

Overcome With Feeling

by PlaidPooka

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Set to Burn

Chapter 1 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

A/N: When I started OWF, it was the third fic I'd ever written. I wrote a lot of short subjects while working on this chaptered fics, so you might notice that the writing style changes a bit in OWF from beginning to end as I got more experience with writing. This fic is not HPB compliant. It was finished before HBP came out. It's also a bit AU. I've brought Sirius back to life with neither explanation nor apology! He's simply too much fun to play with! There is also implied slash, but it never gets graphic. Please do take a moment to leave me a review and tell me what you think, good or bad, just be gentle!

The beginning of this fic was beta read by the fabulous Goblynn, then she had the gall to run off and give birth to the cutest little baby boy goblynn you've ever seen! So Lotm was kind enough to beta the last bit for me! Thanks to both of you!

This fic is now complete, and I'll upload it a few chapters at a time.

Rating is for language and eventual sexual situations.

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

Walking along the path leading around the lake, Hermione was trying to come to grips with her disappointment. It was the first Saturday, since the start of term, in her seventh and final year at Hogwarts. The welcoming feast had been somewhat of a shock; she'd been almost positive she would be named Head Girl. That honor had gone to a Ravenclaw. Hermione argued with herself as she walked, lost in thought.

Blast! It should have been mine! I had the highest marks in the whole school last year, not to mention I didn't serve one detention. Why in the world was I overlooked? Maybe it was because I'm Muggleborn...no...that isn't fair. Headmaster Dumbledore simply doesn't care about that...unless he was trying to protect me somehow? The war against Voldemort is more heated than ever. Now that Harry, Ron, and I are in the Order I can't pretend to ignore it like so many other students do. For heaven's sake, how self-centered can one person get? I'm in the middle of a bloody war and I'm whining because I'm not Head Girl? What the hell am I thinking? Maybe it's a good thing I'm not Head Girl if I'm still as childish as all that. If Professor Snape could hear my thoughts right now he'd have all the proof he needed that he was right about me all along. I am completely behaving like a "silly little girl"!

Appalled by her self-pity, Hermione paused in her walk, looking out over the lake to distract herself with the view. It was a gorgeous fall afternoon. The sun had reached that magic angle in the sky that turned the light all golden and made the autumn colors in the trees around her extraordinarily vivid. The calm waters of the lake shone a vibrant blue-green; it looked more like the pictures she'd seen of the Mediterranean than a simple Scottish loch. But what was that in the water?

Hermione approached the edge of the water cautiously, her hand automatically grasping the wand in her pocket. She didn't need Moody to tell her that 'constant vigilance' was especially important to Muggleborns at this time. Peering at the shining object in the water, she was startled to find herself looking into the jeweled eyes of a salamander. The creature was clinging to a floating log, which had fetched up against a rocky outcrop about ten feet from shore.

Unsure of what to do, Hermione stared at the salamander while she racked her brain to find what little she knew of the species. It was a pitiful amount of knowledge. Salamanders were rather mysterious animals, so volatile and unpredictable that most wizards avoided them; thus, very little was known about them at all. They had amazing control over flame. A salamander could cause bare rock to burn or walk over a pile of old newspaper without leaving a scorch mark. Salamanders loved fire in general; it wasn't unusual to see them at bonfires, capering amongst the flames. Wizard children sometimes captured baby salamanders just to set in their hearth fires to watch their antics. One didn't do that with a full grown salamander unless one wanted to risk getting burned to death if it turned temperamental. The older books on magical creatures in the restricted section hinted at mysterious powers that salamanders possessed, but--other than a few cryptic phrases--the powers were not explained.

This was definitely not a baby. The salamander in front of Hermione was four feet long, including the tail. Its skin was mottled red and orange and the air above it shimmered with heat; jeweled eyes shone like fire opal. The salamander was as beautiful as it was dangerous. Water lapped gently at the log it clung to. Suddenly, the log turned a bit under the stranded creature scrambling to stay atop it. The tip of its tail hit the water; steam rose from the place and the salamander chirped in pain.

"You poor thing. Blast! I know damn well I shouldn't go trying to save dangerous creatures in distress like Hagrid, but I just can't leave you there, so helpless." Unwilling to leave the animal in its precarious position to get help, Hermione considered her options. Using a charm to draw the log to her through the water seemed risky, the log would likely roll and dump the pitiful lizard off. Neither did she want to hit the lizard directly with a levitation charm; there was no telling how the salamander would react to that. Levitation should work fine though, if she concentrated on charming the log instead of the lizard. That way, the salamander would be safe enough from the water as long as it kept its tight grip on the log. Levitation would also allow her to keep her distance from the volatile salamander, making her feel much safer.

Decision made, Hermione drew her wand and, with a precise swish and flick, stated the simple charm. It worked easily; in moments she directed the log, its passenger still gripping it tightly, onto the shore about five feet in front of her. As soon as the salamander was safely ashore, Hermione began to step back, so as to put more distance between herself and the beautiful--but deadly--animal. She never completed the first step. Having looked into the salamander's eyes of swirling color, she found she could neither move nor drag her frightened eyes away. Approaching her slowly, the salamander came to within a foot of her, tilting its head sharply back to keep its eyes locked on her own. Hermione felt very strange, almost dizzy, and oddly unfocused. It felt a little as if she were separated from the world she knew and lost in the jeweled eyes regarding her.

"We will set you to burn," a soft, hissing voice echoed inside her head.

A feeling of intense heat started in Hermione's head and quickly spread to her entire body. A static noise rushed through her mind, snapping and flickering like fire. Overcome by the feelings of heat and confusion, Hermione lost consciousness and collapsed to the shoreline in a heap. The salamander regarded her steadily for a moment before it slipped away into the brush.

Harry and Ron were heading back to the castle after a visit with Hagrid. Hagrid was very excited about his newest pet. Having found it in the forest, he was trying to identify it without success.

"The lil' darlin' just might be a new species," Hagrid said proudly. If 'e is, I might get 'im named after me."

Neither Harry nor Ron could think of a reason why anyone would want...that...named after them. The new creature looked more like a large moldy potato than anything. It excreted a strange, grayish pus over its whole lumpy body, smelling like petrol and making the boys' eyes burn. Because of this, they had not stayed long in the hut before wishing Hagrid luck, then heading outside to walk back towards the castle, rubbing watery eyes. Perhaps that's why they didn't see the huge salamander until they were almost atop it.

"Wotcher, Harry," Ron said, stopping Harry with a hand on his arm, "that's a salamander, that is."

Having only seen the baby ones Fred and George sometimes had kept in the common room hearth, Harry didn't quite know what to make of the strange lizard. "Is it dangerous, then?" he asked.

"Rather," replied Ron. "The big ones are quite tricky...you never know what they'll do. Might leave us alone...might burn us up like a Filibuster firework."

Regarding the salamander warily, Harry was just sneaking a hand into his wand pocket when the odd animal spoke.

"Too frightened...these two legs...won't look me in the eyes..." it muttered to itself.

Harry was astonished that the lizard spoke parseltongue, as it wasn't a snake. Well, the two species were related, after all. Focusing on the odd words, Harry found the accent strange, but he was able to get the gist of it. "Why should we look you in the eyes?" Harry asked, trying to be polite despite his apprehension.

"Ahhhh...the glass-eyes understands the tongue of flame. Very good...much easier. Does the fire-head also bespeak the flame?" replied the great lizard in a sing-song hiss.

The undulating tone made it difficult for Harry to understand, but he eventually worked out that he was 'glass-eyes' while 'fire-head' referred to Ron. Ignoring Ron, who was tugging his sleeve and making noises all too close to whimpering for a 'brave' Gryffindor, Harry calmly replied, "No, he cannot understand your...er...tongue of flame, but I understand you fairly well."

"That will do. I tell you this...the burning two legs lays near the lake. She requires...assistance." With that obtuse statement, the salamander turned and headed for the forest with surprising speed.

"Clever, Harry! I should have known you would talk it out of roasting us like marshmallows!"

"I didn't, Ron. It just left. It said the strangest thing first..."

"What?"

"It said something about a burning two legs by the lake needing help."

"Bloody hell, Harry! It looks like it's already toasted someone!" Ron shouted with widening eyes.

"Ron, wasn't Hermione going to walk by the lake this afternoon?" Harry asked, his voice gone quiet with sudden fear.

"Cripes! Hermione!"

Harry and Ron ran towards the lake.

Snake's familiar was basking in the sun shining through the enchanted window in the Potion Professor's private study. His master sat reading on the nearby sofa. Suddenly, the animal raised its head to stare intently out at the grounds. Turning, whiskers a twitch, he addressed his master, "Syphilis!"

"May I remind you, Turpin, that the last time you had the audacity to call me that you spent a fortnight as a toad?"

"Er...don't remind me, your grumpiness...blasted flies. Oh, Exalted Snarkmaster?"

Severus raised a warning eyebrow.

"Whatever...honestly!" grumbled Turpin. "There is something out here you should get your couch potato arse up to take a gander at. There's a fucking huge salamander on the lawn and it's cornered the idiot twins."

"Potter and Weasley?" Rising, Severus strode quickly to join his foul-mouthed pet at the window. "Damn and blast! Trust those two imbeciles to find trouble while walking across the bloody lawn. Wait...it's leaving...thank Merlin. Nothing would ruin a perfectly fine afternoon more than having to save that brat's life again." Noting the two boy's sudden sprint towards the lake, Severus sighed. "There's nothing for it, I'd better go see what they're up to."

It didn't take long for Ron and Harry to find Hermione once they got to the lake. She lay still as death by the water's edge. Rushing to her side, they found her alive, but were unable to wake her even with an "Ennervate." They were arguing about whether to go for help or try levitating Hermione to the castle when an all-too-familiar voice caused them to stutter into silence.

"Would either of you dimwitted simpletons care to explain to me exactly what is going on here?" Professor Snape hissed.

While Ron simply gaped at the angry professor in dread, Harry managed to find his tongue. "S-something is wrong with Hermione, sir. We can't...we can't wake her."

"Step aside," Snape commanded. He knelt beside the fallen young woman and felt for a pulse. There it was...quite strong, but a bit fast. She seems to be breathing as well, no immediate danger then. His eyes snapped back to Potter. "How did Miss Granger come to be this way?"

"I'm not really sure, sir," Harry began, and winced at the glare that earned him, "a salamander told us--"

"A salamander *told* you, Potter?" barked Snape.

"Yes," Harry snapped, beginning to lose patience. "It spoke parseltongue...or at least near enough. It said something odd about a two legs being on fire by the lake. We came here as quickly as we could, but there was no fire, Hermione was just lying there."

"Did you try an Ennervate?" Severus asked, with a long suffering expression.

"Of course we did...sir."

Severus looked back to the fallen girl. Whatever was wrong with her, it didn't sound good. Salamanders were little understood and rarely good-intentioned. There was one thing he could try before carting her off to Madam Pomfrey. With a graceful sweep of his wand, he called firmly, "Reveal."

A swirling orange and yellow light came to life around Hermione. It pulsed and sparked like a strange energy gone unchecked.

"She's on fire!" squealed Ron.

"Silence!" snapped Severus. "She is not on fire, Mr. Weasley. That is her aura." Severus' voice had gone calm, however, he felt anything but. He had never seen an aura in such uproar. What the blazes had the damned lizard done to the girl, anyway? Standing, he lifted the unconscious girl easily into his arms and began to make quick strides towards the castle. The boys hastened to catch up with him.

"Professor, will Hermione be all right?" Harry ventured to ask.

For once, Severus customary sarcasm deserted him. "Mr. Potter, I'm afraid I do not know."

Finally reaching the Hospital Wing, Severus shouted for the mediwitch as he placed Hermione softly onto an empty cot. He frowned at the unruly hair that had fallen over her face and took a moment to sweep it away. Scowl deepening; he abruptly turned from Hermione to greet the mediwitch as she swept into the room. It took no time at all to fill Madame Pomfrey in with the scant information he possessed. While the mediwitch assessed the situation, Harry and Ron lurked in the doorway. Severus paced.

After what seemed like an eternity, Poppy left the bed, starting towards Severus. When she caught sight of the boys still hovering in the doorway, she shoosed them unceremoniously away and shut the door firmly behind them. Turning back to Severus, she regarded the Potions Master with serious eyes.

"How is she?" Severus asked quietly.

"I can't make heads or tails of it, Severus. She does not appear to be in any immediate danger but I cannot wake her. She's got some strange magic wrapped around her and I can't identify it. Was she cursed?"

"I don't know, Poppy, I just don't know. I'd better get Albus and Minerva down here. Mayhap Albus has seen something like this before."

Severus stalked off to floo the Headmaster and Hermione's head of house while Poppy turned back to the bed, a worried expression darkening her normally calm features.

Of Curses and Mystery

Chapter 2 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

The following morning found Minerva, Albus, Poppy, Hagrid, and Severus no further along in finding out what had happened to Miss Granger.

"It must be some sort of curse, Albus. I spent all night raiding my library but I simply can't find one thing about salamander curses," Severus said, tiredly.

"I'm tellin' yer, thar ain't no such thing!" Hagrid argued, frustrated. "I admit they're a mite touchy, salamanders, but they're right easy to deal with if they don't feel threatened."

"While I doubt Miss Granger threatened the salamander, it's not inconceivable that she happened upon it suddenly and startled it into action. The girl's as gentle as she is intelligent, but she has been rather distracted lately," replied Albus.

"And who's fault is that, Albus?" snapped Minerva. "I told you she'd be disappointed if she wasn't made Head Girl, as well she should be. She was the perfect choice!"

"I thought we'd been over this, Minerva." Albus sighed. "At any other time, Miss Granger would be Head Girl, but I feel she has enough on her plate now she's a member of the Order. Even in these troubled times I'd like the girl to have some semblance of a normal life."

"Not much chance of that now," grumbled Severus, with sneering pragmatism.

"Severus!" barked Minerva.

"Stop it right now." Poppy halted the useless argument with ease. "I'm sure all of this is quite interesting, but it is NOT helping my patient. Nothing I've done has had any effect, nor have the potions that Severus has tried. If this is a curse, then we need to do something about it other than stand here sniping!"

"Hmmm...what about young Bill Weasley? He's still a curse-breaker for Gringott's, is he not? Perhaps he could shed some light on the subject," Albus said. "Severus, why don't you owl him and ask if he knows anything about salamander curses."

"That's no such thing," Hagrid grumbled.

Ignoring the frustrated half-giant, Severus said with a sneer, "Perhaps you'd best give that task to Minerva. I have never gotten along with the Weasley clan. An owl from me would likely be burned, rather than read."

"Maybe if you didn't make their lives a living hell while they were at school..." Minerva began.

"I have not had much choice in the matter, Minerva," Severus replied in an unusually quiet voice.

"Forgive me, Severus," Minerva replied, equally quiet. "Gods know I'm aware of that...I suppose I'm just worried about Miss Granger. I'll get that owl off right away, Albus." Minerva quickly left the room.

Shaking off the hand that Albus had kindly put on his shoulder, Severus snapped, "If you will excuse me, I believe I have some students who await me making their lives a living hell." He stormed from the room.

"Damn. The end of this cursed war cannot come soon enough," murmured Albus to his potion professor's retreating back.

Bill Weasley did better than reply to Minerva's hastily written missive, he showed up in person before lunch time. The same group of professors joined him in the hospital wing when he arrived.

"Well, as far as I know, there isn't any such thing as a salamander curse. Why would they even need such a thing, as they already have some formidable defense with that fire of theirs?" Bill began.

"Told yer so," mumbled Hagrid.

"Now, that doesn't mean she didn't run afoul of some curse or another, I just doubt it came from the lizard. I've brought some equipment with me...I'd rather you not ask me questions about it...its goblin stuff and technically I shouldn't have it here."

"Still breaking the rules I see, Mr. Weasley?" Snape said snidely.

"Shame you can no longer knock off any points, Professor Snape. Pity," Bill replied with a sneer of his own.

"Now boys," interrupted Albus, making both men roll their eyes. "I'm sure if Miss Granger were awake, she'd be most impressed by your wit. Until that time, perhaps we could concentrate on her trouble?"

"Yes, Headmaster."

"As you wish, Albus."

As Bill began setting up a vast array of odd equipment, most of the professors left to see to their duties. Severus stayed and restlessly paced back and forth. Telling himself he was merely interested in the equipment, he would admit to no one, not even himself, that he was worried about his student. Miss Granger was the best potions student he'd ever taught; he only hoped that there might come a day when he could be free to tell her that. Assuming she didn't lie there in that hospital bed until the end of time. He sighed.

"Have you nothing else to do, you bloody bat, other than flap around in here?" Bill snapped.

"I find myself quite at leisure at present," growled Snape.

Bill looked up, only to find the hint of worry in the dour man's black eyes; said eyes immediately narrowed, only a second too late to hide his concern from the younger man. Bill was nonplussed...he hadn't thought the old bat had it in him. Oh, he knew well enough that Snape was a fellow Order member, and that he'd saved the lives of several of the members with little regard for his own safety. Bill had just never imagined the grumpy man might actually care for any of them. He'd always viewed Snape as a sort of automaton, logically doing--with honor--whatever he considered his duty, but with no feelings involved. The mere thought that the mechanical man might have any feelings at all was practically inconceivable to Bill.

Rather stunned, Bill replied in a voice much less sarcastic than intended, "Well, if you must stay, at least sit your arse down. This equipment is complicated; I don't need any distractions."

With another sigh, Severus reluctantly sat down in a chair across the room, where he could watch the proceedings.

Three hours passed with much activity by the red-headed man and much silent fretting from the black-robed professor who watched him impatiently. Finally, Bill addressed Severus, "You'd better go get the others." His face did not look hopeful. Severus went immediately to floo the others; it wasn't long until the group had gathered again around the unconscious girl's bed.

"It's not good," Bill began, "the salamander did do something to Hermione, but I have no idea what. Its electrical energy has left an imprint all over her. I cannot find any signs of a curse, but this is way out of my line of expertise. I believe I can wake her...I'm not sure what will happen when I do, but we can at least ask Hermione what happened."

"Well, we've hit a brick wall otherwise, you'd best try to wake her, Bill," Albus decided.

Taking what looked for all the world like a big tuning fork out of one of his bags, Bill rapped it sharply against the stone wall and placed the base of the fork against

Hermione's left temple. After a moment, he repeated the action to place the fork against her right temple. Hermione stirred.

Bloody Nimue! I feel like I've got the worst PMS ever. I don't know rather to laugh or cry; what a mess. Maybe I should ask Madame Pomfrey for something...but I don't think it's my time of the month...is it? Opening her eyes questioningly, Hermione was startled to find herself surrounded by several of her professors and inexplicably enough, Ron's older brother, Bill. Why...she was in the hospital wing!

"What's happened?" she said, her voice breaking a bit around her parched throat. "May I have some water?"

"Of course you may, my dear," Poppy said, rushing to hold a glass for her patient.

"We were hoping, Miss Granger, that you would be able to tell us what happened. You seem to have had a run in with a salamander out by the lake."

Remembering, Hermione's eyes widened. "There was a salamander...it was trapped on a floating log so I helped it to shore..."

"That was a witless thing to do you foolish little girl! Surely during all your incessant reading you've discovered that salamanders are best avoided," Severus snarled.

"Severus, that's quite enough," barked Minerva.

Abruptly furious, Hermione snapped right back at Professor Snape, something she would never do when in her right mind. "Of course I knew it was dangerous, you insufferable man! But I wasn't about to leave it to drown."

"Miss Granger, may I remind you..." Severus began.

"That will be enough!" barked Albus. "Tensions are understandably high. Hermione, we've all been quite worried about you. How do you feel?"

"I feel odd. I'm sorry, I just can't seem to get myself together; I feel a bit overwhelmed and emotional."

