indicated the door was closed, Tonks ended her other charm with a cure-all spell and Severus began spluttering in indignation as though he had been silenced the whole time.

"I like that," Tonks said to the jailer with an evil grin. "He wouldn't speak a word to me the whole time I was in there. Had to get right nasty with him too, and it didn't do any good. Then as soon as I release his bonds, he won't shut up."

Smith laughed and slapped her on the back. "I like the way you work, Auror Tonks. Doing anything tonight?"

She cackled as they walked down the hall, and the final words Severus heard her say before the door closed on the two of them were, "I've got a date with a werewolf."

Somehow Severus doubted the man took that quite the way Tonks meant it. Still, he didn't waste any more time thinking about Tonks, but rather opened his diary again and began reading his wife's words.

Hermione was sitting down to dinner when she received confirmation that Severus had written in his diary. Or at least that someone had. She snatched her copy up and flipped it open to the right page.

My dear, I'm so glad to see confirmation that your actions at the Ministry were for my benefit. I was beginning to worry that there would be no court date at all.

He continued on describing what had happened to him since the battle and suggested a couple points she might consider in her defense of him, based on the charges she had listed against him. Hermione's hand went to her throat, and her eyes filled with tears as she read how Tonks had slipped him the diary and made it invisible so no one would try and take it from him. Once the initial surprise had worn off, the members of the Order had really banded around her to help with Severus' defense. Well, other than Ron, who was still being a prat.

Hermione thought back to the risks Tonks had taken. That woman really was a bit dangerous, and not just because she knocked over everything in sight. Hermione had plans at Headquarters that night to work on Severus' defense with Harry, and she now had more to bring to the table. Hermione made a mental note to write to her parents, begging off on her expected visit for a little longer.

She had work to do.

Courtroom Ten was packed with people when Hermione arrived with Harry, Tonks, Remus and most of the Weasley clan at her side on the day of the trial. Ron was still being a prat, but as she didn't have time to devote to that little problem, she decided to worry about it another week when things weren't so hectic. There were VIP seats near the door just for her group of people willing to testify in the court case. Hermione understood that many of the others the Aurors had tried to bring against her husband had been too afraid of reprisals to speak against him. That made her supremely happy.

Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister of Magic, had publicly come out and offered the members of the Order any boon within his power to grant as thanks for their work to save the wizarding world from "Lord Thingy." Hermione hoped that the Wizengamot would be reasonable enough for her not to have to pull this ace from her sleeve, but she wouldn't hesitate to ask for her husband as her boon if needed. The Ministry could well afford her terms if it became necessary.

Now, however, she would accept the more comfortable chairs she had been granted and wait for the first sight of her husband. Severus told her the previous night that he had finally been granted a bath and fresh change of clothing for the hearing. She thought it rich that they could allow their prisoners to wallow in filth for weeks, but spiff them up for public view. After all, the Minister had promised criminals waiting for trial were being given humane treatment, and it wouldn't do to let people know the truth.

Bulbs flashed, reporters asked questions, but Hermione and her friends waited silently for the trial to begin, though Mr. Weasley did try once or twice to tell the desperate reporters that they would learn everything they needed in the trial. Eventually he gave up.

Then they brought Severus into the room. He looked even more sallow than usual and despite his bath the previous night, he looked even more unkempt than his Potions' master persona had been. Though he had been fed, he had lost some weight...weight he could hardly afford to lose, in her opinion. Hermione's heart filled with joy just to see him again. She longed to reach out and touch him, but he didn't so much as meet her eye. That had been expected, as they agreed to keep the appearance that she was here to testify against him, instead of the other way around until the last moment. She watched him sit on the chair and the chains clamp around his arms and legs. Reminding herself not to react, Hermione composed her face quickly and turned to Harry. "I suppose we'll start soon, then."

"Yeah. You'll be fine. You'll be brilliant; you know you will. Tonight you'll be back at that mysterious house of yours again, snuggled up together." He pulled a face. "Sorry, still can't deal with that image. It's a good thing you love him cause I doubt anyone else ever could."

Hermione nudged him with her elbow, but refrained from verbally taking him to task, as she appreciated his help putting everything together for the defense, even if he did still dislike Severus a great deal.

Finally the Wizengamot all filed in and took their seats, followed by Rufus Scrimgeour and his aids. After a moment to settle, Minister Scrimgeour stood and took the stand. "We are here today to try Severus Sebastian Snape for his crimes which are:

1-The murder of Albus Dumbledore.