"Perfectly understandable, dear," Poppy broke in, "you've had a rough time of it. I'll get you something to calm you down. Perhaps you'll feel better if people would stop snapping at you," she finished, with a glare at Professor Snape.

After a simple calming draught, which seemed to have no effect on Hermione's emotional upheaval, she explained what happened at the lakeside. She found herself at odd times having to bite back laughter, tears, and fits of temper. What the hell was wrong with her? Was she going mad?

Severus' keen eyes noticed the girl's difficulty. He found himself both worried and bemused by the normally practical student's loss of control. At any rate, she didn't seem to be in danger anymore; he supposed it was no longer any of his concern.

When she finished, Albus echoed Severus' thoughts. "Well my dear, it seems you are out of harm's way--now, at least. Why don't you rest in your rooms until dinner, with Madame Pomfrey's permission, and we'll all attempt not to borrow trouble."

Poppy gave her approval of the plan and the professors began to leave.

"Professor Snape, sir?" Hermione called.

Leaving the others to go on without him, Severus paused at the door, one questioning eyebrow raised.

"I wanted to apologize for the way I spoke to you earlier. I don't know what came over me. It was inexcusable to speak to a teacher that way and I am truly sorry," Hermione said quietly.

"It was indeed inexcusable. I trust you will understand why I must deduct five points from your house." With a silent nod to her, he turned and strode out the door.

Hermione was not upset by the loss of a mere five points for her calling Snape an "insufferable man." However, she was most distressed by the sudden flood of protectiveness that washed over her as he regarded her. Her? Protective of Snape? Now she knew she was going mad!

Ensnared in her room, which was blessedly empty as the other girls were still at class, Hermione thought it would be easy to calm her raging emotions. Instead it was harder. The emotions themselves seemed calmer, but more varied. It was as if every emotion under the sun was seeping through the very walls of her room. If she didn't get a handle on this soon, they'd be shipping her off to St. Mungo's! Trying to distract herself with a book, she eventually found herself giggling softly while tears ran down her face...she gave up in disgust. Flopping back on her bed, she tried to think about the problem rationally. Whatever the salamander had done to her, it must have seemed quite serious. She had been unconscious for almost 24 hours and awakened to half the teaching staff gazing down at her. If they had sent for Bill, they must have thought she'd been cursed! Perhaps that explained what was happening to her now. However, Bill hadn't found a curse, so if there was one, she'd likely be stuck like this for a long time indeed. The thought of being in a perpetual state of raging PMS was too much for the normally rational young woman to take. Burying her head in her pillow, she let out the tears she'd been trying to hold back and tried not to be worried when an occasional chuckle slipped out as well.

Following about a half hour of wallowing in self pity, Hermione roused herself enough to consider the other puzzling thing that had occurred. Why in the world had she suddenly felt protective of Snape? True, he'd looked rather pitiful. He obviously hadn't slept the night before. Was it because he was worried about me? That errant thought made Hermione laugh. Snape, worried about a 'foolish little girl'? Honestly! It was almost as silly as her worrying about him. She sighed, suddenly serious again. And yet she had been worried about him as he stood in the doorway taking points from her. Why? He was the most indestructible person she knew. Or was he? Hermione knew he did difficult work for the Order, but he radiated such confidence and competence that she had never really given a thought to the fact that what he did was extremely dangerous. She had long respected him as a teacher, unpleasant as he was; now, for the first time, she began to see his work for the Order in a new light. Damn, the stubborn man put his life in danger every single day! She must have realized that subconsciously, that would explain her sudden rush of protectiveness. Having decided this, Hermione began to freshen up before heading down for dinner. In her defense, she could not possibly realize how wrong about the situation she was.

Hermione was equally wrong about finding some comfort in the familiar realm of the Great Hall at dinnertime. She'd hoped the normal hustle and bustle would take her mind off her emotional roller coaster ride. As she stepped into the Hall, she realized her mistake. It was as though every emotion in her repertoire had escaped their confines, beating against her psyche. It felt a bit like being hit all over her body with pillows--not immediately painful, but terribly distracting. Starting to turn on her heel and flee, she noticed Harry and Ron waving to her cheerfully. Blast! If she fled now, they'd be after her in an instant, demanding explanations for things she had no answers for. Taking hold of her Gryffindor courage, she continued into the Hall, taking her customary seat between her two friends. Hermione had no idea just how torturous and mortifying the meal would be.

Breaking Down

Chapter 3 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

AN: The song Do Virgins Taste Better is by R. Farran.

Disclaimer: They are not mine; I just take them out to play!

Dinner in the great hall started out easily enough. Hermione gave Harry and Ron a brief description of what happened in the hospital wing. She did not mention her raging emotions; the boys would've kidded her about being an emotional female and she didn't want to hear it. When Ron commended her for insulting Snape to his face, she was surprised to find herself laughing along with him. Normally she would have told him off for disrespecting a teacher.

"It's about time you found your sense of humor about Snape, Hermione," Ron teased.

"That's Professor Snape, Ron," she replied in exasperation, "how many times must I remind you? I don't even know why I'm laughing; it was a horrid thing for me to say."

"It's only horrid 'cause it's true," Ron chuckled.

"Oh...it is not! I know he isn't very nice, but the work he does for the Order is very important. We shouldn't be laughing at him."

Hermione was suddenly disconcerted by a strong wave of jealousy. Where the hell had that come from? Was she jealous of Ron? That didn't make any sense! Confused, she turned from Ron to ask Neville how his recent visit to his parents had gone. Hermione knew that it was hard on Neville to visit his parents at St. Mungo's, and she always remembered to offer him some support. She took one look into his sad eyes and was mortified to find herself bursting into tears. Panicking, Hermione buried her face in her napkin. She felt Harry's arm come to rest around her shoulders. A warm concern spread over her, drowning out the distressing sorrow. Hermione didn't try to analyze the feeling, she simply snuggled her overwrought psyche into it, content to hide in the comforting concern for a long moment.

"Hermione," Harry began quietly, "what's wrong? There's obviously something you aren't telling us. I've never seen you like this."

Hermione leaned into Harry's embrace and buried her head in his shoulder. "I don't know what's wrong, Harry. I'm sorry for acting like such an idiot. I've been like this since I woke up. The professors didn't seem to think it was anything to worry about, but I can't help thinking I'm going crazy."

"Hermione," Harry continued calmly, "you're the sanest person I know. Try not to fret about it. Maybe it's just a weird reaction to the salamander. I'm sure you'll be back to yourself in no time."

"Thank you, Harry. I know I'm making a bit of a scene, but could I just stay here a moment?"

Chuckling, Harry tightened his arm around Hermione's shoulders. "You can stay there as long as you wish. You're quite cuddly for a girl."

"Ugh!" hissed Ron. "Harry could we not discuss your sexual perversity at table? I'm trying to eat here!"

Harry only continued chuckling. "Now that I think of it, maybe you and I should snog a bit, Hermione. Throw all those gossips off track!"

"No way, Harry. Not only do I know you aren't interested in that, I know you've got a jealous boyfriend that would be none too pleased. I don't feel up to dodging hexes at the moment."

Hermione remained leaning against Harry in a sisterly fashion while he finished his meal one-handed. She felt calmer there than she had since awakening. Nothing broke through the restful peace of being near her friend, except an occasional flicker of jealousy, which she easily brushed aside. She did not note the narrowed dark eyes regarding her from the head table with a sneer of displeasure.

Were Potter and Granger dating? He'd thought they were just friends, but it was absolutely disgusting how they were wrapped around each other at dinner. Severus had been momentarily concerned about Miss Granger when she appeared upset, but as she'd snuggled into the boy's embrace, his feelings had grown rapidly darker. Steadfastly refusing to admit he'd any personal stake in the matter, he told himself he was only disappointed the damn girl didn't have better taste. The fib did nothing to improve his mood. Before he'd finished half his dinner, he abruptly rose to stride from the table. Ignoring the surprised expressions on the other professor's faces, he left the hall and headed down to his rooms.

Once he reached his sanctuary, he spent quite some time slamming about while pouring himself a firewhisky. Knocking the first glass back in one swallow, Severus immediately poured another. He searched in vain for a book to take his mind off his inexplicable reaction to Potter and Granger. After the fifth rejected book hit the floor with a crash, Turpin came scampering into his study.

"Who pissed in your shepherd's pie?" Turpin inquired politely.

"Richard Turpin, I warn you that I am in no mood for your cheek," growled Severus.

"Then you should've never accepted me as your familiar, you bloody sod. You know fucking well what I am. It's about time you quit fucking complaining about it, Syphilis, and if you turn me into a blasted toad again, I swear I'll make you pay." Though Turpin's words were harsh, his tone was surprisingly gentle; it was his usual manner of speech.

"I'm sorry, you git," Severus replied in an equally soft tone. "I know you can't help it; the truth is you do very well for one of your kind. You are far more intelligent than most, and more eloquent as well. I've had a tough day, Dick; I did not intend to take it out on you." Drink in hand, Severus collapsed onto his sofa in an elegant sprawl.

"I suppose I'll forgive you...I am rather fond of you...you half-cut wanker. Don't you know better than get pissed alone?" Turpin groused as he scrambled up onto the sofa and into the tipsy man's lap. "Give us a nip then, that's a good lad."

Severus obligingly tipped his glass and let his familiar drink right out of it. He chuckled when the firewhisky made his furry mate sneeze. "That's the problem with you, Turpin...you can't hold your liquor."

A half hour later they were both quite pissed and singing some of the more raunchy drinking songs known to wizard kind. Severus had a rather pleasant, if a bit slurred, baritone while Turpin sounded badly off key and rather squeaky. Neither man nor beast seemed to mind that in the least as they sung far into the night.

A dragon has come to our village today.

We've asked him to leave, but he won't go away.

Now he's talked to our king and they worked out a deal;

No more homes will he burn and no crops will he steal.

Now there is but one catch, we dislike it a bunch;

Twice a year he invites him a virgin to lunch.

Well, we've no other choice, so the deal we'll respect,

But we can't help but wonder and pause to reflect:

Do virgins taste better than those who are not?

Are they salty, or sweeter, more juicy or what?

Do you savor them slowly? Gulp them down on the spot?

Do virgins taste better than those who are not?

"Do virgins taste better, you pissed hinny?" inquired Turpin politely, with a soft hiccough.

"When I find that out, you drunken weasel, I'll be sure to let you know," Severus replied with a leer.

Hermione had a bad night. Exhausted as she was, she could not turn off the riot of emotion that crept into her every waking thought. She felt buffeted, battered by things she didn't understand. Tossing and turning all through the night, Hermione never managed more than a light doze. By morning she felt more out of control than ever. Looking in the mirror while she preformed her morning ablutions, she noted her appearance with something akin to horror. Her eyes were tired and bloodshot, her complexion pale. She looked like death warmed over. Sweet Nimue, if this didn't stop soon, she'd check herself willingly into St. Mungo's. Studies be damned. Whole bloody future be damned. She'd trade it all for a single moment's peace. Refusing to dare the turmoil of the great hall, she asked Lavender to bring her back some toast.

Trying in vain to study, she dreaded her first class. Why did it have to be double potions with the Slytherins?

Severus woke with a blinding headache and Turpin snoring loudly in his ear. They'd both passed out on the sofa around four in the morning. Shifting himself from under his sleeping familiar, Severus rose and staggered into the bath. It took him two fumbled attempts before managing to get the correct phial out of the medicine chest. Draining the hangover potion in one gulp, he slammed the door of the medicine chest shut and regarded his haggard appearance in the mirror gravely. His eyes were sunken and bloodshot, his normally pale face even more colorless than usual. He looked like death warmed over. With a sneer at his reflection, Severus stumbled into the shower to prepare for his day. If only it wasn't blasted double potions with his two most disruptive houses. He did have one thing to look forward to--if there was even one hint of an inappropriate display between Potter and Granger, he was going to give them detention until the end of time.

The sneer turned into a wicked smirk.

Hermione was not coping. It was only fifteen minutes into the class and Hermione thought a nice padded cell somewhere was looking better all the time. For once, Neville had to do the brunt of the work; she simply couldn't concentrate. Unable to do more than mimic whatever Neville did, Hermione's potion was a lumpy mess already. The emotions she could no longer control swirled through Hermione in such dizzy disarray that she could no longer tell one from the other. Beginning to feel that anything would be better than the situation she now found herself in, Hermione seriously considered banging her head into the table until it stopped. Or perhaps she should just stand in the middle of the classroom and scream until someone did something...anything!

What in Hades was wrong with the Granger girl? Was she mad? Severus had never seen her look more raged nor had he seen her prepare a potion with less care. While he hadn't had to break up any charming scenes between the chit and Potter, he was unsure whether he should give Miss Granger a detention or rush her to the hospital wing. Perhaps if he confronted her he could better decide what to do. Blast the girl! He had better things to do than play nursemaid to a young Gryffindor. If this turned out to be some teenage angst gone awry, he was going to give her detention until the stars grew cold.

With a swirl of black robes he was before her, leaning over the table, eyes mere inches from her own. "Miss Granger," he rumbled, his voice low and dangerous, "would you mind terribly explaining to me what exactly is going on here?"

The combination of the scowling face suddenly before her, Professor Snape's harsh tone, and the sudden spikes of anger that blazed through her, broke the last of Hermione's ability to stay calm. Standing so suddenly that her chair crashed to the floor; Hermione found that her legs would not support her and fell to her knees on the cold stone. The cacophony of emotions which attacked her reached a fever pitch. Hermione put her head in her hands and screamed.

Severus had never been so shocked in his life. To suddenly see the normally unflappable young woman collapsed on the floor rocking and shrieking while she pulled at her hair with both hands was beyond explanation. For an eternal instant his brain refused to process the inexplicable sight and he simply stood gaping at her. Coming to his senses, he dove around the table to lift up the screaming girl and cradle her against his chest like a child. His only thought was to get Hermione to Poppy as quickly as possible. As soon as Severus' arms closed around her, Hermione stopped screaming. Her eyes closed, her body relaxed, her hands fell away from where they had been fisted in her hair.

"Miss Granger?" Severus asked. "Miss Granger, can you hear me?"

Hermione could not hear him. She had no idea whose arms held her. All Hermione knew was that she was completely surrounded by a fierce protectiveness that blocked out the din of confusing emotions that had come so close to driving her mad. Hermione snuggled her battered psyche deep into that overwhelming protectiveness and felt as if nothing could ever hurt her again.

Receiving no response from the now eerily silent young witch, Severus sprang into action. "Mr. Goyle, open that door, now!" he barked. Carrying the limp girl hugged tightly to his chest, Severus took the stairs two at a time and nearly sprinted down the hall to the hospital wing. He was shouting for Poppy before he even reached the door.

"Sweet Merlin, Severus," Poppy asked as she ran in from her office, "what's happened to Miss Granger?"

"I don't know, Poppy. She was distracted in class...when I attempted to find out what the matter was, she collapsed screaming. I brought her here as quickly as possible."

"You did well, Severus. Well...at least she seems calm now. Put her down on a cot and I'll take a look at her."

As Severus placed her gently down on the nearest cot and drew away, Hermione began screaming again, eyes opened wide and unseeing. As her hands reached up to clutch in her hair, Severus--in a reflexive move--picked her back up. Hermione's screams abruptly stopped.

Poppy now saw something few people had ever seen before; the imperturbable Potion's Professor was completely at a loss. He looked from the now calm student in his arms to the startled mediwitch with a wide-eyed expression of shock and confusion. If Poppy hadn't been so worried about the young woman, she would've truly enjoyed seeing the normally confident man so nonplussed.

"Severus, would you try to put her down again?" When Hermione once again began to scream, Poppy snapped, "well...pick her back up, man, for heaven's sake!" Poppy stared at the now quiet girl and shook her head. "I've never seen the like," she muttered. Drawing her wand, Madame Pomfrey transfigured the cot into a large, overstuffed chair. "You might as well sit down with her, Severus, while I go floo the Headmaster."

"What? Madame Pomfrey, may I remind you that I have classes to teach? I do not have time sit here snuggling with a student, nor do I think it the least bit appropriate," Severus snapped, his expression falling back into its normal disdain.

"Well, Professor Snape, then I'd have to say that this is your unlucky day, because you are going to sit right there and keep Miss Granger calm until we can figure out what the hell is going on. Have I made myself very clear?"

Severus' only reply was a glare, but he immediately gave in before the irate mediwitch and dutifully sat in the transfigured chair, continuing to cradle the senseless young witch against him. Satisfied, Poppy headed for the floo in her office to alert the Headmaster of the odd situation.

Repose

Chapter 4 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

The first of the professors to arrive was McGonagall. Taking one look at the man cuddling with her prize student, she turned livid with rage. "Severus Snape, may I ask what is the meaning of this outrageous behavior? Take your filthy hands off that girl at once!"

Severus' eyes narrowed in anger but his voice came out a silky purr, "Why Minerva, I'm afraid I don't see what's wrong with our behavior. Miss Granger and I always take a nap together at this time of day." He smirked as Minerva puffed up in rage.

"You arrogant libertine! I swear I'll hex your balls off, and then we'll just see if you're able to debauch any more young girls."

This worried Severus, though he didn't show it. Minerva was a powerful witch; he'd no doubt she could do exactly what she threatened. Perhaps he shouldn't have baited her, but he'd been furious that Minerva would even think he would do such a thing. She should know better. Now the enraged witch was going to hex him, and with his arms full of Miss Granger, he'd never be able to block it. Severus did the only thing he could think of--he shouted. "Poppy! Get your bloody arse out here immediately!"

Poppy was still busy in her office--she'd never get there in time. Luckily for Severus (and his balls), as Minerva drew her wand, a bearded wizard chose that moment to rush through the door. Albus took one look at Minerva--a tower of vengeful witch standing with wand drawn and pointing to his wide eyed Potion's Professor--and acted with lightning reflexes. "Expelliarmus," he intoned softly. Professor McGonagall's wand flew gently into his hand.

Turning to the Headmaster with startled eyes, Minerva sputtered, "Albus, give me back my wand...don't you see what this..."

"Minerva," Dumbledore began in a voice that brooked no argument, "I believe you owe Severus an apology. If you were in your right mind, I think you would realize what you were accusing Severus of is rather ridiculous."

The wind abruptly left the sails of Minerva's fury, her face going white. Taking one look at Severus' shuttered expression, Minerva felt absolutely mortified by what she'd accused him of. "Severus, I am so..."

"I don't want to hear it," Severus interrupted in a tight, soft voice.

"But, Severus..."

"I--do not--want--to hear it," he snapped.

The senseless girl in his arms took that as a cue to whimper against Severus' shoulder. His eyes softening abruptly, he looked down at the girl in his arms--gathered her even tighter against his chest--and murmured in the softest of tones, "It's quite all right, Miss Granger. Everything will be fine." The young woman wrapped in his arms grew quiet once more, snuggling her face into the crook of his neck.

Turning serious eyes up to his Headmaster, Severus addressed him in the same soft tones, "Albus, perhaps you could at last get around to figuring out this mess. I do not know how much more of this insufferable situation I can take."

"I will do all in my power, my boy. For now, please continue to keep Miss Granger calm. Is there anything you require?"

"Other than my freedom, which I seem destined to do without for the time being?" Severus sighed. "Perhaps a cup of tea..."

"Minerva," Albus regarded his Transfiguration Professor calmly, "I trust you can make the poor boy a cup of tea without calling his honor into question?"

"Of course, Headmaster," Minerva replied. Turning to Severus, she asked him softly, "Is there anything else I can do for you, Severus?"

"No...thank you, Minerva." Severus' voice was as gentle as her own, though he refused to look at her. "Tea will be sufficient."

Two hours and four cups of tea later found Severus in a bit of a predicament. Albus, Minerva, Hagrid, and Poppy were all in the mediwitch's office trying to find out what could be done. Severus still sat in the chair with Hermione, who had yet to awaken. Severus' back was starting to get a bit stiff and Miss Granger's hip was pressed firmly against a bladder which now held an uncomfortable amount of used tea. He tried to ignore it, but he was starting to squirm in discomfort. The next time Minerva came to check on him, she noticed his unease.

"Severus, what is the matter? Can I do something for you? Perhaps you would like more tea?" she asked kindly.

"Absolutely no more tea!" he hissed, trying in vain not to squirm.

"Oh, I believe I begin to understand your problem." Minerva said, biting back a chuckle. "I could get you one of Poppy's contraptions..."

"That is out of the question! Minerva I'm surprised at you. What if Miss Granger was to awaken during the...proceedings?"

"Why Severus, I don't think I've ever seen you blush before." This time Minerva could not stop an amused snort of laughter.

"How kind of you to ridicule me in my torment." Severus may have intended the comment to be disdainful; it came out more embarrassed than anything.

"I'm sorry, Severus," Minerva began in a gentle tone, placing a hand on his shoulder and giving it a soft squeeze, "and I'm awfully sorry about earlier. I know you better than that. I'm afraid you aren't the only professor here with a bit of a temper."

"Find me a way out of my present plight and I'll think about forgiving you," he grouched.

"Why don't we see if she'll let me hold her?"

Severus raised his eyebrows in speculation. It was a practical suggestion and if he didn't take a piss soon he was in danger of getting Miss Granger and himself very wet. Why not try it? There was no proof that there was anything special about his person that Miss Granger found comforting. In fact, should the young woman come to her senses to find herself wrapped tight in the arms of her "greasy git" of a Potions master, she would probably go into hysterics. Minerva's idea was quite sensible; Miss Granger was bound to be better off in the arms of her head of house.

"Let's attempt it. It would certainly be much more proper for you to care for Miss Granger in her present condition." Severus stood easily, despite stiff muscles and the weight of the girl in his arms. When Minerva took his place in the chair, Severus gently placed the young witch in her lap. As he drew away, Hermione did not start screaming, but she began to whimper piteously.

"Damn! It's not going to work, Severus. You'd best hurry."

"I'll be as quick as I can," Severus said with a resigned sigh. He took but a moment to stretch his aching back before striding off to Poppy's private bathroom.

Hermione was still whimpering when he returned. Severus wasted no time in retrieving his burden; he simply leaned over and plucked the upset girl off Minerva's lap. As soon as Hermione was once again cradled against Severus' chest, she immediately quieted. Watching Severus look down at the girl he held so gently, Minerva could not believe the tender expression she glimpsed in the man's normally guarded features. By the time she vacated the chair so the burdened man could resume it, Severus had replaced the look with his usual one of bored disdain. Hesitating before she returned to Poppy's office, Minerva waited in front of the chair until Severus had gotten Miss Granger as comfortably arranged as possible. Eventually, he looked up to regard Minerva with a questioning raise of an eyebrow.

"Was there something you wanted?" he asked, looking a bit puzzled.

"I know you do not want to discuss it, Severus, but there is something I would like to say about my behavior earlier."

"I assure you, Minerva, that it is not necessary. You are certainly not the first person to confuse the actor with the role, so to speak. I have gotten rather used to it," he replied in a tone both snide and weary.

"Obviously I do need to explain something, for you misunderstand me. When I walked in here today, I was angered by what I wrongfully assumed to be a professor taking advantage of a student in no shape to express her wishes in the matter. I would have reacted the same way had it been any professor and any student. If it had been Albus himself, he would have had to defend his balls!"

"I would've paid money to see that," Severus said with an amused snort.

"Severus, there is one more thing I would like to make perfectly clear. If I knew that a professor and a student--of legal age--had honest feelings for each other...well...let's just say that in my opinion, Miss Granger would be a very lucky young woman."

Severus had no witty reply to that remark. His eyes opened wide for a moment in disbelief, then they abruptly snapped shut as he bent his head. His curtain of black hair swung down to shadow his face, hiding his discomfort.

With a sigh, Minerva began to return to Poppy's office. She stopped when she heard his soft voice address her. Turning back, Minerva saw that his head was still bowed; she could barely see the glitter of his black eyes from under that mask of hair.

"Minerva," Severus began in a voice nearly as soft as a whisper. "Even if...that professor...had such feelings, he could never act on them, or even acknowledge them. Professors who are supposed to be Death Eaters do not have...affection...for muggle-born witches. It would only put both of them in grave danger."

"Severus, may I remind you that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named will not live forever." With that said, she turned and strode quickly to Poppy's office.

Minerva did not hear Severus' last whispered comment. "True enough...and I have about as much chance of surviving the war as he does."

Another hour passed before the professors sequestered in Poppy's office returned to tell Severus of their progress.

"We've got good news, my boy. With Hagrid's help, we've managed to track down a woman in Jamaica who is something of an expert in salamanders. Miss Granger has not been cursed after all; it seems that the salamander she rescued has given her a rather rare gift," explained Albus.

"This does not appear to be much of a gift, if I may say so," replied Severus with a disbelieving snort.

"This woman...she's called a Firewalker...assures us that it is a useful gift indeed. Apparently, Miss Granger's trouble is that she is not schooled in dealing with it yet. The Firewalker said that it can drive the untutored quite mad if they have no assistance."

"Is that what is wrong with Miss Granger? Has she gone...mad?" Severus asked with an uncharacteristic hesitation in his normally confident manner of speech.

"No, my boy, not yet at any rate. The Firewalker said that if she were mad she would not stop screaming for any reason. We were terribly lucky you were about when Miss Granger collapsed, Severus. According to the Firewalker, there are certain people who are naturally calming to those who have received this gift."

"What exactly are we talking about, Albus?" Severus asked, curiosity overcoming his worry about the girl on his lap.

"Miss Granger is now an Empath."

A small intake of breath was the only way that Severus showed his surprise. Empaths were rare indeed--he'd never yet met one. There wasn't much known about them, or the powers they possessed. "Did this...Firewalker...explain how we are to handle this situation?"

"Indeed she did," interrupted Poppy, "seems she's an Empath herself, that's what that 'Firewalker' title implies. She has told us some things that will help Miss Granger until she can come up here. The Firewalker is going to train Miss Granger herself."

"What do you mean by 'until she can come'?" Severus asked with a snarl. "Exactly when is this so called 'Firewalker' arriving?"

"As soon as she finishes up some business at home. She should be arriving in a week or so..." Minerva explained.

"What? *A week or so?*" Severus' voice rose, as did his ire. The unconscious witch in his arms began to whimper. Severus' tirade broke off abruptly. Looking down at the agitated girl, he held her closer and bent his head to her ear. "It's all right, Miss Granger. Nothing will harm you; you are quite safe," he murmured into her hair. As Hermione once again quieted in his embrace, Severus returned his attention to the professors gathered around him. Though he continued in a soft voice, his eyes blazed daggers. "And exactly what are we expected to do for Miss Granger in the meantime? I certainly hope you are entertaining no insane notions of me continuing this ridiculous...*cuddling*...any longer than is absolutely necessary."

"Never fear, my boy," Albus continued with a chuckle, "the Firewalker told us some things that will help Miss Granger besides 'cuddling,' as you so aptly put it. If you can continue caring for Miss Granger--perhaps another hour--we will be able to ward a room for her. Apparently, if she's secure in a buffered room, she'll regain consciousness and be on the road to recovery."

"Is that all she needs? A buffered room?" Severus asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Mostly. She will need some company as well. The Firewalker mentioned that it would be almost as bad to leave Miss Granger alone as it has been to be around so many people with no protections. She suggested we find a few people that Hermione feels comfortable around, letting them take turns keeping her company. The emotions of one comforting presence will overpower any outside emotion that seeps through the wards."

Severus nodded to himself. That sounded like it would work well, as far as he was concerned. After all, it was hardly likely Miss Granger would want her abusive Potions Professor around. The sooner he escaped this bittersweet torment, the better off he would be.

Sliding slowly into consciousness, Hermione was confronted by snippets of memory. She remembered the emotional roller coaster she had been trying to cope with...feeling safe with Harry in the great hall. Good gods! She'd started screaming in Potions! Professor Snape must've been furious! Hermione vaguely wondered if Gryffindor had any points left. But what had happened then? She remembered falling to her knees on the floor, closing her eyes tight, and screaming. Ahh...someone had picked her up. Hermione distinctly remembered strong arms supporting her and a sense of fierce protectiveness washing all the frightening confusion away. Hermione also had fuzzy memories of being held on someone's lap...hearing a comforting voice reassuring her. Harry! It must have been Harry. He was the one who had made her feel safe at dinner after all. He was a good friend, too. She could just see him racing to her rescue.

Where was she? Infirmary? What did it matter...she felt safe and calm. The only emotion she felt at all was a soft concern. It was quite pleasant. Feeling stronger, Hermione opened her eyes. She was in a strange room, quite unfurnished other than the bed she lay in and a large overstuffed chair. Familiar blue eyes regarded her cheerfully.

"Headmaster, am I mad?" Hermione blushed furiously. Why had she blurted that out!

"No, my dear child, you are not mad, nor are you cursed," Dumbledore began. He then explained to Hermione all that the Firewalker had said. "So Miss Granger," he concluded, "now all we need to do is choose some people to keep you company, and you will be quite safe until the Firewalker arrives to start your training."

"I...I think...I'm sorry, sir. It's just so much to take in! I'm an Empath? I guess it makes sense, looking back on all that's happened, but it just seems so odd," Hermione said.

"Like all powers, Hermione, I expect it will take a little time to get used to... as well as a little good old fashioned know-how. I am quite certain you will adjust to it very well, once we get that woman here to help you. Now then, whom do you think might make you feel secure in the meantime?"

"Well...obviously you do, sir. I feel quite at ease at the moment," Hermione said with a little blush of embarrassment.

"Excellent, excellent, I would be honored to help keep you company, my dear."

"Not Ron!" Hermione suddenly blurted, then blushed even more deeply.

Albus only chuckled. "Do not worry my dear, I know he's a good friend of yours, but I also know he's a bit...volatile, shall we say?"

Sighing in relief that the Headmaster understood, Hermione continued. "Professor McGonagall would be lovely, she's always so calm. I'd like to see Neville, but he's just been to see his parents..."

"I understand, Hermione. Mr. Longbottom would be a bit too sad at the moment, I'm afraid. Don't be afraid to be blatantly honest, my child, this isn't a popularity contest, we need to keep you safe."

"Harry! I'd really like Harry."

"Are you sure, Miss Granger?" Albus asked. "Harry is a fine young man, but he has had his moments of uproar, just as Mr. Weasley has."

"Oh no, Harry would be lovely. I was having a terrible time at dinner last evening, and just being near him helped me."

"All right, then. If you are sure."

"Besides, Headmaster, he's the one who carried me out of class, isn't he? I had thought I was going insane until he picked me up. Then suddenly I felt very safe, like nothing could ever harm me again."

"Miss Granger, I'm afraid it was not Harry who carried you out of class earlier today, though I'm certain he would've been willing. It was Professor Snape."

"Professor Snape!" Hermione almost shrieked. "But that can't be right! He doesn't even like me!"

"Miss Granger," Albus said with a sigh, "I think you have been a member of the Order long enough to know that things are not always as they seem. It was indeed Severus who carried you to the hospital wing. Not only did he do that, but when it was discovered you became agitated whenever he put you down, he quite gallantly held you on his lap for four hours while we worked on a plan to help you."

To say that Hermione was shocked by this would be a gross understatement. She did not reply for long moments while she tried to wrap her brain around the odd idea that it was Professor Snape's lap she'd been cuddled in. As she came to grips with that, she remembered that fierce protectiveness that had enveloped her like a suit of armor. Even sitting here with Albus Dumbledore himself didn't feel quite that secure. Well, there was no getting around it...

"Then I suppose I'd better have Professor Snape's help as well, if he will," she said tentatively.

Albus chuckled again. "I do believe that can be arranged."

Set to Burn

Chapter 5 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Harry was surprised when Dumbledore called a sudden meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. With things heating up on the war front, Order meetings were called infrequently and held in great secrecy; to have an impromptu meeting with whichever members could drop what they were doing and flood to Dumbledore's office was unheard of. Walking into the office, Harry gave the room a quick perusal to see who'd arrived. The Order members who worked at Hogwarts were all there: McGonagall, Hagrid, Snape, and--of course--Dumbledore himself. There were several other members who'd already arrived. Molly Weasley was chatting with McGonagall--Mrs. Weasley would no doubt fill the rest of her clan in on the meeting. Two of the Ministry's Aurors were also present: Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt. Harry returned Moody's nod of greeting a bit nervously, still feeling chagrined about being taken in by Moody's impersonator during fourth year. As Harry tried to regain his composure, the hearth flashed brightly, then spat two more Order members into the room. Harry's discomfort fled before a grin of happiness as he rushed forward to greet his godfather, Sirius Black, and his friend Remus Lupin. Both older men gave Harry a quick hug and exchanged a few words of affectionate greeting before Albus called the meeting to order.

"I appreciate everyone taking the time to gather at such short notice. I know some of you wonder whether this meeting is worth the risk involved in convening here at Hogwarts, but I've decided the news is worth the risk; especially as it concerns one of our members." Albus went on to describe Hermione Granger's new gift and the circumstances surrounding it.

"Hmm...an Empath is she? That is a rare power--I confess I don't know much about it," began Alastor Moody, "but I'm not sure why this business concerns the Order and I'm not convinced it warranted this haphazard meeting, Albus. Surely you agree constant vigilance is required now more than ever?"

"Believe me, Alastor, I am well aware of that fact. It's young Harry's seventh year, and from what Severus has been able to learn at the Death Eater meetings, it seems certain Voldemort will take some definitive action before he graduates. Despite these volatile times, there are two reasons I have called you here today, and both have much to do with our war efforts. Firstly, Miss Granger has been given a rare gift, indeed. So rare, in fact, that we know almost nothing about it. I realize it may seem the powers of an Empath could be of little use to us in the war, however, if we do not know the extent of her powers we cannot judge whether they will aid us in our war efforts or not. Now I would be a foolish leader, indeed, if I left unturned any stone which may allow us the slightest advantage against Voldemort. I am asking you all to learn all you can of Empaths, as covertly as possible, and report it back to me."

"You know, Albus, the idea might not be as farfetched as you believe," offered Kingsley. "I was recently reading a history of the goblin rebellions, and during one of the main battles, they mention the help of an Empath. The witch's name was Solsticia, and it was said that what she did turned the tide of that battle, and perhaps of the whole rebellion."

"Did it describe what she did?" Minerva asked with interest.

"Not at all, unfortunately. You know how those old history texts are--dry and boring as one of Professor Binns' lectures, I'm afraid--but it does give us a place to start looking for answers."

"Indeed it does. Perhaps we can start here by asking Professor Binns what he knows of the story. Minerva, will you see to that after we've finished?" After a nod of confirmation from Minerva, he continued, "In the meantime, I meant what I said about leaving no stone unturned. Let us all research the matter as thoroughly as we are able."

Albus waited for a moment as the rest of the Order broke into a quiet clamor, various members discussing ideas and resources to study the problem. Eventually, he regained their attention with a soft clearing of his throat. "While it is important that we get information on this matter in a timely fashion, it is only one reason I've called you here. The second concerns Miss Granger herself. I have already explained to you the precautions we must take to keep Miss Granger comfortable while she waits for the Firewalker, Andrene Christie, to arrive. Due to the possibility of Miss Granger's empathic abilities turning out to be of some help to the Cause, I think it best if we keep her new abilities as secret as possible. I have already let it be known around the school that Miss Granger is missing classes due to illness, and that she will return when she is well. Hermione must not be left alone for any reason; however--in light of the need for secrecy--I think it is imperative that her companions be chosen only from members of the Order."

"Quite sensible, Albus. I'm glad to see you're being circumspect after all," broke in Alastor.

"Miss Granger has made some requests, but with classes and teaching it would help if some members not at Hogwarts could assist, as well. Molly, Remus, I think both of you would be a help to the girl, at least we could give you a try and see how it goes."

"I'd be delighted," Remus said softly with a gentle smile. "I have always found Miss Granger's company quite compelling." Remus did not notice the scowl his comment brought forth from a silent, dark figure seated near the door.

"I'd also be happy to help, though I'm not sure how much time I can spare at the moment," Molly said with an exasperated sigh. "I'll get my schedule to you as soon as possible and you can work me into a shift."

Speaking up for the first time since the meeting began, Harry asked, "Who has Hermione requested to keep her company?"

Albus had hoped to avoid this question during the meeting. It was certain to cause a ruckus. Ah, well...they were bound to find out eventually and at least this way he could put a halt to the tempers this would rouse. "You for one, Harry. Which is hardly surprising. Miss Granger told me what a comfort you were to her at dinner the other night. Of course, no one will be forced into this duty. It is crucial that Hermione be kept calm and that would hardly be the case if she is locked into a room with someone who does not wish to be there."

Though Albus said these words to Harry, Severus was startled to see Albus glance up to meet his eyes. What in Lucifer's name was the old man up to now?

"No problem there, Headmaster. I'll be glad to help," Harry said with a grin.

"Miss Granger has also asked your help, Minerva," Albus continued.

"As much as I'd like to help the girl, Albus, I'm not sure she's correct in choosing me. There is a vast difference in seeming calm and being calm. I'll give it a go, if she insists, but don't be surprised if she requests me to be removed from the roster," Minerva said with a sheepish expression while Albus gave a soft chuckle. "Is that all of us then?"

"No, my dear, not at all. There is one other whom Hermione specifically requested. It seems she found his presence particularly comforting. That is, Severus, if you are willing?"

Severus stared at his employer with slightly widened eyes for a moment, completely confounded. Miss Granger requested his company? Was she barking mad after all? No student voluntarily sought his company--not even his Slytherins. Impossible! Between trying to research potions to aid the war effort, his teaching duties, and never knowing when he was going to be called to the Dark Lord's side, he simply could not waste time molly-coddling a student--no matter his thoughts on the student in question. All this raced through his mind instantly, and as he was nigh to telling Albus that he was in no way prepared to waste his time with such nonsense, all hell broke loose.

"What the hell are you on about, Albus? Do you mean to tell me that you intend to leave that defenseless girl alone in the hands of this heartless bastard?" Sirius roared. "Don't you think that'd be a case of the cure being far worse than the disease?"

Severus' darkening eyes snapped to Black. With the utmost disdain, he replied, "Perhaps, Black, you are simply jealous that Miss Granger has not specifically requested the...*attentions*...of an uncouth, mangy cur."

Sirius almost got to his wand before Remus stopped him with a hand on the arm. While Sirius was distracted, the uproar was continued by other voices.

"Perhaps Black is right," Alastor began in a stern voice, "I am well aware of the work Snape has done for the Order, but it has always been my contention that we can only trust him so far. Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater, after all."

Snape glared at Moody but didn't bother to argue. He wasn't about to waste his breath on the likes of that stubborn travesty of an Auror. Severus was quite convinced that he could spend the rest of his days like that blasted Muggle saint Mother Theresa, then give his life to save a train-full of infants from fiery death, and the cynical Auror would stand at his funeral and proclaim "Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater."

"Are you quite sure you've thought this idea through, Albus?" inquired Kingsley.

"It does seem rather inappropriate," Remus offered gently.

"Inappropriate? Why there's no telling what the leech will do to the girl with no one to stop him!" snarled Sirius.

"Now Mr. Black, sir," broke in Hagrid, "I'm sure yer wrong 'bout that. Professor Snape would never harm the wee lass. Though I must admit, I'm not at all sure how comfartin' he'd be to 'ermione."