2-The Imperius of Hermione Granger while he was her professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

3-Attacking the students with his fellow Death Eaters at the Muggle school in West Surrey.

4-Conspiracy to undermine the Ministry of Magic and the structure of the wizarding world.

5-Rape of a student while still her professor.

"These issues will be handled in the order the witness deems appropriate for his defense." With that, Scrimgeour sneered. It was obvious he thought there were no witnesses for the defense. "Mr. Snape, which item would you prefer to start on?"

Hermione sat perfectly still, her face blank, though her stomach was tied in knots and her hands were clasped together a little tighter than usual on her lap. She and the others had been over this the previous night and decided to start with the third item first.

Though his arms and legs were in chains, Severus looked supremely unconcerned. "The third one, if you will. The attack on the Muggle school. You are welcome to begin your argument first, if you like."

"Very well." Scrimgeour looked pleased by this turn of events. "Auror Tonks, if you would please address the Wizengamot on your experiences that evening."

Tonks, for once wearing her hair in a more subdued red, one that almost passed for natural, stood and smoothed her completely respectable robes. "Minister Scrimgeour and members of the Wizengamot, on the evening of September 15, there was a full-scale Death Eater attack of a Muggle high school in West Surrey. The Aurors were warned in advance of the impending attack through Severus Snape who relayed the information to his contact, thus enabling the Aurors to intercept the Death Eaters before the planned attack could get too advanced."

Minister Scrimgeour stood and objected. "How do you know the information came from the prisoner? I thought you were here to testify against Snape."

"I am here to give testimony of the things I know first hand and have experienced in reference to Severus Snape's activities. No one specified which side I must testify for. As I was saying, I received a message warning me of the attack and was able to pass that on to my superiors."

Scrimgeour sat again, his face filled with anger at her impertinence. He mumbled something to Percy Weasley, who still sat at his side taking notes.

"We arrived on scene a few minutes after the attack had begun and immediately engaged the Death Eaters. After a few minutes, I found myself face to face with Snape who took the opportunity to remove his mask for a moment, then resume it before striking a Death Eater over my shoulder with a curse." Tonks went on to describe their faux duel and all of the opponents they had managed to take out during their fight. "Without his assistance on this event, we would have brought at least ten fewer of the Death Eaters back to be questioned. He never once threw any serious hexes directly at me during the duel." She stayed standing, then looked to the Wizengamot. "Do you have any questions for me?"

Dolores Umbridge stood and gave Tonks a fake smile, then spoke in her breathy, little-girl voice. "You stated that Snape was the one you dueled. How can you be sure it wasn't someone else?"

"Besides the fact that I have seen him duel before and recognized his movements, I mentioned that I did, in fact, see his face."

Umbridge cleared her throat and batted her eyelashes prettily. "Are you sure you might not have been, um, mistaken?"

"No, I am absolutely positive it was him. I had no reason to doubt it, as I already had reason to believe that he was still acting as a spy in the Dark Lord's camp for the Order of the Phoenix."

"Yes, you stated that you believed he sent the note. What makes you think it was he who warned you of the impending attack?"

Tonks turned to Hermione, who stood. "Severus Snape and I have been in contact since he left the school last spring, and he warned me of the attack as soon as he learned of it. I then passed the message on to Auror Tonks through my house-elf."

Harry muttered, "You have a house-elf? That's ironic."

Hermione fought to keep her face straight as Tonks sat down.

"You are sure it was he who tipped you off?" Umbridge asked, still in her sweet babygirl voice, though her eyes were about to pop from her head.

"Yes, you see we had been writing to each other in these diaries for months." Hermione produced hers for everyone to see and returned it to its normal size. "This is how I knew the note was from him, because he wrote me in his diary, and the note was replicated in mine. This is the same method attack was circumvented on the Creeveys, the Longbottoms, and many others."

There was a buzz of murmuring that swept through the room as everyone caught sight of the diary. Deciding they were finished with her on this point, Hermione sat back beside Tonks, but Umbridge seemed to decide to jump on this point.

"So how long have you been having a secret relationship with your professor? How long were you under the Imperius Curse, Miss Granger?"

"I never have been under the Imperius Curse. In actuality, it was another enchantment entirely that brought us together. Perhaps you have heard of Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes?" Hermione took perverse delight in reminding the old bint of her wilder days at Hogwarts. "They were experimenting with a new true love chocolate in March, one containing the potion known as *Amoriata* or the Soul Mate Potion." Again, a gasp of surprise filled the court room, but Hermione ignored it.

"We each received a dose of this chocolate through some cookies we ate, and then I passed a book to him in the library, facilitating the potion. When we realized what had happened and what had affected us, Severus went immediately to Headmaster Dumbledore..."

"The man he later killed," Umbridge added.

Hermione ignored the interruption and continued on. "...and told him of the development. Since the potion has no antidote and requires those affected to get to know one another quite well to avoid madness, he allowed us a few weeks to get to know each other better, during which time the diaries were brought into use. Eventually we were married, as the school charter required."

Minister Scrimgeour looked apoplectic, his face red and his eye bulging as he stood from his chair. "How come the Ministry of Magic has no record of this?"

Hermione gave him a pitying look. "Minister, we have already stated that Severus Snape was a spy for the Order of the Phoenix. If it had become known that we were married, with me being a Muggleborn and best friend to Harry Potter, how long do you imagine we would have been allowed to live? The Headmaster did the binding for us." She whispered the incantation over her ring and held it out as proof of the binding.

When he said nothing, she nodded. "So you see, not only was I never under the Imperius Curse, but I was also never raped by him, so both of those accusations are wholly without foundation. I am surprised that the Ministry would attach such serious offenses to a court case without any proof whatsoever of their reality. The outright speculation and fabrication of the *Daily Prophet* should never be admissible in a court of law. They don't seem to feel the need to be hampered by facts or proof like the law requires. And I believe we have proven without a doubt that he did not attack the Muggle school and, in fact, helped the Ministry route the Death Eaters."

The new head of the Wizengamot, Pauline Vance, turned to Severus and asked, "Have you no more to say in your defense?"

Severus shook his head. "Not unless you have specific questions. I believe my wife has given a full enough testimony on my behalf."

"Ah, but what about his other subversive tactics?" Scrimgeour asked, grasping at straws.

Blinking, Hermione tipped her head and appeared thoughtful, then returned her gaze to the Minister. "Which tactics might those be, sir?"

Scrimgeour stuttered for a moment, then caught on an idea. "The Death Eaters were involved in many attacks over the past year, but he didn't stop all of them. What about those Muggle ships that were blown up? What about them? Did he not know about them in advance, could he not have warned someone?"

This was where it got tricky. Hermione met her husband's eyes and he pointed slightly to himself. She nodded and gestured to him. "I believe the defendant would like to speak. Severus, please give a full explanation of what happened, your choices and options and the decision we came to." Hermione sat.

"You, Miss Granger, er, Mrs. Snape, are not the one to question him. That is for the Wizengamot and myself to do."

"Oh, but you are mistaken," was Severus's silky reply. "You see, she is not only my wife but my Vow holder. I am bound by an Unbreakable Vow to answer any question she puts to me about the Dark Lord and his plans, his tactics and any actions I might take in relation to them. Her putting the question to me is the only way you are certain to get a complete and honest accounting of the event, as my death will result if I do not fulfill my vow. Since I am rather attached to my wife, I find I do not wish to be separated from her."

There was another great commotion as the news flew around the courtroom until the Pauline Vance shook her gavel and turned back to Snape. "Continue with the answer, if you would."

Severus then launched into how he had learned of the attack, discussing it with Hermione, and their choice to get as many people off the ships as possible without drawing too much attention to himself. Then he told of his trip to the ship to trip the alarms and the thousands whose lives had been saved by his actions. This last was very difficult

for him to tell, Hermione knew, as she felt his hesitation. But she had told him to describe his actions, so he had little choice.

When he was finished, Hermione stood and described several other occasions when his notes to her had allowed the Order or Aurors to stop trouble before it began or to minimize its effects. "So, you see," Hermione summed up, "He has been working to support the Ministry and help protect witches, wizards and Muggles from the intent of Voldemort for most of his life, not working against the Ministry."

Desperate, as the court case flew out of control and in a completely different direction than he had intended, Minister Scrimgeour stood and faced Hermione. "I would like to know what this vow entailed and if anyone else saw it."

Hermione produced one of the parchments she had passed around at the Weasleys' on the day he had taken it, with the signatures of everyone seated with her saying that it was the wording she had used in the vow. She passed the sheet over and explained what it was.