Even Hagrid? It was true that at least the half-giant hadn't accused him of some nefarious plans against Miss Granger, but it still rather inexplicably bothered Severus that even the gentle Hagrid had doubts as to his usefulness. Damn and blast! He really didn't have the time for this foolishness. In spite of this, he found himself suddenly considering acceptance of the task. For one, it would obviously annoy Black no end--that in itself was enough to make it worthwhile. Also, he would take a wicked sort of glee out of proving all these boisterous maligners wrong. Besides, if he accepted the task, it would give him an excellent opportunity to keep an eye on the werewolf who seemed to find Hermione's company so 'compelling.' One thing puzzled him: why was Potter so silent in this? When Albus announced Severus' name, Potter had looked at him in shock for a moment, then simply shrugged his shoulders and kept out of the ensuing argument. Severus would've expected the annoying young Gryffindor to make the most fuss. Scowling at Harry, where he sat calmly watching the verbal fireworks, Severus addressed him, "Do you not have some equally disparaging remark to make, Potter?"

"No, sir," Harry replied calmly, "I trust Hermione to know best what's good for her." That was not the only reason Harry remained silent, but it was all he was going to tell the dour Professor. Harry would never like Snape, that was a given. Their battle of wills had gone on too many years for a sudden peace to come between them. Still, Harry was astute enough to have realized, since joining the Order, that Snape was not quite the abrasive character he portrayed to the world--and Harry was well aware of why the spy chose to act as he did. Couple that knowledge with the rather dashing manner in which Professor Snape had dealt with a collapsed and screaming Hermione, and Harry found all sorts of questions about the evasive man racing around his mind. Not the least of which being, exactly when did he ever find the great git rather attractive? Bloody hell! Malfoy was going to have a field day with that one if he ever found out.

"You trust a sweet little girl like Hermione to know what's best when dealing with a complete and utter chuffer like Snape? He'll have her in tears, at the least. And there's no telling what else he'll do to her if he has half a chance!" roared Sirius.

"That is enough!" bellowed Albus. "I will not tolerate one more ill word spoken about Severus Snape within my hearing. I would think by now you would all know that I trust the man with the business of the Order, as well as with my very life. I cannot keep you from squabbling, but I can damn well keep you from publicly disparaging a good man in my presence. Have I made myself absolutely clear?" The stern look he threw them, especially Black and Moody, left them in no doubt that further arguing might find them on the wrong side of Albus' wand. An uneasy silence overtook the room.

Severus was staring at Albus with frank incredulity. What had gotten in to the man? Oh, he knew how Albus felt about him well enough, they'd been friends for years. Ever since Albus had taken Severus under his wing after his brief and horrifying time as an actual Death Eater, Severus had looked up to the man with an amazing sense of respect and admiration. Albus was the alpha-wizard of his century; with power both terrifying and revered. He was kind as a Hufflepuff and as sneaky as a Slytherin. It had always been understood between them that (until Severus' spying days were over) Albus and he would keep their friendship quiet, lest Voldemort find out just exactly where Severus' loyalties lay. Albus had certainly defended him to the Order when absolutely necessary, but for the most part he expected Severus to deal with these situations on his own--and Severus understood all too well the need for that discretion. Yet he found himself unexpectedly touched to have Albus' trust in him so loudly and vehemently proclaimed. Bugger all! This was the deciding reason why he would endure--perhaps the next two weeks--spending time alone with a young woman he'd rather avoid at present. He would do it simply because his friend asked him to.

"Well, my boy," Albus continued, "What shall I tell Miss Granger? I fear she will be sorely disappointed if you refuse, but the decision is yours."

"Albus, you may inform Miss Granger that I would be honored to be of...assistance." Though Severus made the statement in all seriousness, he could not resist throwing a wicked smirk towards Sirius Black. Black again made as if to go for his wand and was again restrained by Remus. Severus' smirk widened, his eyes flashing with amusement. Turning back to Albus, Severus found there was one thing that puzzled him. "Albus, I am aware that you have warded one of the infirmary's old storage rooms for Miss Granger, but if all those meant to assist her are here, exactly who is keeping Miss Granger company at present?"

"Why, I left her with Poppy for the time being..." Albus began until he was interrupted by a startled Potions master.

"Bloody hell! Have you gone barking mad, old man? Poppy is barely bearable under the best of circumstances; she'll have Miss Granger climbing the walls!" Without waiting to be dismissed, Severus turned with a swirl of robes and stalked briskly from Dumbledore's office to head in the direction of the infirmary.

Behind him, in an office of people gone suddenly quiet at the Potions Professor's unexpected concern, Albus began to chuckle.

A Puzzling Professor

Chapter 6 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

When Headmaster Dumbledore had asked Hermione if she would mind having Madame Pomfrey keep her company while some of the Order members discussed her predicament, Hermione had readily agreed. She'd thought the kind Mediwitch would be easy company. Nimue's spandex knickers! Had she ever been wrong! Obviously the mediwitch's calm bedside manner was a horrible pretense. Madame Pomfrey practically seethed with unchecked emotion and, when Hermione tried to distract herself from this by conversing with the mediwitch, she found they had absolutely no common ground. Madame Pomfrey turned out to be about as interesting as the other seventh year girls in Hermione's dorm. The older woman kept up a constant and rambling dialogue of catty gossip, fashion advice, and numerous suggestions about how Hermione should style her hair. Hermione didn't know what was worse, the inflow of riotous emotion or the insipid prattle. After politely attempting to be agreeable for the first thirty minutes of this torture, Hermione had taken to pacing about the tiny room, trying to dispel some of her nervous energy. She had to repeatedly ignore Madame Pomfrey's suggestions that she try to rest. Honestly! If this continued much longer she was going to start climbing the walls!

Hermione's ordeal ended abruptly when the door to the small room banged open to admit a stern-faced Professor Snape in a flurry of black robes. Hermione had never been more relieved to see anyone in her entire life. She felt better as soon as he strode through the doorway. She felt protected. She felt safe.

Severus took one look at the very flustered, pacing young woman and found himself fighting back the urge to hex the blasted mediwitch. He settled for a brusque dismissal. "Poppy, I will take over your duty here for the present; you may go."

Poppy looked startled, by both his sharp tone and the way he stared at her, as he resolutely held the door open for her immediate exit. Finding herself intimidated by his abrupt manner, she forwent arguing with him in favor of rather overdone fussing over Miss Granger as she bid the girl goodbye. The moment Poppy left, Severus shut the door firmly in her wake and turned to Miss Granger. He found himself completely at a loss when the girl walked right up to him, rested her cheek against his chest, and wrapped her arms around his waist in a tight hug. Merlin's balls! Students did not hug the evil, Death Eater, Potions master! Hell, women in general didn't wrap their arms about his person and hug him as though...well...as though they wanted to. He didn't know whether to hex her or hug her back. Damn and blast! He couldn't hex her; the poor girl was trembling like a leaf. An hour with Poppy must have been nearly more than the girl could stand. Exactly what was he supposed to do with the chit? He had no experience calming distressed young students. With the expression on his face a mixture of confusion and discomfort, Severus raised a hand to pat awkwardly at her shoulder.

The clumsy pat made Hermione suddenly realize exactly what it was she was doing. Merciful Heavens! She was hugging the most feared and abrasive professor at Hogwarts! What in the world was she thinking? What in hell was he thinking? She would be lucky if he didn't assign her detention for the rest of the year. Yet...he wasn't pushing her away...he was sort of...patting her. Severus Snape! Patting her! Perhaps she was insane after all. Abruptly withdrawing from the now uncomfortable embrace, Hermione found herself staring at Professor Snape's black booted feet while she blushed to the roots of her hair. Her tongue stumbled around an apology. "I'm sorry, Professor, it was...rude of me...to fly at you like that. I was very glad to see you, sir. Madame Pomfrey was...er...difficult."

Severus could not restrain a short bark of laughter. Hermione's eyes flew up to his in wide-eyed shock. "Miss Granger, while I am normally unwilling to speak ill of a fellow Hogwarts staff member before a student, I must admit I am quite aware Madame Pomfrey is a gossip-mongering imbecile. I half expected to find you a gibbering wreck after an hour in her forced company. My apologies, Miss Granger--had I been aware whom the Headmaster had stuck you with, I'd have arrived sooner."

It required all Hermione's concentration not to gape at her normally foul-mouthed git of a Potions Professor. First he had patted her shoulder, then he had actually laughed, now he was speaking to her like a human being. In fact, he was being rather wickedly witty and inconceivably kind. It struck Hermione that she really didn't know this enigmatic man at all. She was going to do some serious thinking about that. Hermione knew Professor Snape was a spy, but she'd never truly considered all the ramifications of his work for the Order.

Severus did not like the calculating way in which Miss Granger was now regarding him. Damn and blast! Some Head of Slytherin, über-spy he was! One ridiculous hug and he'd slipped up in front of one of the brightest minds at Hogwarts. Well...she was indeed one of the brightest minds here, as well as an Order member. As slips went, he didn't see that it was all that dangerous. He would ignore it for now and attempt to be more careful in future. Perhaps he could throw her off-track. No time like the present...

"Have you just been lounging about in here?" Severus said in a disdainful tone accompanied by a raised eyebrow. "I would imagine catching up with your studies would be a more suitable way to pass the time you will remain stuck in this abysmal room?" To Severus' surprise, the young witch neither grew angry, nor rolled her eyes. She simply continued to study his face for a moment before replying in a calm tone.

"Actually, I would quite like to have something to do and I am worried about keeping up with my classes, seeing how I may be here for some time. Unfortunately, I do not have my books here, nor would Madame Pomfrey send for them. Would you be so kind as to arrange someone to collect them for me, sir?"

Severus forced a sigh of resignation. "I suppose, Miss Granger, it is not enough that I am to be your babysitter, I may as well be your social secretary as well," he said in a tone both dry and acidic. He was disconcerted to find that Miss Granger simply smiled at him.

Hermione was getting quite a speedy lesson in What Makes Severus Snape Tick. Though untrained, she could easily tell that Professor Snape was not irritated. She still felt his protectiveness, which was very strong. Now the static noise of a crowd's emotions were no longer overwhelming her, she could tell her professor had other emotions swirling around beneath that swell of protectiveness, but she could not quite identify them. Still, it was extremely apparent his outward manner had very little to do with what he truly felt. It occurred to Hermione that he wore that abrasive persona like a costume; sort of an 'aren't I a nasty, evil, Death Eater' costume. Hermione was not quite sure what she thought of all that, but it certainly was an intriguing puzzle. Hermione loved a good puzzle.

"Thank you, Professor. That would be most kind," she replied with a smile.

"I assure you, Granger; kindness had nothing to do with the matter," Severus continued, with all the abrasive snark he could muster in the face of her gentle smile. "It is pure selfishness on my part. The sooner you have some sort of task to occupy your time, the sooner I shall be able to have some peace from your endless prattle." Though his expression did not change, Severus was startled that the only effect his performance had on the girl was a slight widening of her amused smile. He's obviously made a complete bollocks of this impossible situation already. Bloody hell! Severus could only hope the intelligent young witch never plumbed the depths of his most carefully guarded secret.

Realizing he'd been staring at the girl, Severus turned abruptly to the door and opened it to glare into the infirmary beyond. He was relieved to see Minerva chatting with a ruffled Madame Pomfrey. Interrupting them with a sharp "Professor McGonagall, if I might have a word," Severus rolled his eyes in exasperation as Minerva turned to regard him--a twinkle of mischief in her eyes that rivaled Albus'.

"What can I do for you, Professor Snape? I trust you have found Miss Granger well?" Minerva addressed Severus with a soft chuckle at his obvious aggravation.

In clipped tones, Severus replied, "Nothing about this repugnant situation is well, Minerva. Miss Granger would like her schoolbooks and I would like the red book on the desk in my study. In addition to that, perhaps you might want to consider the fact this horrendous room has nothing in it but a bed and a chair; at the least you might provide the girl a desk to study at. Not to mention the fact that Miss Granger and I have not had a thing to eat since breakfast, nor do we seem to have access to a lav. I don't know what the hell you all were thinking when you created this detestable cage."

Minerva knew him too well to be put off by his caustic tone. It was obvious that he was concerned more for the comfort of the student presently in his charge than in his own. After all, the Potions Professor would only have to do shifts in the room; Miss Granger would be stuck there for at least a week. "We were in a bit of a rush before, Severus. I will see about your books and then ask the Headmaster what else we can do to see to your comfort."

"See that you do," Severus replied, sulking. Why was it that despite his best 'Death Eater' act, suddenly everybody kept smiling at him? Fucking hell! Was he losing his touch? While Minerva strode off, Severus remained a moment in the open doorway to give an experimental glare at Poppy. Biting back a satisfied smirk when the mediwitch paled and turned away, Severus at last closed the door.

During the twenty minutes that passed before any deliveries were made to the warded room, Severus sat in the chair, glaring at Miss Granger. When she politely tried to engage him in conversation, he answered her queries in monosyllables, if he answered at all. Severus was completely baffled by the young witch's response to his gruff treatment. Far from being discouraged, she persisted in smiling at him and continued chatting animatedly despite his lack of response. He did not know whether to admire her tenacity or worry about the state of her sanity. Severus was still musing over that quandary when there came a brisk knock on the door. Opening it, Severus was faced with a small army of house-elves bearing platters of sandwiches, tea, pumpkin juice, Miss Granger's book bag, and the book he was currently reading--Disappearing Ingredients: the Effects of Muggle Deforestation of the Rainforest on Modern Potion Making. Severus was hesitant to allow them entry; he was unsure what effect they would have on Miss Granger. He was considering asking them to leave everything at the door when Miss Granger spoke.

"Professor Snape, I believe you may let them in. I was fine with Madame Pomfrey when...when you were here. They should not be here for very long at any rate."

Studying her intently for a moment before replying, Severus said, "As you wish, Miss Granger. However, I trust you will inform me if you experience any difficulty?"

"Certainly, sir. Thank you," Hermione replied with a smile.

Would the thrice-damned girl never stop smiling at him? If he wasn't more cautious, this ridiculous situation was going to get out of hand very quickly. Now that he was stuck in this closet sized room, face to face with the smiling young woman, he wondered what had possessed him to accept this torturous fate. Oh, he knew it seemed reasonable at the time, but Hermione's warm smile was convincing him he'd made a grave error in letting himself get trapped in close quarters with a female student that he found inappropriately alluring. Merlin's teeth! Was he a Slytherin or a blasted Hufflepuff? Surely one Death Eater spy was more than match enough for any student, no matter how enticing.

The troop of house-elves traipsed in. After conjuring a small table on which to put the lunch, they gave Hermione her knapsack with much friendly chattering. An uncharacteristically silent house-elf gave the Potions Professor his requested book and fled squeaking from his answering scowl. Within minutes, the noisy gaggle of house-elves had left as suddenly as they'd arrived. Closing the door behind them, Severus grabbed a sandwich before plunking back down in the chair and opening his book.

Serving herself from the table, Hermione sat cross-legged on the bed with her knapsack. Pulling out her Transfiguration text, she munched happily on a sandwich while she read. Thirty minutes later found Severus having difficulty remaining focused on his reading. Having finished her meal, Hermione was now lying on her stomach with her head propped on one hand as she continued to read. Knees bent, feet in the air, with ankles crossed, she swung her feet gently back and forth in unconscious motion as she studied. Severus had never seen her so relaxed and unguarded, nor so quiet. She made a pretty picture, lying there with her book. Fucking hell! Was he torturing himself on purpose? There could never be anything between them, even if the young woman was willing. Why in hell was he sitting here watching the chit read as if he was a love-sick schoolboy? With an unconscious sigh, he dragged his eyes from her bare calves and tried to focus on his book.

Hearing his soft exhalation, Hermione peeked up at him over the top of her book. Seeing he wasn't looking at her, she took the opportunity to study his face intently. Puzzling. His attention was focused on the book, yet his eyes were not moving, nor did he turn a page. Professor Snape just stared at it, lost in thought. His eyes held none of the coldness she usually found there. Their black depths gazed unseeing at the book before them, as if the world they examined was far away from this dingy room. Hermione thought Professor Snape looked a trifle wistful; it was an expression much softer and infinitely more sad than she'd ever seen on his chiseled features. Strange, without the acid tone of voice and the habitual sneer, his face--thus softened--looked almost handsome...well...perhaps more striking than handsome, but it was rather appealing. Nimue's bustier! What was she thinking? Did she actually just find the 'bat of the dungeons' attractive? Hermione's shocked eyes snapped back down to her textbook. Calm down, girl, calm down! I've had a rough couple of days; it's probably just the stress talking. I had a trying time with Madame Pomfrey and then Professor Snape burst in like a snarky knight in black wool armor. Little wonder I'm feeling better disposed towards him. Hermione risked another peek over the top of her book. Damn! Despite all my creative rationalizations, I still think he looks quite appealing. I need something to distract myself from this until I have a chance to think about it. Reluctantly, Hermione tore her eyes from the inky depths she had been contemplating and glanced down. Pausing at the curve of his lips, which she noted looked very different without being twisted into their customary sneer; she then looked at the red cover of the book he was (not) reading. Now there was an interesting subject, she thought as she read the title. It was also a subject she knew a bit about, from a Muggle standpoint at least. Perhaps a discussion would distract both Professor Snape from his wistfulness and herself from her inappropriate thoughts.

"Professor Snape," she called, when he looked up she continued, "are you aware Muggle scientists estimate that 137 plant, animal, and insect species are made extinct every day by the deforestation of the rainforest?"

Severus was intrigued despite himself. "That is amazingly similar to the data gathered by wizards studying the phenomenon. Muggle scientists study this?"

"Indeed they do. I have several Muggle books on the subject. I would be happy to lend them to you if you wish."

"Miss Granger, if Muggles are aware of the problem, why is it that they have not put a stop to the destruction? It is the Muggles who are causing it."

"Some Muggles are aware of it and they are trying to educate others. There is only so much they can do about the situation when the governments in charge of the land sell the forest to any lumber company that wants to chop it down."

"Why in the world would they want to do something which will only cause future harm, and possibly drastic harm at that?" Professor Snape looked completely flabbergasted by the thought.

"They are poor countries, Professor. I suppose it seems more important to them to try to improve their lot now and let the future care for itself. One can hardly fault people--concerned with where they'll get their next meal--for not worrying overmuch about the future of the planet. This is a worldwide problem; it needs a worldwide solution. Smacking them on the hands and saying 'don't do that' while offering them no real alternative simply isn't good enough."

Severus was enchanted by the intelligent witch's views on the subject. It was intriguing to listen to a debate on the matter from a Muggle standpoint. "It is indeed a worldwide problem, for wizards as well as Muggles. Why then don't the Muggle governments band together and find a solution to the trouble?"

Hermione snorted. "We have a devil of a time getting the wizards of a single country to band together against a common foe. Do you think it is much different with Muggle governments?"

Smirking in amusement, Severus conceded that Hermione had a point. The pair continued the discussion, to the great enjoyment of both, until they were at last interrupted by a knock. Striding to the door, Severus opened it to see Albus regarding him with madly twinkling eyes. What new hell had the old man planned for him now?

"Severus," Albus greeted him. "Miss Granger, do you think it would be all right for me to come in for a moment?"

"I'm sure it would be fine, Headmaster," Hermione said with a smile.

Albus walked into the room and softly closed the door. "We've been working on a much more comfortable place for you to stay, Miss Granger, and I daresay you will find it more convenient as well, Severus. It is better furnished and we've also warded its adjoining lavatory. I decided it would be easiest to take you there by portkey, so if you will both take hold of this..."

Albus Dumbledore held out a rather worn Altoids tin. When Hermione reached out to touch it, she felt the familiar queasiness associated with portkey travel. It lasted for but a moment. Feet once again firm on the floor, Hermione looked around with interest. It was a lovely room. There was a black leather sofa with two matching chairs arranged around a large hearth, fire blazing merrily. A beautiful mahogany desk stood near one wall, on the adjoining wall was a huge window looking across the lawn. The window had a charming seat, which Hermione immediately decided would be her favorite place to sit. Best of all, the room was absolutely filled with books. Hermione had never seen a more wondrous room in her entire life. Her delight was suddenly interrupted by the voice of her irate Potions Professor.

"Albus," Severus shouted, "what the bloody fuck are we doing in my private study?"

Tea and Turpin

Chapter 7 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

As Severus exploded in anger, waves of fury washed over Hermione, who'd enough presence of mind to realize the fury she suddenly felt was not her own, but that of the irate Professor currently yelling into the calm face of Headmaster Dumbledore. Though Hermione possessed quite a temper of her own, it didn't hold a candle to the fierce anger currently buffeting her. Trembling, she backed toward the window seat and sat down. Hermione was sure his fury wouldn't last long; she had only to remain calm until it passed. Hanging her head, she wrapped her arms about herself and rocked. The small motion seemed comforting as the Potion master's shouting continued.

"How dare you Albus! I go to hell and back for you and this is how I am treated? Commandeering my own rooms without so much as a 'by your leave?' This time you've gone too far!" Severus screeched.

"Now my boy, you were sequestered with Miss Granger and I assure you I had no idea you'd take this poorly. Honestly, Severus, it seems a small thing..."

"Small thing? Small thing you say? You expect me to have all sorts of imbeciles running rampant in my study without my supervision and you think it's of no particular concern? I'm supposed to welcome Lupin and Potter in to rifle through my drawers am I?"

"Severus, I am sure you have no reason to believe..."

"No reason? Potter fucking hates me in case you've forgotten. Lupin isn't much better. And with the two of them in here there's no doubt Black will bully his way in and I won't stand for it. That man is a menace!"

"Severus, I assure you I will keep Black away; he'd hardly be a calming influence on Miss Granger at any rate."

"And what about Miss Granger," Severus snapped, "what the bloody hell am I supposed to do with her in the evening? It's not like I can..."

Still rocking gently on the window seat, eyes tightly closed, Hermione was startled when the insistent rage abruptly left her. Keeping her eyes squeezed shut, she ceased rocking, though she could not stop her trembling.

"Miss Granger." The voice calling to her was deep and gentle. "Miss Granger, please open your eyes."

Cracking her eyes open, Hermione looked tentatively up at the black-robed man calling to her softly.

"Miss Granger, it seems that I am destined to make you apologies today," Severus said, "though I am certain you are well aware I have quite a temper, it is inexcusable for me to subject you to it in your present condition. Do you think you can forgive me?" The young witch seated before him nodded, but Severus saw her eyes looked a bit haunted and she still trembled. Damn! Why hadn't he been more careful? He considered his options. "Miss Granger, would it help, do you think, if you were to...how did you put it...fly at me' again?" Severus asked in all seriousness. When Hermione nodded at him, Severus squeezed his eyes shut and stood as if bracing himself for an attack. "Do your worst then," he fairly growled.

Hermione stared at him a moment, then did exactly that. Shooting off the window seat, she fairly leapt at Severus, wrapping her arms about his waist tightly as she burrowed her face into his chest. She snuffled a bit into his robes as she let his warm concern wash over her, erasing her unease. When Hermione muttered something into his chest, he found he could not understand a word. "I beg your pardon, Miss Granger?"

Hermione lifted her face far enough out of his robes to speak more clearly. "I won't let them rifle through your drawers," she promised softly.

Severus could not stop a small snort of amusement. He'd been completely shocked when he'd turned to her mid-tirade and seen the change his temper had wrought on the normally calm and cheerful girl. After what he'd just put her through, did she rail at him? Did she turn away in fear or disgust? No, she was hugging him and worrying about his drawers. Hermione truly was an amazing creature. "Thank you Miss Granger. I will trust you to take care of the matter. Now then," Severus continued, drawing back from her embrace slightly to look down at her, "feeling better?"

"Yes, Professor, thank you...for letting me...fly at you," Hermione said haltingly, managing a small smile. "It really does help."

"It was the least I could do, Miss Granger, seeing how I was the cause of the trouble. I...er...trust you will not make a habit of it?" Severus smirked as she blushed and shook her head. "Now then, why don't you go to the lav and freshen up while I do my blasted best not to hex our Headmaster."

Nodding, Hermione unwound herself from her Professor and dutifully headed for the door he indicated. To tell the truth, she needed a moment simply to think. The puzzle masquerading as her Potions Professor was getting more intriguing by the moment.

After the door closed behind Hermione, Albus murmured, "Astonishing."

"Miss Granger is a resilient young woman," Severus responded, with obvious pride.

"Oh...I was not speaking of Hermione, my dear boy. It's you I find astonishing," Albus replied, with a soft chuckle.

Severus glared.

Returning to the study, Hermione found Professor Snape and the Headmaster calmly discussing things over a cup of tea. Neither looked the worse for wear, which relieved her greatly. Albus bade her to sit down and handed her a cup.

"Now then, Miss Granger," Albus began, "we have a tentative schedule. While Professor Snape is teaching, Remus Lupin will be here. Harry will spend lunch with you and come by evenings after dinner, when he'll bring your class work. Molly Weasley doesn't have much time to spare, but she has to sleep...as do we all...so she will arrive every night around eleven and stay the night with you. Professor Snape will be doing mostly evenings and weekends. I'll be filling in as needed. Now then...does that seem all right to you, my dear?"

"That sounds fine, Headmaster. I'm only sorry to be causing so much bother," Hermione replied a bit sheepishly.

"Oh, it's no trouble at all. Do not even consider it. You are a fine student, Miss Granger, as well as a fine young woman, if I may be so bold as to say so," Albus said kindly, giving her a warm smile. "Now, I'm afraid I must go attend to some business. Professor Snape will keep you company until Molly arrives tonight, as we've already had to cancel his classes for the day. We will start the rotation in the morning."

Hermione thanked him warmly for all that he had done for her as Severus showed him out. After Albus left, Severus and Hermione spent an awkward moment staring at each other. Hermione eventually broke the silence, "You need not feel like you have to entertain me, sir. I'm sure you have your own work to do, especially since I have disrupted your routine so badly. I have my classes to catch up on, at any rate."

"Miss Granger, I'm afraid I know your studious nature too well to believe you have anything to catch up on. If you are running true to form you are already--at the least--two months ahead on your studies and will most likely still be ahead when you are able to rejoin your classmates," Severus said, with a slight smirk. Hermione's startled look told him he'd hit near the mark, indeed.

"Professor," Hermione began, looking a bit unsure of herself, "I was wondering...could I perhaps look at some of your books?" As she finished speaking, Hermione eyed the books in question with a naked hunger that made her Potions Professor bite back a chuckle.

"Miss Granger, as you will no doubt have to spend at least a week in my study, perhaps I should set some ground rules." Looking resolutely at the floor, Hermione was positive her strict Professor was about to tell her to touch nothing not belonging to her. Her eyes flew to his face in surprise when he continued. "You may read whatever you like. If you need scrolls--or ink or anything--you will find a supply of them in the desk. The lower left-hand drawer of the desk is warded; I would advise you not to fool with it. While it is true that I do not want just anyone rifling through my drawers, you may make yourself at home, Miss Granger."

All Hermione could manage in reply was a soft, "Thank you, sir."

The almost adoring way in which the young witch regarded him made Severus Snape extremely uncomfortable. Blast it all! Less than a day in the girl's company and he was already acting daft as a brush. Waving a dismissive hand, Severus said, "Do as you wish. Now, if you will excuse me, I do have some papers to grade." With that, he strode to his desk and resolutely began working.

To Severus' amusement, it took Miss Granger a good half hour of happy browsing to settle upon which of his many books she wished to read first. He was a bit surprised that she settled on Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, one of his favorite pieces of Muggle literature. Knowing she was studious--and at times worrying she was too studious--he had assumed she would head for one of his many books of wizard non-fiction. Miss Granger took the book happily to the window seat and began reading. Severus dutifully graded third year potions essays, though he often found his glance rising to the young witch. She made an enchanting picture, sitting in the late afternoon sun as it streamed through his window. Severus found himself both charmed by the play of expressions running over her face as she read, and impressed with the eager speed in which she turned the pages. Dragging his eyes away from the pleasant tableau, Severus resolutely returned to his grading. So determined was he that he failed to notice the low form scampering into the room, whiskers a-twitch in delight upon noticing the visitor.

Richard "Dick" Turpin, foul-mouthed and playful, as well as a notorious thief--thus his overly appropriate name--took one look at Hermione and raced across the room, clambering onto the window seat to sit beside her.

"Well," began Turpin excitedly, "aren't you a pretty piece of skirt? Are you here to have a pash with Snarky Pants? I must say it's 'bout time. He's been an absolute wanker lately. Though with you being a student, it's just a touch pervy..."

"TURPIN!" Severus bellowed. "If you do not cease this line of questioning immediately I will feed you to one of Hagrid's hippogriffs and be done with it!"

Hermione had been startled by the animal's sudden appearance, begun to giggle at its speech, and laughed outright at Professor Snape's response. Though she blushed a bit at the beast's implications, she wasn't offended. She immediately recognized Turpin for what he was and became completely charmed by the cheerful creature. "It's quite all right, Professor," she said, still chuckling. "I am not offended." Turning to regard the animal sitting next to her with interest, Hermione addressed it, "If I am not mistaken, you are a jarvey, are you not?"

"Aye, honeypot, that I am. Name's Richard Turpin, though that paedo at the desk usually just calls me Turpin. I suppose you may as well."

"I'm very pleased to meet you Turpin, my name is Hermione." She obligingly held out her hand for Turpin to take a sniff.

"You smell better than a French working girl," Turpin said with obvious enthusiasm. "Are you quite certain you aren't here for a..."

"Turpin..." Severus warned.

Grinning at the jarvey, Hermione replied, "Afraid not. Actually, I've been having a bit of trouble and I'm to stay here until it gets sorted out. I do hope you won't mind too much."

"Mind? Not at all!" Turpin said happily. "Gets dead boring with only Syphilis to insult, day after day. We'll have loads of fun!"

With a longsuffering sigh, Severus rubbed the bridge of his nose with the fingertips of both hands as he muttered, "That's what I was afraid of."

Hermione and the jarvey giggled.

Hermione thought Turpin was completely adorable. Granted the rough talk would take some getting used to, but the little creature was friendly, and so honestly happy to make her acquaintance, she was determined to make every effort not to chastise him for something he couldn't help. Actually, Turpin was rather soft-spoken for a jarvey. The ones Hermione had seen in Diagon Alley were so foul-mouthed they made little sense. Hermione thought him likely intelligent, and beautiful as well. About three feet long, he had the appearance of a huge ferret. He was colored much like a Siamese cat: body the color of toasted bread, legs and tail a deep sable. He also had a dark sable mask on his face, right over his eyes, much like a raccoon. While it didn't surprise Hermione that Professor Snape owned such a snarky familiar, she was amazed he owned such a cute one.

"I've never seen you before, Turpin," Hermione began, "how long have you lived with Professor Snape?"

"I've been here with gloomy arse for a year now. He got me from my first mistress--wasn't she a fucking bitch. Even I don't have the mouth to describe that earth-vexing harpy." Turpin looked to his master with obvious affection. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for him, the hinny. Best day of my life when narky arse nicked me."

Giving Professor Snape a look of incredulity, Hermione rather loudly said, "You stole him?"

"Oh..." continued Turpin, "he didn't just nick me, he hexed that bloody twunt arse over tits. I never saw anything like it." Turpin stared at Severus with pride. "You were the scariest thing I ever saw in my life; I might've run for it if I hadn't been on fire."

"On fire?" Hermione asked.

At last bringing a halt to even pretending to grade essays, Severus turned serious eyes upon Miss Granger. "Turpin's former owner--and for once his description is not exaggerated--was upset with him because he didn't answer a question fast enough. When I first took note of what was happening she was using Cruciatus on him. Before I could intervene, she had set his tail on fire."

"He put me tail out, he did...and picked me up. Been in this hellhole ever since," the jarvey said softly.

"Wanker," said Severus, with blunt affection.

"Toss-pot," replied Turpin, in kind.

Severus didn't like the way Miss Granger was looking at him. Bloody hell, he knew he was lying to himself. She was looking at him like he was some kind of hero and he reveled in it. However, he simply could not afford to do so. Grumbling how he would never get any work done with all the insipid prattle, he returned to his marking. Neither Hermione nor the jarvey found his grumbling particularly convincing. The remainder of the evening passed pleasantly. Hermione continued chatting with Turpin until he took himself off for a nap, then returned to her book. Dinner was a quiet affair. Apparently, Professor Snape had endured enough conversation for one day; Hermione didn't press him further.

Molly arrived, as promised, at eleven o'clock. Severus greeted her politely, then took his leave. Hermione found that she was completely knackered by the events of the day, and was happy to sleep after the older witch had transfigured Professor Snape's two chairs into cots for them both. It had been a day full of surprises--most of those involving her inscrutable Potions Professor. Wondering what the next week would bring, Hermione slipped into sleep.

In the Master's Study

Chapter 8 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Hermione didn't see Professor Snape at all next morning. By the time Molly Weasley left, Remus Lupin arrived. Though pale and a touch fragile looking, the werewolf still looked much healthier than the last time Hermione had seen him. Obviously, living with his friend Sirius--in addition to the part-time work he picked up from the Ministry's Aurors--was improving his health, as well as his station in life. His suit and cloak were not the height of fashion, nor were they threadbare as ones he once wore. Remus immediately asked Hermione to call him by his first name, as he was no longer her Professor, and before much time had passed, they were chatting like old friends. It was a most enjoyable morning, and Hermione was shocked when Harry knocked on the door to join her for lunch. Remus took his leave as Harry entered, promising to return in an hour when Harry departed for class. Harry was glad to get Hermione alone; he'd a ton of questions to ask his friend.

"So," Harry began the inquisition, "what's it been like being stuck here with Snape?"

"Harry, I will warn you right now that I am not going to put up with any of your ridiculous..." began Hermione, sharply.

"Hold on, Hermione! If you'd wait a bit, you might notice I asked a simple question. No innuendos...no rash accusations...you could jump in any time now and admire how well behaved I'm being," he finished, with a grin.

Hermione looked at him for a moment, her mouth hanging open. Closing it with a snap, she collected her thoughts and replied, "So you are...my apologies. Just why is it that you are being so well behaved?"

"Look, Hermione, I don't like the man...I don't think that's going to change. But unlike Sirius, I don't think Snape's offered to help just so he can have his wicked way with you," Harry said with a smirk. "I've taken some time to think on some things, and--if the git's helping you--then I don't see how I can give you a hard time about it. He's...well...he is treating you all right, isn't he?"

"Professor Snape has been very kind," Hermione said and rolled her eyes at Harry's disbelieving expression. "He really has! Oh...I'm not saying he's not a bit prickly now and again, but he's been terribly nice to me--for the most part. Honestly, Harry, he's been so different from what we've been accustomed to that I'm beginning to think we don't know the man at all."

"I've had...reasons...to wonder about that myself. I mean...I know he has to be careful because he's a spy. Now I wonder just how deep that spy act goes. There have been a few things lately..." Harry trailed off.

"What things?" Hermione demanded.

"Well, when he came and found us at the lake, when you were unconscious, for a moment he seemed really concerned. He actually spoke to Ron and me like human beings, for a few sentences at any rate. When he took you back to the castle he didn't levitate you, he carried you! When have you ever seen a wizard do anything by hand that he can't do more easily by wand?"

"How about...never? Good point."

"He did the same thing when you collapsed in Potions. At first he stared at you; I've never seen him look so shocked. Then he just swept around the table and scooped you up like you weighed nothing. He called to you--I remember--and he looked concerned. Then he snapped at Goyle to open the door, and without even dismissing the class, he ran out with you like Fluffy was on his heels. It was actually rather...dashing."

Hermione had been hanging on Harry's every word. When he reached the end of his description, she giggled at him. "Why Harry! You're blushing! Don't tell me you think the nastiest Professor at Hogwarts is a bit fetching?"

"Don't laugh!" Harry snapped. "I can't seem to help it! It's horrifying! I can't stand the wanker, but when he swept you away like that I got a bit...flustered. Hermione, you've got to promise not to tell anyone--if word of this gets back to Malfoy I'll never hear the end of it!"

"My lips are sealed," she promised, still giggling. "Speaking of Draco, how is he?" Hermione wisely changed the subject; she wasn't yet ready to admit to anyone--even

Harry--she found the Potions master a bit fetching, as well.

"Delicious," Harry said with a wicked grin.

Remus returned after Harry's lunchtime visit and the afternoon flew by fast as the morning. In addition to pleasant conversation, Remus helped her practice DADA spells. He'd brought a boggart, locked in a small trunk, and they were practicing Hermione's Riddikulus. They'd both collapsed laughing when the boggart--for the fourth time--had turned itself into a failed exam.

From the doorway leading to Professor Snape's sitting room--as well as the rest of his chambers--a deep voice interrupted them.

"You are lucky indeed, Miss Granger, if that is the worst of your fears," Severus Snape said with a smirk.

Turning towards him with a smile she replied, "I assure you, sir, that not all my fears are so trivial. I expect, since I am going to miss so many classes, this one was just more on my mind than usual."

Severus turned to regard the werewolf calmly. "Lupin," was all the greeting he offered.

"Severus," Remus replied with a polite nod of the head.

Severus remained just beyond the doorway; he'd not broken through the wards protecting Hermione. "Miss Granger, I'm afraid I need something from my desk. Do you think it all right for me to enter, or would you rather fetch it for me?"

"You may enter, Professor Snape. I'm certain I'll be fine," she replied.

As Severus entered, the forgotten boggart--still masquerading as a large scroll with a huge red 'D'--took notice of him. Its form wavered and disappeared, immediately taking the shape of Albus Dumbledore. The boggart Albus lay unmoving on the floor, eyes open and staring sightlessly, face frozen in an expression of pain and fear, a bloody wound slashed through its unmoving chest. Face gone white, Severus closed his eyes and turned from the sight of his dead friend. "Lupin," he said, voice seeming to stick in his throat, "could you please..."

"I'll get it, Severus, don't look again." Lupin leapt between Severus and the boggart. "To me!" he said, sharply. The boggart obligingly turned into a familiar silver disc and Remus drove it back into the trunk, locking it securely. "I've got it locked up, Severus. Are you all right?" the werewolf asked kindly.

Severus turned to regard Lupin through slightly narrowed eyes. "No disparaging remarks to make, Lupin?" he asked warily.

"I'm hardly going to tease you about that one, Severus, as it's a fear I share as well," Remus replied in all seriousness.

Severus considered this a moment, and with a small nod of his head, said, "Thank you, Lupin, for...dealing...with that. As for your earlier question, I shall be fine." He moved towards his desk, but was interrupted by Hermione suddenly flying at him, hugging him tightly about the waist. He stared at the top of her head for a moment in bemusement and then--with what was becoming a habitual awkward pat--said almost teasingly, "I had thought, Miss Granger, that we'd already discussed the necessity of this sort of thing not becoming habit?"

Releasing him, Hermione eyed him sheepishly, "I'm sorry, sir, I couldn't seem to help it. Are you quite all right?" she finished, looking at him worriedly.

"I shall be fine, Miss Granger," he replied with the faintest of smiles. "Indeed, it is I who should be asking after you. Perhaps we should consider, Miss Granger, that I might not be the most...restful...company for you after all."