Scrimgeour read it over, then passed it to Pauline, who read it, then nodded in satisfaction.

"Now," Scrimgeour asked, as he stood again. "You have addressed the other charges laid against your lover's feet, what of the charge of murdering Albus Dumbledore. Can't get out of that one, can he?"

Irritated by the comment he had made devaluing her relationship with her husband, Hermione stood and looked at Scrimgeour as though he were a spider, or something equally disgusting. "My *husband* is innocent of murder in this case."

There was more than a slight mutter in the rooms at her pronouncement, and Scrimgeour actually laughed at her words. "Harry Potter, did you not say that you saw Severus Snape murder Albus Dumbledore on the Astronomy Tower at Hogwarts last spring?"

Harry stood. "I might have used those words, I don't recall. However, I was mistaken. He did kill Dumbledore, but it wasn't murder." He sat again.

Scrimgeour eyed him with disdain. "Not murder? How do you explain that away, Miss Granger?"

Blank faced, so as not to give anything away, Hermione began, "I'm Mrs. Snape, remember? Over the past years I have imbibed a great number of books on Wizarding law, and I looked one of those laws up yet again to get the specific reference information during this past week. It states in Ministry Code that one is permitted to use deadly force to protect oneself if one's life is in immediate danger. Is that not true?" Hermione felt her stomach tying in knots. This was her trickiest argument of the day. If she got this one across, all was won, if she did not, all was lost. Still, she had a trick or two up her sleeve if the Wizengamot didn't see things her way.

"Yes it's true, but it's hardly the case here. His life was hardly in any danger. On the contrary, he could have sat back and watched everything happen if he liked or even protected Albus Dumbledore from the others." Scrimgeour sat again and gave her a superior look.

Hermione maintained a blank face. "Actually, the defendant was under an immediate threat of death by not one, but two Unbreakable Vows that required him to kill the Headmaster. One of these vows was to the Headmaster himself. If he stood by instead of acting, he would have dropped dead on the spot."

"And what proof do we have of these vows?" Scrimgeour asked. "Any memory he produced as proof could be subject to tampering, and therefore useless."

Harry grimaced when Hermione turned to him and gave him the floor. He stood as she sat, and she saw his knuckles turn white as he gripped the banister before him. After the media circus he had been through over the past week, the last thing he wanted to do was testify in a court room filled with reporters.

"I have in my possession right now two memories willed to me by Albus Dumbledore himself, with the express wishes that I use them to defend Snape. You must all understand that I have never liked Snape, and seriously doubt I will grow to become bosom buddies in the future. I love Hermione, however, as the sister I never had, and though I hate her husband, I don't wish her death, as the potion they both imbibed would cause if you were to convict him today." He held out two vials of undulating white memory. "We requested a Pensieve be available for the Wizengamot to use. You may view these if you like."

Scrimgeour motioned to Percy, who hastened over to take the vials. The memories were poured into a waiting Pensieve, and Scrimgeour and the three most senior members of the Wizengamot entered the bowl. Hermione shared anxious looks with her husband and conferred with those around her to see if there was anything else she had missed in her testimony.

After more than five minutes had passed, the four returned from the memories and to their seats. Scrimgeour looked disconcerted, but still pushed the issue. "So, he was asked by Dumbledore to kill him if necessary."

"No," Hermione clarified. "Dumbledore did not kindly ask or sweetly suggest that Severus *might consider* killing him. He *ordered* Severus to do it, and I believe he even used that exact word. Under this compulsion, Severus had the choice to live and kill Dumbledore that night in June, or die himself, thus bringing about my eventual death as well. He chose life for himself. As you have already stated that wizarding law allows deadly force to protect one's own life, he is innocent of murder."

When the furor died down, Hermione continued. "Further, not only is this trial a farce because each thing he has been charged with is clearly unjust, but without Severus Snape's work in the past months, we could not have defeated Voldemort." There was much cringing and gasping at her use of the dead madman's name, but Hermione pressed on. "In addition to being our spy...a difficult job that nearly cost him his life in the end...Severus Snape taught Harry, Ron, and me the dueling skills necessary to survive the final battle, and he is the sole person responsible for developing the spells that brought about Voldemort's downfall."

"Only because you brilliantly came up with the idea, my love." They were the first words Severus had spoken in a long time, and for him to use the endearment in public, with so much real feeling behind it, nearly brought tears to her eyes.

"Nonetheless," she choked over her words and managed to clear her throat. "Not only did he develop the spells, but even after being grievously wounded and taken away for medical help, he rejoined our group and aided his strength in the final spell casting." Hermione held up her copy of the *Daily Prophet*, which clearly showed the scene in question. "Instead of treating this man as a criminal, you all ought to be thanking him for the heroic work he did to save you all from danger when the Ministry either could or would do nothing to protect you."

"The Ministry has been working to protect its citizens all along. We had several people in custody from whom we received information about Lord Whatsits work," Scrimgeour objected.

Harry stood this time. "Like Stan Shunpike? Still holding the man in custody for over a year without the benefit of trial because you have no real evidence against him? You and I both know you will never have evidence against some of those you've held for months or longer, but you can't admit you made a mistake, so instead you've treated them like vermin and denied them their rights. Your reign as Minister of Magic may have been an improvement over Fudge's in some ways, but that still isn't saying much. We all have reason to be grateful for Severus Snape for the work he has done for us. No matter how we might loathe him as a person." Harry sat again, and everyone watched Scrimgeour's face grow beet red as he fought to find any kind of rebuttal that wouldn't make him look more foolish than he already did.

The head of the Wizengamot stood and announced a break while the members of the court discussed the matter and came to a vote.

Hermione bit her lip, wondering if they hadn't taken things a bit too far, with the part about Severus deserving praise and adulation. Not that it wasn't true, but she worried she may have overplayed her hand and offended some of them.

Harry gave her hand a squeeze, and Tonks did the same to Hermione's shoulder. Molly and Arthur whispered reassurances. Hermione just sat and stared at her husband, drinking in the sight of him now that there wasn't anything else to do. He stared back, and she felt their twin yearning to be together. She reminded herself that she had other options if things didn't go well.

Her hands shook.

Finally the members of the Wizengamot turned to face the crowd, their faces unreadable, and Pauline Vance spoke loudly, "All those who wish to pardon Severus Sebastian Snape of all charges, raise your hand."

It was like a veritable ocean wave as every hand shot into the air except for the toad Umbridge's and Rufus Scrimgeour's.

"Then by almost unanimous vote, we fully pardon Severus Snape for all crimes in which he had involvement both for those listed and any other he may be charged with taking place before this date. We grant him amnesty and wish him well in his life." The woman smiled brilliantly, then waved her wand and released the chains from Severus's hand and feet. Hermione stood and thought her heart would pound out of her throat. She jumped from the dais where her chair sat, and he stood, and with two steps, she found herself in her husband's arms.

And as their lips met, she felt the strength of their love reverberating through them. There was the wave of reporter's voices, the flash of bulbs, but for a long moment, the only thing Hermione was aware of was the feel of her husband's mouth on hers. When they pulled apart, Hermione turned and looked across the crowd to see Harry smiling at her. He scowled when his eyes switched to Severus, then he shrugged when he met her eyes again.

"Care to go home?" Severus whispered in her ear.

"Twinkie," Hermione called with a nod.

"Yes, mistress," Twinkie asked, appearing at their sides.

"Take us home, will you?"

"Of course, mistress, anything mistress wants." Then Twinkie took both their hands and Apparated them to the manor's master bedroom, and Hermione twirled into her husband's arms again.

AN: Just a short epilogue still to come. I hope you've enjoyed my story as much as I've enjoyed writing it and reading your reviews.

A huge thanks to ladyinthecloak for all of her many, many corrections in this chapter. It is because of her that you got this update so quickly.

Epilogue

Chapter 51 of 51

See Chapter 1

Epilogue

A warm breeze blew across Hermione's face as she sat on the grass outside Prince Manor watching butterflies and bees flit from bloom to bloom. She had only finished her N.E.W.T.s a week earlier, and the school year had officially finished the previous day. After the big battle, Professor McGonagall had hurried to fill vacancies in the teaching staff and pushed to open the school by November first. While holidays had been short...they only took three days off for Christmas and two for Easter...and testing was two weeks later than usual, they had managed to pack nearly all the study of a regular school year into the shortened terms.

Arrangements were made for students like herself who had been married after the announcement of the school's closure the previous spring, and Hermione had lived at home and Flooded over to the school every day for classes...at least until her baby was born in early April. After three weeks off, she started up again part time to prepare for her tests. Neville Longbottom and Lavender Brown had married the previous summer, and they also Flooded in for classes every day. Ron and Harry had stayed in the dorms, grateful to have something as normal as school to return to, even if Harry found it hard to deal with the upswing in attention he received during the first few weeks.