"Nonsense!" Hermione said in a chastising tone, making the werewolf avidly watching the exchange bite back a chuckle. "You haven't disturbed me in the least. I was simply worried about you, Professor."

Severus made no reply; he was having trouble wrapping his mind around the idea of the young woman being so concerned on his behalf. His manner getting a bit brusque, he said, "If you will excuse me, I must get to my next class." Striding to the desk, he retrieved his third year students' essays and left the room without another word.

Turning back to Remus, Hermione was startled to see wry amusement on the werewolf's face. "Hermione," he said with a grin, "is there something you wish to tell me?"

"No. Absolutely not!" she said, blushing. Remus took pity on the embarrassed girl and did not press the matter. Returning to their Riddikulus practice, the remainder of the afternoon passed quickly. Remus stayed for dinner and took his leave when Harry arrived.

Having brought Hermione's homework assignments, Harry delivered them to her and they then worked in companionable silence until time came for Harry leave for Gryffindor tower. Severus spent the three hours until Molly arrived grading papers. Though she'd have enjoyed another conversation with her mysterious Professor, Hermione didn't mind his silence. It'd been an interesting day and she had much to muse over. Tired, she was happy to snuggle into her cot as Molly snuffed out the torches.

The rest of the week passed in much the same fashion. By Friday, Hermione was beginning to get a little perturbed that she saw Professor Snape so little. Despite the fact she was living in his chambers, she saw him only a couple of hours each day. How was she ever to finish figuring out What Makes Severus Snape Tick if she was so little in his company? Hermione did her level best to ignore the fact she enjoyed his company for its own sake. Oh...he was still a bit of a git, but there was much more behind the masque than Hermione had ever before realized. Most evenings he graded papers; sometimes she could rope him into a discussion of whichever of his books she had been reading that day. Cherishing these infrequent discussions, Hermione did her best to pry him out of his stubborn shell; she looked forward to spending more time with him this weekend. She could hardly complain, though; her week had been pleasant and interesting. The worst thing she'd had to deal with was a little light-hearted teasing from Remus. On Friday evening that changed drastically.

Just after Hermione and Remus had finished dinner, Harry had knocked on the door. Assuring both Harry and Remus it would cause no harm, Hermione invited Harry in to join them and the three friends sat chatting around the fire. There came a furious pounding on the door, making them all turn to it, flinching in surprise. The door slammed open, in walked a furious Sirius Black.

"I would like to know what the bloody fuck Hermione is doing living in Snape's quarters," Sirius thundered. "You two can't be here all the time; what the hell is the chuffing bastard doing to her when you aren't here?"

Severus had been reading peacefully in his sitting room when he heard the ruckus. Striding to the door, he opened it to see a sight he would cherish the rest of his life. Hermione had drawn her wand, pointing it directly at the face of a very shocked Sirius Black. Wanting to rush into the room, Severus held himself back. Miss Granger already had three emotional men within the wards to deal with. Shaking with frustration, he stood in the opened doorway, just outside the wards protecting her, and watched the fiasco unfold.

"Sirius Black," Hermione snapped, eyes blazing, "you will remove yourself immediately from Professor Snape's rooms or I will run through my arsenal of hexes. As Harry can attest, I know rather a lot of them." Brave as Hermione was, she hoped she could get Black out quickly. The swirling emotions of the three men were already having an unpleasant effect on her. Concern, anger, confusion, wariness, indecision, and guilt buffeted at her mind, eroding her control. Hermione's wand hand began to tremble.

"Sirius, what the hell are you doing here, man?" began Remus. "You know damn well you aren't supposed to be here, and you're upsetting Hermione. What do you say we leave her with Harry and go talk with Albus about your concerns?"

"You know I love you, Sirius, but you're being a whopping great prat," Harry said angrily. "We shouldn't all be in here, you have to leave."

"I'll leave when I understand what the hell is going on here and not one second before," Sirius spat. "The Hermione I know would never draw her wand on me! What has the bastard done to her? Is she under some nasty enchantment?"

"Black," Hermione hissed, her control slipping by the moment, "the reason I have never done so is you've never given me reason to...until now. You have no right to be in Professor Snape's rooms...leave. Leave now." Beginning to lose control in earnest, Hermione felt her body start to tremble. Her hands shook so hard she dropped her wand. Shaking her head to try to clear it, Hermione's hands slid up to clutch in the hair at her temples.

"What's wrong with her?" shouted Sirius, as he tried to go to her side only to be grabbed by both Harry and Remus as they desperately tried to keep the upset man away from her.

Severus watched from the doorway in growing horror as the brave young woman began to fall apart before his very eyes. "BLACK!" he bellowed. "For gods sakes' man, can't you see you're hurting her? Get out! Get out that door now! If you must speak to her, fine! Leave the door open, but get outside the fucking wards, you bloody imbecile!"

Black's eyes flashed to the hated Potions Professor in rage. Even in his fury, he noticed two things. Hermione had fallen to her knees whimpering, and despite Snape's obvious fury and apparent desperate desire to stride into the room and throw Sirius out, Snape was staying resolutely outside the wards. Sirius looked to Remus in confusion.

"He's telling you the truth, Sirius. Get outside the wards now! Go with Harry!" pleaded Lupin. Sirius reluctantly allowed Harry to lead him outside the door where the two men then hovered just beyond the wards. Lupin crouched beside Hermione as she knelt on the floor, rocking. He tried to call to her, but she didn't hear him. Looking to Severus, where he leaned with both hands on the doorjamb leading to his sitting room, Remus said, "I'll go out now, Severus...she needs you, I think."

Giving Lupin a quick nod of the head as his response, Severus waited until Lupin had crossed the wards before advancing to Miss Granger's side. Kneeling, he called softly, "Miss Granger? Miss Granger? Hermione...it's all right now...everything will be all right now."

Hermione eventually opened her eyes. Staring into his worried gaze for a moment, she flung herself into his arms, sobbing. Standing, Severus lifted the weeping young woman in his arms and carried her to the window seat. He sat with her in his lap, cradled tightly to his chest as he murmured softly to her. "You'll be fine, Miss Granger. Everything will be fine. You're quite safe now."

The expressions on the three men outside the door were very different. One held blunt shock, one a soft smile, and one a look akin to envy. Smiling still, Remus reached in far enough to gently close the door.

"Are we just going to leave her in there...like that...with him?" growled Sirius.

"He's helping her," Remus began sternly, "and you have caused her enough grief for one night."

"But...why was he being so...nice...to her?" Sirius asked in honest confusion.

"Sirius," Harry said softly, "you're my godfather, and I love you...but one of these days you are going to have to grow up. Even a blind man can see that Professor Snape is concerned for her." Harry and Remus firmly led their gobsmacked friend away.

Back on the window seat, Hermione recovered rapidly. Drying her eyes with a handkerchief that Professor Snape had managed to snag from his trouser pocket, Hermione gave him a serious look and said, "I tried to make him leave, Professor."

"I know you did, Miss Granger, and very formidable you were, as well. Pity you were not able to follow through on the hexing; I would've enjoyed seeing that," Severus said with amused admiration. His face fell into a slight scowl as he continued, "Despite my best efforts to the contrary, you seem to be making a habit of accosting me, Miss Granger."

Not quite succeeding in biting back a giggle, Hermione disengaged herself from her Professor's lap. "Thank you, Professor," she said quietly, "it really does help."

Standing, Severus was about to reply when there came a sharp knock on the door. He scowled for a moment, then strode to open it, muttering, "If it's that fool Black again, I'll hex him myself!" Pulling the door open suddenly, his snide retort died on his lips. Standing in the doorway was a woman he had never seen before. Looking him over from head to toe, she gave him a wide and slightly mischievous grin.

The Firewalker had arrived.

The Firewalker

Chapter 9 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

A/N: Anyone interested in the meaning of some of Andrene's words can find definitions in this entry of my LJ: <http://www.livejournal.com/users/plaidpooka/8529.html>

Severus studied the odd woman intently before allowing her in the room. The Firewalker had skin as dark as the wood of his mahogany desk; white teeth gleaming in sharp contrast as grinned at him mischievously. A blue scarf was wrapped around her head in a band, forcing her short hair--already twisted into dreadlocks--to stand up every which way. Andrene Christy appeared perhaps sixty years old, almost as tall as he was, and so skinny she made him look filled out (perhaps a first in his life). She wore a short knit top--a riot of orange and yellow exposing her midriff, prominent ribs, and a multitude of tattoos (darker even than her skin) weaving around her torso in graceful swirled patterns. A cotton skirt hung low on her hips, light blue with an almost web-like pattern of darker blue over it. An array of silver jewelry completed her outfit: earrings, necklaces, anklets, and silver bangles enough to rival Trelawney. Severus noticed even her sandaled feet had silver bands flashing on her toes. The Firewalker had obviously floo'd directly from her home. Severus was surprised she wasn't freezing down here in the dungeons; if she was cold, she did not show it.

Andrene did not mind his close scrutiny, nor did she mind being kept waiting in the hall. His study gave the Firewalker time to study him as well. *Coo pon him! Standing in the doorway like a guard. Mebbe he is at that. He's a tall man, he is. Why is the child living in his rooms? Is she his boopsie? He acts it, standing there like it's up to him whether I come in or go. He'll be a boderation for certain and I don have the time. Got to get dis girl set right and get me home.*

Having been a Firewalker since she was seven years old, Andrene focused her inner attention on the formidable man before her, slipping her focus through the wards Albus and Minerva had so carefully prepared. Reading his emotions easily, Andrene was surprised at what she found. The man was suspicious of her, distrustful--that was understandable. The wall of protectiveness was much stronger than she expected; probing gently beneath it, she searched out the reasons this scowling man was so protective of the girl. *Ahhh...there 'tis; pride, respect, affection, wistfulness, but no possessiveness. The girl is not his boopsie then, though it clear the man is in love with her. That's why she's living here; the girl would feel safer with this black robed rat-bat than anyone.* Amused, she widened her gamin grin, her enjoyment growing as she felt how uncomfortable this made the man. With an inward sigh, she realized she'd better use her tourist English for these people. They'd never understand her Patois. "Are you going to stand there like Merlin guarding Nimue's cave, or will you eventually ask me in?"

"You are Andrene Christie," Severus said. It was not a question.

"You are Professor Severus Snape. Now that we both know who we are, may I meet Miss Hermione?"

Reluctantly, Severus moved out of the doorway and allowed the Firewalker to enter. Finding herself staring at the woman in confusion, Hermione closed her mouth with a snap, embarrassed to have been so rude. The Firewalker simply gave her a friendly smile and a calculating appraisal. Andrene said gently, "What puzzles you, girl? Don't be afraid to be honest with me; we are going to have to be mighty honest with each other to get you sorted out."

"Well...it's just..." Hermione began hesitantly, "you don't feel like anything!" she finally blurted out.

Far from being offended, Andrene threw her head back and laughed. It was a rich, merry sound that echoed through the room. "Oh, Miss Hermione, but you are a fast one! You've begun figuring things out your own self, I see. You are not frightened of this gift?"

"No, but I find it difficult and confusing at times."

"That we can deal with, my brave girl, and we'll start right now. You cannot feel my emotions because I have walls up to protect you as well as myself. You've already experienced how difficult it is to go with no protections. I'm here to teach you these things." Seeing Hermione's wary look, the Firewalker laughed again. "You, child, are already learning to depend upon your gift. It is difficult to trust someone you cannot feel, isn't it?"

Hermione blushed in embarrassment, but remembering the older woman's words about honesty, she answered with just that. "Yes, it is."

"Feel me then, Hermione," said the Firewalker, dropping her wards.

Curious, Hermione concentrated on what she could feel. Mouth dropping open in shock, she stood gaping at the woman for some time. The Firewalker felt like the sun rising on a dark, cold morning to shine and warm the world. Love, kindness, and joy washed over Hermione in waves. Without thinking about it, she ran right up to the older woman who folded her securely into a tight hug. "All will be well, little girl," Andrene said softly. "I know you've had a hard time of it, but all will be well, I promise you. We just need a little time and a little work."

Severus had stood quietly watching the scene before him unfold. He had been very distrustful of the tall Jamaican. In his defense, he was both a Slytherin and a spy; trust was a good way get killed. So he stood there, appearing calm but inwardly as taut as a drawn bow, ready to protect his student if the Firewalker was not what she seemed. Watching Miss Granger dash up to hug the woman, and hearing the older woman's gentle words, Severus let his tense muscles relax. Nodding once to himself, he turned to slip out the door leading to the rest of his chambers.

Noticing his sneaky exit, Andrene called him back. "Professor Snape, you should stay, man. Tonight all we will do is discuss the gift and the things Hermione needs to learn. Your Headmaster tells me that you are at war."

"We are," Severus replied curtly, still standing at the door to his sitting room.

"Even down in my Jamaica I have heard of your enemy. We have had our own troubles with downpressors, and the one you face is a dogheart man for certain. It may be that this girl's gift may be a help to you. Stay and learn so that you can think on it."

With a nod to the Firewalker, Severus re-entered the room, sitting in one of the chairs before the fire. The women sat together on the sofa. Severus conjured tea for the three of them and, after the tea was poured, Andrene began.

"Hermione, you English are so polite...too much so I think. First I tell you that if you do not understand, or you have a question, you should interrupt me. I can only stay a week here with you, then I must be getting myself home."

"I'm supposed to learn everything in a week?" Hermione asked incredulously.

The Firewalker laughed again, the sweet sound echoing off the stone walls. "My girl, it will take you all your life to truly learn what you can do. I will teach you the building blocks; what you make of it is up to you." Taking a sip, she continued, "I will start with what you can do. Your gift allows you three main powers. They may seem simple on the surface, but a good Empath can accomplish a great deal with them. Empaths make excellent diplomats and arbiters--their gifts make it easier for them to get to the heart of a matter and make it very hard for them to be fooled. Empaths also make excellent spies," she said, with a saucy wink at the startled Potions master.

"What are the three things?" Hermione asked, intrigued.

"The first you are already aware of, overly so, I am thinking," Andrene said with a chuckle. "You can feel the emotions of those around you. The second is related to the first: you will be able to tell when someone is lying."

To this point, Severus had been trying to stay out of the discussion. With Andrene's last comment he could not hold back a disbelieving snort.

"I assure you it is quite true, winjy man. When an Empath knows what they about, it is more certain than your truth-getting potion. It's better 'cause you are not needing to make anyone drink it. It's sneakier 'cause they not even knowing you're doing it!" Seeing the man still looked at her in disbelief, Andrene decided to have some fun with him. "I am happy to show you...tell me four true things and one false one."

Interested despite himself, Severus gave the odd woman a calculating look while he considered it. "My name is Severus Draconis Snape. Though I teach Potions here at Hogwarts, I desire the Defense Against the Dark Arts position. I am the sole heir to a rather abysmal family estate in Spain. I find your manner of dress atrocious and I look forward to having my study once again to myself."

Laughing, Andrene replied, "Truth, truth and lie, truth, truth, half-truth, you sly devil. Albus warned me about you Slytherin. I now warn you, you hard-eared man, it is a fool who lies to an Empath and thinks he get away with it."

"Indeed," was the only answer Severus gave, though he regarded the Empath with far more respect than he had previously.

"What is the third thing an Empath can do?" asked Hermione.

"You can project an emotion onto others. This may be the most powerful gift the Firewalker possesses. With your projection, you can calm folks who are upset, give comfort to the grieving, give hope to the downpressed. It can be used for defense as well. You can throw such fear at an attacker that he flee in horror. But I warn you girl, this will not take the place of your magic in a fight. All peoples react differently to emotions and some will not react the way you expect."

"I'm not sure I understand," began Hermione. "Take fear for example--won't most people react the same way?"

Chuckling again, Andrene replied, "Trouble no set like rain. You will never know how each person will react and there won't be no storm clouds to warn you until they storm

is atop you." Eyeing the black-robed wizard with frank speculation, she continued, "I think I could give you a good demonstration, if you be willing."

While Hermione gave a hearty 'yes,' Severus conceded with a small, silent nod of his head. It was obvious the Professor was curious, but cautious, as well. Taking but a moment to still her mind, the Firewalker then proceeded to strike them with as much raw fear as she thought prudent. Hermione and her Professor reacted in ways that were as opposite as any for which the Firewalker could've hoped. It made an impressive demonstration of the point she was trying to teach her young student. Hermione jumped to her feet, and with only a moment's hesitation, ducked behind Professor Snape. Snape stood as well, but did not retreat. Firmly standing his ground, he drew his wand and leveled it at Andrene's face. His features were calm, but his eyes blazed with ferocity. This is not a man I want to be on the wrong side of, Andrene thought. Even in his fear he is strong. He only looks winy, dat man is a force of nature I am not wanting to cross. Abruptly, Andrene stopped projecting. Peeking around the veritable wall of black robes that was her professor, Hermione sheepishly returned to her seat beside the Firewalker. Sheathing his wand in his sleeve, Severus sat as well, his expression remaining calm. Probing his feelings lightly, Andrene felt how much his inability to resist reacting to her projection had unsettled him.

"You are a formidable man, Severus Snape," Andrene said with frank approval. "I would not want to be that dogheart man you fight when you decide to go a-knocking on his door. He better have eyes in the back of him head or him be a duppy before he know what hit him," she concluded with a friendly smile at the tense man.

Forcing himself to relax, Severus attempted to forgive himself for being unable to withstand the Empath's demonstration. At least he had not made a complete and utter fool of himself. The open admiration with which the Firewalker addressed him did much to calm him, despite understanding only about half of her speech. It was an intriguing demonstration--if Hermione were capable of learning such a skill, and learn it quickly enough to wield it when the Dark Lord ultimately made his move, it could prove to be useful, indeed.

"Hermione," Andrene continued, "I expect you see the danger now in assuming you will know how folks will react. If you project fear at a hundred men, they will react in a hundred ways. An if you be very unlucky, one of them might react like your Professor, and instead of avoiding a fight, you will be in a worse one than you expected."

Looking at Severus with wide, appraising eyes, Hermione said in all sincerity, "I believe I'd rather fight Voldemort!"

Severus' laugh rang through the room.

Oddly enough, the rather harsh demonstration brought three radically different people closer together, rather than driving them apart. For a moment, the two women sat chatting about inconsequential things while Severus stared into his tea cup, lost in thought. Eventually Andrene returned the discussion to the matter at hand. "The night slips by and I am sleepy, I am. Before I rest these bones I must tell you, girl, that being an Empath isn't all easy and safe. I expect you are knowing part of this already?"

"It was horrible at first," confessed Hermione in a quiet voice. "I tried so hard to ignore it, but I couldn't focus on anything else. I didn't know what was going on--thought I was barking mad there for awhile. Even after Headmaster Dumbledore explained it to me, there've been times..." Her soft voice trailed off, remembering with fear the way she'd completely broken down--despite the best efforts of a rational mind--when Sirius had furiously entered the room earlier.

Taking the distressed girl's hand and squeezing it tightly, Andrene said, "Don't let it get to you, girl. That is why I am here, to teach you how to protect yourself. What you went through is the greatest danger a Firewalker faces. One who is untrained--or careless--can be literally overcome by the emotions of those around her. It makes you helpless and it will drive you mad. There is no cure for a Firewalker who runs mad, so it is of grave importance, girl, that you take the lessons I give you seriously."

For the first time, Severus interrupted the Firewalker to make a comment. "I assure you, Madame Christie, that Miss Granger is the most serious of students--some times too much so, in my opinion. I imagine that your only difficulty will be to quiet her constant questions long enough to teach her anything at all." Though he said this in the most serious tones, both the women easily picked up on his inner amusement and chuckled at his teasing. Instead of irritating the dour-seeming spy, Severus' eyes got a slight look of pleased wonder. It was refreshing indeed to be seen as the man he was, rather than the persona he was avowed to portray until the Dark Lord at last fell. Dangerous, perhaps...but refreshing.