Now Hermione watched Harry switching back and forth between his regular form and that of his Animagus as he tried to take Sophie's attention from Ron, who was flying around as a dragon, shooting fire into the air. The two boys doted on her daughter, a fact Hermione found herself constantly surprised over.

Ron landed on the ground nearby, then changed back into himself and walked over, sitting down beside her. "Two weeks of bliss before I start Quidditch practice," he said. Only a few weeks earlier, he had been scouted by the Wimbourne Wasps to be their keeper. The only way it could have been better was if it had been the Chudley Cannons, his favorite Quidditch team ever.

"Glad to hear you aren't going to work yourself too hard in the meantime. Not going over to the shop any, are you?" Hermione asked.

"No way. What do I need with their peanuts when I'm getting so much more playing games?" He grinned, then scooped up Capuchin Harry and began running away with him and threatening to throw him in the fountain. Harry changed back and took Ron down with him on the grass not far from the fountain. It was a moment of frivolity that Hermione was grateful to see. During the summer and well into the winter, things had been so difficult, first with the fight ahead of them, and then dealing with the aftermath. It was good to see them acting like teenaged boys sometimes.

Another reason it had been a difficult winter and spring for Hermione was Ron took his time coming around again after learning about her soul mate's identity. Though she had seen signs of his relenting, it wasn't until Hermione brought her new baby to show off to everybody the Sunday before resuming classes in late April that things changed. Ron had sidled over behind the group, then slowly worked his way up through the crowd. Before Hermione knew it, he was holding little Sophie and cooing at her. From that day forward, things began to improve.

It probably helped that Severus never returned to teaching. Though Professor McGonagall had offered him the Defense job again, he had been content not to continue his old life. Too many parents would have caused a fuss if he had taken the job, regardless of whether the courts found him innocent or not, and as teaching had never been his favorite thing, he decided not to resume the profession.

As Hermione had reviewed the household accounts, she realized that there were some residuals that hadn't been accounted for in his first perusal. Careful to use their resources wisely, she and Severus had decided to do research at home, rather than taking regular jobs. One of Severus's patents had already been purchased by a major potions supplier, and with the sale of his home on Spinner's End, which he had always hated anyway, Hermione saw a bright future for them.

When Sophie began to fuss, as her two entertainers were still wrestling some yards away on the grass, Hermione picked up her daughter. Dark, curly hair covered

Sophie's head, and Severus' black eyes peered from the tiny face. Hermione traced each feature with a fingertip, still in awe of the perfection before her. Her little family would be making its first trip together to see her parents, who had finally unbent enough to accept Severus despite the age difference and his history.

Tentative letters before Christmas had blossomed into something more between mother and daughter through the spring so now their relationship was nearly on an even keel. Things were still fairly tense, but Hermione had every reason to believe that they would continue to improve. News in the paper about Severus' contributions to the war...articles that had both gratified and embarrassed her husband...had gone a lot way toward calming her parents' concerns.

"Thank goodness she has your nose," Severus said behind her. Hermione turned around and smiled up at her husband.

"I'm afraid she has also received my hair."

He sat beside her, dressed in a black shirt and trousers, but infinitely less formal than she had ever seen him in the public areas of the school. Private research and married life seem to have suited him well as his wrinkle lines had relaxed and he smiled much more often. "Then she'll look just like her beautiful mother, and who could ask for more than that?"

Severus leaned over and pressed a kiss to her temple, then relieved her of their daughter to distract himself from the two boys ambling back toward them. "How is my little Potions genius doing today, huh?" He lifted Sophie up to his face and pulled faces at her.

"I really think you should have him checked for any stray curses, Hermione," Ron said as he sat down beside her. "There's no way the bat of the dungeon would ever act like that."

"He'd really scare the kids into behaving if they saw it now," Harry said. "They'd all be sure he was going mental."

Hermione swatted at both of them, then leaned back and enjoyed the fresh air. Severus and her two friends were still a bit touchy with each other, though they were all making efforts for her sake. When she wasn't pulling out her hair in irritation, she decided to content herself with their being able to be in the same room without hexing each other. It was certainly more than Severus had ever managed with James or Sirius. "Have you heard an official date on your Auror training?"

Harry twisted a piece of grass between his thumb and forefinger. "August first. They want to wait for my N.E.W.T. results before I get an official invitation to work there, but I've been assured I'm a shoo in. I'm starting to wonder if it's what I really want. The Ministry is a bit of a mess right now."

Severus let out a huff of laughter. "That's an understatement. Ever think of teaching? You'd probably do a slightly better job of teaching Defense than Lockhart."

Harry rolled his eyes and looked ready to say something nasty in return, but Hermione intervened. "Actually, Harry did a bang up job of teaching us all in the DA. He'd probably be smashing, if he could stand all the Colin Creeveys of the world fawning over him."

"No, thanks. Auror training sounds like a party compared to teaching. I've got a couple weeks yet before I have to make any real decisions about life." Harry lay back on the grass and slung an arm over his eyes to keep out the sun. "I understand France is nice this time of year. I've never been out of the country. Care to join me for a jaunt, Ron?"

"Gabrielle is a bit young for you, don't you think, mate?" Ron asked, then leaned away when Harry's hand smacked against his chest.

"She's twelve; that's just plain sick. Besides, Ginny would shoot us both if she heard you even suggest that. No, there's only one woman for me." Harry sat up and ran a finger down the baby's face. "You're the one, aren't you, gorgeous. You and me all the way."

Sophie grinned at him, adoration clear on her face.

"Don't even think about it, Potter." Severus glared, but Hermione could feel he was actually quite pleased. "That's my daughter you're talking about."

"That's probably our cue to leave, mate." Ron stood and offered Harry a hand up. When they were standing side by side, Ron placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You know, I understand the women in Italy are supposed to be beautiful. I wouldn't mind spending some time on the beaches there." He wiggled his eyebrows.

"And Luna would kill you as surely as Ginny would kill me if we did more than look." Harry grinned. "And if we offered to take them along, your mum would go spare."

"Then perhaps you ought to go sweet talk your women for a while." Severus gave them both scathing looks. "I'd like a little time alone with mine." He set a hand on Hermione's shoulder, then pulled her near, pressing a soft line of kisses to her jaw.

Hermione felt a strange trill of glee run through her that was definitely not her own. Severus was enjoying making the boys uncomfortable. The glee accompanied a wave of something very much like desire that was coming from her. A glance at Ron's face showed Severus's tactics were succeeding.

"Yeah, we'll see you later." Ron turned away, looking a bit green around the gills.

Holding back a laugh, Hermione stood and gave each of them a hug goodbye. Before they could Disapparate away though, Severus spoke up. "Potter, the Ministry is in chaos, but they could use leaders like you. People who have convictions and are willing to place them above their own political gains." It was a difficult thing for him to admit, Hermione knew.

Harry turned and gave Severus a long look. "Thank you, sir. I'll remember that." There was more respect in his voice than Hermione ever remembered hearing before. It made her smile.

When she turned back to her husband after the boys Disapparated, Severus was scowling. "Ginny better keep that boy on a leash, because he's certainly not getting anywhere near my daughter."

Hermione laughed, then called Biscuit, the house-elf who worked in the nursery. When the sweet elf had taken Sophie away for her afternoon nap, Hermione turned back to her husband. "Now." She threaded her arms around his neck and settled in his lap on the grass. "You made some promises to me a few minutes back, and I don't care if you were just trying to turn the boys' stomachs. I expect you to follow through." She ran her lips along his cheek bone.

His hands came up to her lower back, cradling her closer. "I wouldn't want to break my word to you." His lips came over her mouth and shut her up.

When he pushed her gently back onto the lawn, Hermione smiled against his lips. There was nowhere else on earth she wanted to be.

A year and a half earlier, she hadn't any idea that life could be like this. Now she wouldn't give up that chocolate chunk biscuit she had eaten at dinner one night for anything. The thought crossed her mind, as it often did, that she owed the twins a big thanks.

Nah, a refresh on their freckles would be much more fun.

AN: Thanks to my betas, countrymouse and MaevePotter, for their help throughout the posting of this story here. Also, a big, big thanks to all the Admins who work so tirelessly to ensure that the stories on this site are of the highest quality, and for their willingness to devote so much of their lives to helping us out. Their patience with me has helped my writing in so many ways, and I'm sure my critique group will be very thankful.

And, of course, thanks to all you readers who followed along as this story dragged out, and for the hundreds of reviews I've received (over 500, wow!)