Returning to her explanation, Andrene continued, "When I walked in the room tonight, you felt nothing, nuh true?"

Nodding, Hermione answered, "It was very confusing...you didn't feel like anything at all."

"I had my wards up full strong. I wanted to get a look at how you were doing before I lowered them at all. When I found you not only sane, but inquisitive, I knew dropping them would nuh harm you. Your friends have protected you well," she said, raising a knowing look to the Potions Professor. Feeling his instant unease, Andrene took pity on the man and returned her gaze to her student.

"Everyone has been very kind," Hermione said. "I've caused Professor Snape no end of trouble." There were many replies to this statement that Severus considered making. Deciding that all were equally dangerous, in one way or another, he held his tongue.

"The personal ward I had raised does two things," Andrene continued. "When it is all the way up, I can feel no one else's emotions, nor can they feel mine."

"Is that very important?" Hermione asked, tilting her head in thought. "If Empaths are so rare, you must not need to block your own emotions from others with any frequency."

"Ahh...you are a clever girl! But there are other reasons to block your own emotions, Miss Hermione. That brings us to the second greatest danger an Empath faces...the Dementors. They will flock to you now like a bat to a flame and they will make you helpless faster than you can say Expecto Patronum. However, though you are most at risk, with your protections you are also most protected. Tell me girl, if your wall is up full strength, and none of your feelings are getting through, what will this do to the Dementors?"

Thinking only for a moment, Hermione blurted out in pleased surprise, "They wouldn't even know you were there!"

"Exactly," beamed the pleased Firewalker, "they feed off emotions, an that's how they see, too. They would take no more notice of you than if you were a nanny goat."

So ended serious discussion for the evening. The three drank tea and chatted companionably--the women, rather--the black-robed man mostly listened, a slightly bemused smirk playing about his lips. When Turpin rushed in to greet the new visitor, Andrene took no more offense to his rough talk than Hermione had. In fact, despite Severus' grumbling that she shouldn't encourage the Jarvey to bad habits, Andrene began teaching the overgrown weasel to curse in Jamaican. Turpin scurried merrily about shouting phrases like "bumbo clot," and calling his master a "sanfi bitch."

Eventually Severus took his leave and headed off to bed, leaving Hermione alone with the Firewalker as her caretaker. Molly Weasley would not be coming anymore; for the week the Firewalker would be residing at Hogwarts, she would be with Hermione twenty-four hours a day. The need for the Order to find companions for Hermione was over. Hermione felt two ways about this--on the one hand, she was glad to stop being a bother (and instead learn how to control her new gift)...on the other, she'd so hoped to spend time with Professor Snape this weekend. Sighing, Hermione drifted off to sleep in her transfigured cot, reflecting on how it had felt to be cradled on her snarky Professor's lap earlier in the evening. She fell asleep with a slight grin on her face.

Confessions

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Saturday morning found Harry and Ron lying on their backs in the grassy middle of the Quidditch pitch. They'd just finished a rousing game of "catch the snitch," and it felt good just to lie back for a moment in the autumn sunshine. It seemed the two young men were resting in companionable silence, yet one was simply working up the nerve to begin a discussion he'd been avoiding all week.

"Harry, why is it that you never tell me how Hermione is doing?" Ron asked. "I know you've seen her every day, but you never tell me about it."

Harry gave a resigned sigh. "Listen Ron, I know you care about Hermione as much as I do...and I should've probably told you about...things. Honestly, I've had my hands full with Sirius and I was only trying to avoid any more shouting in my life."

"Harry, I'm not a temperamental thirteen year-old anymore. I can't make any promises, but I will at least try not to shout at you. Did Snape...did he treat her badly, then?" Ron asked softly.

"No! Not at all. I'm afraid that's why I thought you'd start shouting. I...er...think he rather...likes...Hermione."

Ron didn't exactly shout; his voice raised a notch and became a bit high and squeaky. "Likes? What do you mean *likes*? Are you telling me the git *fancies* Hermione?"

"Look, I don't know! It's not like he's going to tell *me*, is it--the boy he wishes he could get expelled? It's just obvious he likes her, that's all."

"How do you know? Has he been making passes at her? Did he try to snog her? Because if he's acting like that we ought to tell..."

"It's not like that, Ron," Harry said in exasperation. "He's her Professor and an Order member; it's not like he's going to make a pass at her. He's just been...well...he's been nice to her."

"You must be joking!" Sitting up, Ron gave Harry a frankly incredulous look. "That man isn't nice to anyone! What's he been doing?"

"Don't worry, it's not too bad. He still acts the git a bit, or so Hermione says. But he...well, he lets her read all his books; he lets her use his things and his desk. Hermione said he threw an absolute eppy when he found out Dumbledore decided to use his study without asking him, but he yelled at Dumbledore--not Hermione--and then he told Hermione she could make herself at home."

"Do you suppose he's turned into one of those pod people? Like that Muggle movie you told me about?" Though it seemed a silly question, the expression on Ron's face suggested he might be considering this as a serious possibility.

"I think it's far worse than that. I think he really likes her. And I'm beginning to suspect we don't really know him all that well. There's another thing...er...how is the not shouting going?"

"I'll manage," Ron growled.

"Hermione said he lets her hug him when she's upset," Harry said in a rush.

"He WHAT?" All right--a little shout. Not too bad really. Harry can't be too upset with that...it was a bit of a shock. Calm...stay calm. "Uh...does he hug her back?" Ron asked, getting a trifle nauseous at the thought.

"No. And what's more, I'm a bit concerned about the fact that Hermione sounded a touch disappointed when she told me he didn't. She says he just pats her shoulder a bit and acts as if he's never been hugged before."

"That's not hard to imagine," hissed Ron, abruptly lying back and closing his eyes.

"All right, Ron?" asked Harry. Ron was not reacting as expected and Harry was a bit worried.

"Shut up, Harry. Let me think!" was the only response. Ron lay in silence for some time. Restless, Harry sat up and stared at his red-headed friend. With a sigh, Ron at last opened his eyes and sat up, regarding Harry seriously.

"Look Harry," he began quite calmly, "the thought of Hermione with Snape rather makes me sick. He's old...he's ugly...and I still think he's a right bastard--no matter how nice he's been to her lately. But even with all that, it might be for the best, as far as Hermione's concerned."

"How can you say that!" This time it was Harry's turn to shout.

"Just hear me out. I've been worried about Hermione. It's hard times, Harry, and there's no telling how bad it's going to get. It's dangerous times for Hermione especially. Not only is she a Muggle-born, she received top grades in the whole school on her O.W.L.S. She'll probably do just as well on her N.E.W.T.S. Can you imagine what the Death Eaters think about that? She's a poster child for why their whole cause is complete and utter tripe! Add that to the fact that she's best friends with 'The Boy Who Lived' and she might well be a walking target. She's pretty safe here at Hogwarts, but even here she isn't completely safe."

"What has that got to do with Snape?"

"As much as I can't stand the greasy git, he's a bloody powerful wizard and sly as hell. If he really does care for her--and from what you've told me, it seems he may--then we couldn't ask for a better watchdog. Anyone who wants to get to Hermione will have to get through him, and he's damn formidable." Ron still didn't look like he liked the idea, but he seemed resigned to it.

"I hadn't thought of it like that, Ron," Harry said quietly. "I don't like the notion any more than you, but if it helps Hermione..."

"If it helps Hermione, then we'd better get used to the idea," finished Ron with a grimace.

By lunchtime, Ron and Harry heard the Firewalker had arrived. So it was no surprise to see Professor Snape taking lunch in the Great Hall. Ron and Harry exchanged a look, but they couldn't discuss the matter of Hermione's 'illness' in front of the other students. While Harry kept his speculations to himself, he couldn't keep his eyes from wandering up to the black-robed Professor at the Head Table. Ron's right, Harry thought, the man wasn't pretty, and he certainly has distinct bastard tendencies. Yet even now, when Snape wasn't doing anything more dashing than stabbing half-heartedly at his salad, Harry still found him a touch oddly attractive. It was rather distressing.

"Harry," hissed Ron, "I think you'd best stop making eyes at Snape. Your boyfriend is looking daggers at you."

"I was NOT making eyes at Snape!" Harry hissed back. He snuck a look at the Slytherin table. Damn! Draco was indeed trying to catch his eye--and he didn't look at all pleased. As Harry finally looked at him, Draco stared a moment, then slicked his hair back with his right hand. Not a very sneaky signal, but then, they were only supposed to pretend to be sneaky. "Looks like I've got a fight scheduled in the Quidditch shed," Harry sighed.

"Give 'im hell, Harry," Ron mumbled around a mouthful of chicken.

When Harry entered the Quidditch shed and closed the door, he quickly found himself pressed against the door--and not in a good way. Wand already drawn, Draco hit the door with both a locking and silencing charm before he turned angry eyes on Harry.

"Just what the bloody hell do you think you're doing, Potter?" he snarled.

Harry pushed Draco away and stepped farther into the shed. "Look Malfoy," Harry said angrily, "there's really no reason for you to be upset, I haven't *done* anything! You've no call to get jealous."

Draco's eyes widened in surprise. Making a valiant effort to stay serious--which failed miserably--the blond-haired young wizard dissolved into a rather girly fit of giggles. "Jealous? You thought I was jealous of *Uncle Severus*? That's the most hysterical thing I've ever heard! Here I thought you were trying to get Snape into trouble again, and instead, I find out you've finally discovered my uncle is a bit dishy!"

Instead of defusing the situation, Draco's raucous laughter only proved to make Harry both confused and angrier. "What the hell are you on about? I never said I thought Snape was...anything!" he finished a bit lamely.

"You didn't have to say anything, you daft hinny!" Draco said with affection. "But true or no, you are going to have to keep your eyes off him if you can't manage a decent sneer." Crossing to where Harry stood glowering, Draco wrapped his arms firmly about Harry's waist and brought his forehead to rest against the Gryffindor's.

"So, Draco," Harry began, pouting prettily, "exactly why is it that you aren't jealous to find me ogling another man?"

"I'm hardly going to go ballistic over a little ogle. Now if any of those imbeciles dares touch you I'll happily hex their balls off. Not that I have to worry about that with Snape; he's the straightest wizard I know. But honestly Harry, you can't let Crabbe and Goyle catch you looking at him like that. You're supposed to hate him, and he can't afford any more trouble right now."

"Is it bad then, with Voldemort?" Harry asked seriously.

"It's always bad with that bastard. He hasn't really trusted Snape since he came back this time. He's always finding some reason to punish Uncle Severus at the meetings."

"Is Snape brave?"

Draco laughed. "He's the bravest man I know, but if you're asking if he acts all strong and brave when Voldemort uses Cruciatus on him, the answer is no. He's far too smart for that. If he acted all manly about it, he'd be punished more and the Dark Lord would trust him even less. Voldemort doesn't want people around who threaten his power; he wants a bunch of spineless yes-men. Snape can withstand Cruciatus for twenty minutes without making a sound--I've seen him test it--but Voldemort would never suspect he has that kind of strength."

"You must be joking? Twenty minutes? Most wizards don't last five! What does he do then, when he's punished?"

"Uncle Severus could've been a Muggle actor...he's fucking brilliant. He pretends to try to withstand it for about thirty seconds, then throws himself to the ground writhing and screaming. I don't think he's had to do more than a few minutes, no matter how angry Voldemort is. Then Voldemort gets off on telling Snape how weak and stupid he is and Snape doesn't have to spend a week recuperating from it when he's got work to do."

"It's getting more dangerous for both of you, isn't it? I know our supposedly fake relationship has convinced them to hold off giving you the dark mark--so I won't get 'suspicious'--but maybe it's too dangerous, Draco. I wish you'd just stay here and be safe. The Order has Snape spying for them, why do they need you as well?"

"Harry, Snape's been spying for seventeen years. He's damn good and he's damn clever, but every day his life hangs by a fucking thread. If he's found out--which is a growing possibility--I'll be the only spy the Order has left." Tugging Harry's head down to rest on his shoulder, Draco continued, "Besides, so long as I'm feeding them information--or misinformation, as the case may be--on the insufferable Harry Potter, I'll be safe enough."

"Do you have the portkey I made you?" Harry asked softly.

"Always."

"You promise me, Draco...you promise me you'll use it if you have to."

"You bet your sweet arse I will," replied Draco, giving the body part in question a squeeze. "I'm not stupid, Harry. I want to do my bit--it's important to me--but when that final battle happens, I don't want to be dead from some Death Eater meeting gone wrong. I want to fight by your side, love, where I belong."

Using his unexpectedly free Saturday to catch up on some potion work for Madame Pomfrey, Severus kept himself too busy to spend much time musing on the events of the past week. When he found himself thinking about the young Gryffindor, he chopped, sliced, or ground a bit more intensely, until his mind was once again focused on the task at hand. Twice during the day his knife slipped, piercing a long pale finger rather than the intended ingredient. The second time, Severus stared at the wounded digit as blood ran down his hand, puddling on the table top. His expression was both puzzled and distracted. Severus couldn't remember a time his knife had slipped, now he'd done it twice in a single afternoon. The most recent slip had sliced through the pad of his index finger, clear down to the bone. Eventually Severus raised his wand and closed the wound with an offhand motion. Surprised by the amount of blood on the table, he dealt with it in the same distracted manner. Taking a silver pocket watch from his trouser pocket, he noted the lateness of the hour. Perhaps it was time he called it a day; he was obviously tired--it was the only explanation for his unprecedented clumsiness.

Once in his dungeon chambers, Severus ignored the door leading to his study. *Miss Granger is no longer any of my concern, and that is for the best*, he told himself. *As...tolerable...as Miss Granger's company is, there is absolutely no sense in continuing an...acquaintance...that can have no possible future. Damn and blast! This is ridiculous! How in the hell can it be possible for me to miss her company on one bloody day's separation! Why should I? The girl is an obnoxious, opinionated, noisy, distracting, bossy, foolish, Gryffindor know-it-all. Damn.* Unfortunately, a completely different set of adjectives came to mind, describing her equally well: brilliant, kind, humorous, lovely...*FUCK! This isn't helping.*

In an attempt to calm his thoughts, Severus took what solace he could from preparing a pot of tea. He neither conjured a cup nor floo'd the kitchens; fine tea must be brewed as precisely as the most delicate potion, if one wants to experience the tea's flavor at its best. He pre-warmed the china pot before adding the hot water and loose tea leaves from a tin of his favorite Darjeeling. While most of England favored the China black teas, Severus preferred the more delicate, and yet more complex, flavor of the India teas. Oh, he liked the china greens as well, especially Gunpowder, and he liked the semi-fermented Formosa Oolong, but when disheartened, he always reached for the calming familiarity of the Darjeeling. To the solitary man, the routine motions of the brewing--as well as the comforting scent and taste--were more like a form of meditation than the simple preparation of a beverage.

Tonight his tea brewing ritual did not bring him any peace. Severus sat on his bed, leaning against the headboard in his plain black dressing gown, and allowed himself to think about the matter he'd done his best to avoid all day. *Why is it that suddenly this situation has become a problem? I've had feelings for the chit since about half-way through her sixth year, but I've never had any trouble keeping it buried in the back of my mind. Is it because she's of age? I really don't think that's it; the reasons I cannot allow myself to pursue Hermione have nothing to do with her age and those reasons still apply whether she's seventeen or not. It must be harder to ignore simply because I've been forced more into her company...and maybe the cuddling...and the hugs. Those damn hugs! I don't think I've ever been hugged before in my life. Oh, certainly I know the feel of a woman's arms around me--though there's been precious little of that since Voldemort returned--but a simple hug? An embrace that is meant solely to*

give or receive comfort rather than some type of foreplay? Not even Minerva hugs me, though she does give me a peck on the cheek or the forehead from time to time. I'm not really all that huggable, I suppose, yet Hermione doesn't seem to realize that. She's hugged me four times, and I think one of those she meant for my comfort instead of her own. And just look what it's done to me! One day, without her voice...without her smile. One blasted day without one of her stupid fucking hugs and I feel like busting down the door to my study and demanding...demanding what, exactly? Demanding she waste her time on a bitter old man who is as good as dead? Demand she give me her heart so I can leave her bereft and alone when I do not survive this thrice cursed war? No. I can do that no more than I can be selfish enough to endanger her life by allowing anything to happen between us. I've lived thirty-eight years without hugs. I believe I can manage this last one as well.

Finishing his tea, Severus removed his dressing gown and slid beneath the cool sheets. Hours passed before he at last slipped into a fitful sleep haunted by disquieting dreams.

Hot and Spicy

Chapter 11 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

On Sunday, Andrene and Hermione continued their lessons. They'd spent all day Saturday working on what Andrene called the most important skill a Firewalker possessed: the warding wall that would both tune out the emotions of others and keep Hermione's own emotions from being read.

"I understand it is important, Andrene, but surely it is not the most important thing I can do? I mean...it doesn't even do anything! It's just a buffer to protect me, isn't it?"

"Yes, that is true enough, as far as it goes, girl. But don't be thinkin' that this is only to keep the madness at bay; you are goin' ta need that buffer everyday of your life if you don't want ta turn into a hard-hearted woman. Blouse and skirt, girl! Do you think it's going to be a fun thing to always be knowing what other's feel about you?"

Her eyes opening wide in surprise, Hermione was shocked she'd never given this particular aspect of her gift much thought.

"It's a powerful useful thing to be able to know how others feel, and to see the truth in men's hearts--even when they use honeyed false words to your face. But it is a hard thing, girl, to always know what other's feel about you. You know that there are people in your life that just don't like you; that's normal. But how shall you feel when you find out that boy or girl that you always thought liked you just fine wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire?"

"It will upset me," Hermione said in naked honesty.

"Yes, child, yes it will. You listen to me, girl, and you listen good. We got no time for you to go all hard-ears on me. You will find out that in each person's life they find three kinds of people: they is a few that will hate you, they is a few that will love you, an all the masses in between couldn't care less about you one way or the other. It's important for you to remember that this is normal for all peoples, not just Empaths. You will think for a while that you are the most unloved girl in the universe, but that is not true. We all of us have those few who do, those few who don't, and all them folks who can't make up they minds."

Brightening a bit, Hermione chuckled at the Firewalker's blunt speech. "I will remember that, Andrene."

Chuckling as well, Andrene replied, "See that you do. Keep your wards up unless you need to know something. Besides, girl, all those folks who could care less about you, you probably don't give much of a damn about them either. Don't seek to have the masses love you girl, it would be nothing but work and trouble if they did. Just take comfort in the few who love you as you is. They the only folks who matter."

"There is another thing that will cause you trouble, Hermione. You will find that even the folks who love you will not always want your help. This can be maddening, to know that there is someone who is hurting and to have your concern turned away. This gift comes with great responsibility. You must use it when you can to help others, but you must remember that not all others will want your help, and that is their decision to make. You can not force them and--in the end--you are not responsible for any life but your own."

"Andrene, why in the world would anyone refuse something that would help them?"

"People are not made of logic, girl. They are mixed up, emotional creatures. Don't try to figure them out, just try to accept that all any of us can do is try to muddle through life the best we can."

"I will try, Andrene," Hermione said with a sigh.

"You are doing very well at keeping a gentle level of the buffering ward up all the time. Now I want you to focus on making it as strong as you can, visualize it as a wall around you that none can breach. Do you see it?"

Looking calmly at the older woman, Hermione nodded her head. She could feel the ward around her; almost see it crackling with energy.

"Right then," Andrene continued. "I am going to project at you, as I did the other night. Focus on keeping me out." Gazing at Hermione intently, the Firewalker projected strong fear at the girl, and felt it meeting and beating itself against the young Gryffindor's protective ward. Her student was doing quite well; the ward was strong and held steady. It was time to see how well she focused when distracted. Inwardly, Andrene chuckled at the subtle trick she would use against her student. Still projecting fiercely, Andrene said, "You are a quick study. Your winy looking Professor was quite right in what he said of you. He is an interesting man, is he not? Why, if I were a few years younger, I'd be trying to see if he is really the grindsman he looks..."

Hermione's ward abruptly failed, allowing the fear Andrene was projecting to wash over her in strong waves. Unable to either raise her wards or ignore her reaction, Hermione retreated with a startled cry. Stopping the projection, Andrene regarded her student with kind, yet serious eyes. "This shows you two things girl. It is imperative you keep working on your focus. If you want to help those you love in this war, you cannot afford to let anything break your concentration. It is also important to remember how very easy it is for an Empath to use a person's emotions against them. Think before you act. Think before you speak. Do not seek to manipulate a person just because you can."

Blushing, Hermione stammered, "Am I so...transparent then?"

The Firewalker's laugh echoed through the room. "To me girl, you is as hard to see through as glass! But I would not be fretting about it girl. Your Professor is an observant man for certain, but he is hopelessly obtuse where you be concerned."

"Andrene, what does he feel about me?" Hermione asked softly.

"Now if I were to be answering that, I be cheating for certain. That man is a good test for you; he hide his emotions almost from him own self. You wish to read him, then you'll be working on your lessons harder than I could ever convince you. Make my job dead easy, it does!" Andrene finished with another rich laugh.

"You are positively wicked!" Hermione said with a chuckle of her own.

"Ain't I just?" The two women laughed for a moment, then returned to work. By the end of the afternoon, Hermione could keep her protective wall at full strength no matter how the Firewalker teased and tormented her.

When Turpin romped into the room about an hour before dinner, Andrene declared they'd worked enough for one day. Seating herself at the desk, Andrene wrote a letter home while Hermione and Turpin sat together at the window seat. Turpin was lying sprawled on his back and Hermione idly stroked his stomach while she read aloud to him from "The Hobbit." Turpin was thoroughly enchanted by the fact that the dwarves had taken Bilbo along with them in the position of 'Thief' and Hermione suspected Turpin wished he was along for the adventure.

Finishing her letter, Andrene quietly contemplated the young witch at the window. The girl is doing better than I could have hoped. I'll be back to my Jamaica by the end of the week for certain. The Firewalker's eyes narrowed for a moment. She does well, but something is distracting her and I need to be getting to the bottom of it before the girl starts learning to project. Though Hermione had her buffer up--something the Firewalker suggested she learn to sustain at all times--it was no longer at a level completely blocking all emotion. The experienced Empath had no trouble slipping her focus through the ward and gently probing the young woman's emotions. Strongest were eagerness and a gentle pride. She was enjoying her lessons then, but where is the problem? Andrene probed deeper. Ah...here it is...a bit of loneliness...a touch of wistfulness...why the girl is pining! I know she is intrigued by that black-eyed rat-bat, but are her feelings for him so strong that she pines for him after a separation of a brace of days? Hmm...that should be easy enough to find out...

Rising, Andrene walked over to the lounging pair at the window seat. Reaching a hand down, she tickled the half-dozing Jarvey. Sputtering and giggling uncontrollably, Turpin leapt to his feet to regard the Firewalker with surprised eyes.

"If you're going to be grabbing at me, you teasin' tart, why don't you have a go at me wedding tackle and have done with it?" Turpin said with an obvious leer at Andrene.

"Charming as the thought is," Andrene began, laughing, "I think I'll give it a pass. Do us a favor, you reprehensible weasel. Go ask your master to come here. Tell him it's a matter of life and death," she finished with a wink.

"Life and death, is it? Syphilis might hex you for teasing him...sounds like fun!" With a pointy-toothed grin, the Jarvey launched himself off the window seat and disappeared through the cat flap in the door leading to the rest of Professor Snape's rooms. Turpin must have been eloquent indeed, for--within moments--Severus burst through the door, wand drawn, robes billowing behind him. His look of concern quickly melted into one of puzzled displeasure when his penetrating glance took in no immediate danger. He focused his glare on the Firewalker calmly grinning at him.

"May I ask, Madame, if it isn't too much trouble," Severus hissed, "exactly why you have--with so little ceremony--distracted me from my work, when you obviously have no need of my presence?"

"Ah, but you are mistaken for certain, Professor, because we have desperate need of you. As important as Hermione's training is, two women stuck staring at each other while locked in a room for a whole week is bound to lead to nothing but badness. Won't you take dinner with us? You will save one of us from killing the other out of sheer boredom for certain!" Andrene finished with a grin.

"Though I understand the apprehension with which you face a whole week in the sole company of this foolish young Gryffindor," Severus sneered, "I fail to see that it is any concern of mine." Severus couldn't stop a quick glance at the Gryffindor in question. He was startled to note, in spite of his unwelcoming speech, Miss Granger simply regarded him with one of her beaming smiles. Damn and blast! Must the girl be forever smiling at him? It was almost as if she had missed him. Impossible! There was no way in hell such a lovely young witch could ever have actual feelings for an ugly, bitter, old man such as himself. She was most likely simply grateful that he'd been useful to her when she was in need. That must be it...gratitude...she was beaming at him with gratitude, nothing more. When she approached him, he was both hopeful and terrified that she intended to give him one of those nerve-wracking hugs. He was ashamed to find himself experiencing a rather crushing disappointment when Miss Granger simply rested a hand lightly on his arm.

"Won't you please stay, sir?" Hermione asked softly, looking up at him shyly. "I've missed our discussions."

Ah, he could understand that. An intelligent young witch like Hermione would miss intellectual discourse. Quite foolish, really, for him to have imagined she missed his person in any way. Severus tried to brush aside the ridiculous disappointment he felt at this realization. Looking down at her earnest face, Severus debated with himself. On the one hand, it wasn't prudent to submit to the torture of putting himself voluntarily too often in the young woman's company. On the other hand, he couldn't deny the fact he had missed her, and looking down at her hopeful expression was a bittersweet pleasure he did not wish to deny himself. With a gruff sigh, he gave Hermione a nod of agreement, not trusting his voice to not reveal too much. He was both pleased and distressed by the huge smile she gave him in answer. Removing her hand from his arm, he moved to the hearth, flooding the kitchens for their dinner.

Andrene had enjoyed their little exchange immensely. Blouse and skirt! You could practically see the sexual tension sparking between the two, the daft things. He was a stubborn man for certain; the little Firewalker was going to have her hands full with that one. It's just as well she's an Empath; she's likely the only woman around here that has a chance of figuring the secretive man out. Ha! She'll need her talents just to handle the mixed-up bubu. Here the girl had stared up at him--practically radiating something that was rapidly growing into adoration--and what the black-eyed man felt most was puzzlement and a rather hopeless longing. That man wears his solitude like armor; it will take the girl some time to worry a few chinks into it.

It took little time for the house elves to arrive and set up a table with enough of the usual Hogwarts fare for three. While Severus and Hermione began eating with enjoyment, Andrene picked at the English meal. Noticing her reluctance, Severus wondered if the skeletal woman always ate in such fashion, or if the food itself was the problem.

"Madame Christie, is anything amiss? If the food is not to your liking, I assure you it would be no trouble to request something else," Severus inquired politely.

"An get more of the same? No, thank you. Must you English boil everything?" she inquired with a good-natured chuckle. "And do you know there are spices other than salt and black pepper? Perhaps they are mystical here in Britain, but I am assuring you they exist for certain."

Severus did not attempt to hold back a chuckle of his own, and as he did so, he couldn't help but notice the pleased surprise washing over Miss Granger's face at the sound. "Ah...I see. I imagine you find our fare a bit bland."

"Cha! 'A bit bland.' That is like saying a three-day-dead fish is a bit renk. I've a mind to show you what you be missing." Rising, Andrene strode to the hearth, threw in a handful of floo powder, and after a clearly stated "Shorty's" she disappeared.

Turning to Miss Granger with an upraised eyebrow, Severus said, "I wonder what we can expect from a dining establishment named 'Shorty's.'" He managed to put an abundance of disdain into the restaurant's name. By the time Hermione's giggles had died down, the Firewalker had returned.

"Shorty's has the best jerk chicken in all of Negril," Andrene said proudly as she began to dish the food she had returned with onto each of their plates. Hermione looked at it with interest. There was a simple rice dish with an odd sort of spotted bean that Andrene referred to as 'rice and peas,' as well as the chicken dish.

Severus stabbed a small piece of the chicken with his fork, brought it up to his nose and sniffed it curiously. Lifting his eyebrows in pleased surprise, Severus popped the morsel into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "This is quite good, Madame Christie, thank you for fetching it." Popping a larger bite into his mouth, he closed his eyes in enjoyment; focusing intently on the unusual blend of flavors.

Emboldened by her Professor's example, Hermione took a large bite herself. Her face took on a look of complete shock. Sputtering, she barely got the bite swallowed before she grabbed her pumpkin juice and downed the entire glass. Amused, Severus calmly handed her his own glass of juice and went back to eating the fiery jerk chicken with obvious enjoyment. Andrene laughed heartily at her student's red, sweating face and suggested she try the rice and peas on its own. "That should be bland enough even for an Englishwoman."

That set a routine for the remainder of the week. Andrene and Hermione would work all day and then Severus would join them for dinner. Andrene always floo'd out to one restaurant or another and brought a wide array of spicy dishes back to share with Professor Snape. After the jerk chicken fiasco, Hermione predominantly stuck with food from the Hogwarts kitchens. Twice Severus tricked her into trying something Andrene had brought, telling her it wasn't terribly hot and then calmly handing her his glass of juice and chuckling as she sputtered. By Thursday night's dinner, Hermione had made enough progress in her studies that she could tell he was lying, thus ending his fun at her expense. On Friday night, Andrene brought an African dish called Doro Wot. Hermione didn't need to rely on her abilities to see that this dish wasn't for her. It was so hot the smell alone brought tears to her eyes. This dish proved to be Professor Snape's favorite, and he requested the restaurant's direction from Andrene before he left for the evening. Hermione simply didn't understand how he could eat the stuff. She rather thought one could use it to strip paint off walls.

On Saturday evening, as Hermione lay on her cot trying to get to sleep, she found she was rather sad. Andrene was leaving the next day; she said Hermione now knew all the building blocks of how to use her empathy--all she required was practice. She would miss the cheerful Firewalker. Trying to distract herself from thinking about Andrene's departure, Hermione decided to ask the Firewalker a question that had been bothering her all week.

"Andrene?" she called softly.

"Yes, child?"

"What's a grindsman?"

Andrene's throaty laugh echoed in the dark room. She had been expecting Hermione to ask this question since Sunday. "Well girl, a grindsman is a man who shows great prowess in bed."

While Hermione could not hold back a startled squeak, she blessed the darkness of the room for hiding the blush that she knew graced her features. Now she was even more distracted. It was a long time before Hermione at last slipped into sleep.

Goodbyes

Chapter 12 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Sitting on the window seat, Hermione quietly watched Andrene pack up her few belongings. It amazed her how close two people could grow in such a short time. Andrene had always been honest about the shortness of her visit, but Hermione felt a bit bereft now it was time for the Firewalker to leave.

Turning to regard her student kindly, Andrene walked over to the window seat and pulled Hermione onto her feet and into a tight hug. "Already you are missing me and I not even gone yet," she said with a soft chuckle.

"I will miss you, Andrene," Hermione said, hugging the older woman tightly. "I'm not sure I can handle all this without you."

"Now child, what sweet nanny goat a go run him belly! You might think it a great thing to stay hole up here with this old woman, but young woman needs more in life than this. You are free to see your friends now and go back to your classes, nuh true?"

"Yes, and I've missed them." Hermione looked up at Andrene with worry reflecting in her eyes. "What if I mess it all up, Andrene? I barely know what I'm doing!"

"I've told you before and I tell you again; all any of us can be doing is try muddle through this world the best we can. You are a kind girl, Hermione, with a good head on you shoulders. That salamander gave you this gift because your compassion for him plight was stronger than your fear of him. I'm thinking he couldn't have picked him a better person. I'm proud of you girl."

Eyes sparkling with unshed tears, Hermione smiled up at Andrene. "I'll try my best," she said softly.

"I know you will, girl. An you remember that I am only an owl or a floo away." Andrene chuckled again. "When you get a chance, you come visit my Negril; I'll take you out to Shorty's. We'll ask him make you something fit for an Englishwoman and watch him screw up his face."

"If worse comes to worse, Madame, Miss Granger can always eat rice and peas," a deep voice called from the doorway to Professor Snape's sitting room.

Eyeing with amusement the black-robed man hovering in the doorway, Andrene said, "Did you come to see me off then?"

"I came to celebrate the re-taking of my quarters," Severus retorted with a smirk, but he entered the room nonetheless, extending his hand to the Firewalker politely.

"When your damn war be over, an this girl comes to Shorty's to eat rice and peas, I hope I will see you there as well, young man," Andrene said, giving him that gamine grin he seemed to find so annoying. Noting his nearly playful mood plunge abruptly, Andrene continued in a more serious manner. "I do hope you realize, Severus, that your company would be welcome. I have enjoyed our dinners here very much and I have not even begun to show you all the tasty delights my Jamaica has to offer."

"I, too, have enjoyed our evenings, Andrene, but I doubt it will be possible for me to visit after the war." Severus released her hand and retreated nearer to his desk. His expression had reverted to its normal look of shuttered disdain.

Concerned, Andrene probed his feelings lightly. The whirling mixture of sorrow and determination confused the experienced Empath for a moment; until she remembered what Albus had said of the Potions Professor. Ah...yes. Chicken merry, hawk deh near. I've so enjoyed his company here in the safety of his chambers that I nearly forgot the man's a spy. I've not known a spy in my whole life that did not balk at making plans any further away than next week. They cannot afford to make such promises; they are a short-lived people. Smiling at him kindly, Andrene continued, "I ask no promises, Severus Snape, but time longer than rope. I will hope to see you there unless I be told it no longer possible."

For a moment, Severus gave the older woman a piercing look. His expression changed into a wistful smirk as he said--almost lightly--"Don't hold your breath, Firewalker."

This whole exchange succeeded only in confusing Hermione. Andrene had taught the young witch that being able to read the emotions of others was easy, interpreting them correctly would take her a lifetime to learn. Hermione couldn't have asked for a more perfect example of this very lesson. Andrene's mixture of affection, pity, and wistful hope--combined with her Professor's sudden bout of sorrow and determination--had Hermione so befuddled, she couldn't even hazard a guess at what was going through the two older wizards' minds. Whatever it was, it couldn't be good. The glance she cast over her Professor was filled with worry.

Finally, it came time for Andrene to leave. Giving her young student another firm hug, Andrene completely shocked Professor Snape by giving him the same treatment. Hermione couldn't stop an amused grin as she watched her Professor's eyes widen in shock when Andrene hugged him. She was then forced to bite back a chuckle as she saw Professor Snape give Andrene the same awkward shoulder pat that the young Gryffindor had so often been subjected to herself. Now that man obviously has never gotten enough hugs. I believe I ought to try to do something about that. I'm not the brightest witch of my age for nothing; if I can't figure out how to get more hugs into the man's life, I don't know who could. Hmm...sounds like a new campaign. Wouldn't Ron and Harry throw a complete eppy! What to call it? Hug Impossible Potions Professor Often?

Hermione's inner monologue was interrupted by Andrene taking her leave and disappearing into the floo. Both professor and student stood, lost in their own thoughts a moment, gazing into the fire where the cheerful Firewalker had vanished. Eventually, Severus mentally shook himself and turned to regard Miss Granger with a disdainful look. "Well, Miss Granger? I'm sure you're as ready to get back to your Gryffindor friends as I am to once again have my rooms to myself," he announced with a sneer. "Perhaps you could do me the utmost of favors and get along with it."

Smiling at him calmly, Hermione ignored his gruff tone and said, "It's true it will be nice to see my friends, but I can't say I'm thrilled to be leaving. I've quite enjoyed your library..." she hesitated but a moment, "as well as your company." Ignoring his disbelieving snort, Hermione set her already packed knapsack near the door before crossing back to a startled Professor Snape and wrapping her arms firmly about his waist in a tight hug. No time like the present, she mused, to start her new campaign.

Startled speechless for a moment, Severus gave Hermione's shoulder a habitual pat before finding his tongue. "Honestly, Miss Granger, it is highly inappropriate for you to treat one of your Professor's in this off-hand manner," he said through gritted teeth. It took all his will not to wrap his arms around the little minx and ask her to stay--quite certain she'd be appalled if he were ever to do so. The girl was kindness itself; little wonder she would hug even her irritating Potion's master. But, were he to return the embrace the way he most wished, she'd run from the room screaming.

Chuckling, Hermione said in a chastising tone, "I'm quite certain there is not one mention in the Hogwarts rules and regulations prohibiting an occasional hug, Professor."

"Be that as it may, I believe we have already discussed the necessity for this sort of thing not becoming habit. This is the fifth time you have...hugged me...and I find myself increasingly distressed by your lack of propriety."

Fifth time? He's keeping count? Is he really distressed? Keeping her arms firmly locked around Professor Snape's waist, she lightly probed his feelings. No, not distressed...Nimue's green garters, he likes it! I'm not about to stop then. Only why does he like it? Is it simply because he needs hugs, or could it be because of me? Now there's a quandary that's going to keep you up nights, Granger. "Keeping count are we, Professor?" she said cheekily. "That doesn't sound like the actions of a distressed man to me. It sounds like someone who doesn't get enough hugs, if you can so easily keep track. I'll have to work on that, I think. Besides, I'm afraid your warnings have all been in vain, as it's already become habit. I'm afraid I'm quite addicted to hugging you, sir." Releasing him, she noted his wide-eyed expression and the way his lips twitched as if wanting to form words, but having not an inkling which ones to form. Taking pity on the man--obviously sorely unused to this sort of attention--she thanked him warmly for all he had done on her behalf. Giving him another brief hug, she gathered up her knapsack and left his study.

During the whole business, Severus hadn't managed a single word. As she left, softly closing the door to his study, he at last found his voice enough to mutter, "Impudent chit," but his tone suggested his heart wasn't in it. It came out sounding much like an endearment.

Scrambling through the entrance revealed by the open portrait of the Fat Lady, Hermione had only a moment to drop her knapsack before she was hit in the chest by sixteen pounds of enthusiastic ginger tom. "Crooks!" she squealed, catching him in her arms and returning his joyful welcome.

"I see they finally let you out of...the infirmary," Ron said with an uncertain grin from where he and Harry were playing wizard's chess near the fire.

Returning the grin wholeheartedly, Hermione said, "It's good to be out. I've missed you both terribly!"

Releasing Crookshanks, Hermione returned the greetings of the other Gryffindor students lounging about the common room before walking over to the fire to give her best friends a quick hug. As she hugged Harry, he whispered, "We need a chat, care to visit the library?" Nodding her answer against his neck, she released him to pick up her knapsack.

"I'll go put my things away and give Crooks a good brushing, then I think I'll head down to the library--I've got so much catching up to do!" Hermione said, with all the false honesty she could muster.

"Honestly, Hermione!" Harry answered in kind. "All you ever do is study! Surely you can enjoy one evening before you get back to it?"

"As I keep trying to drive into your heads, it's never too early to start studying for N.E.W.T.S.! We've only seven months left!" Hermione returned, hoping her tone was more exasperated than sarcastic.

"Well, if you're going to the library, we're coming with you," demanded Ron.

"Oh, all right then," Hermione said huffily, "if you insist." Biting back a giggle, she climbed the stairs to the seventh year girl's dormitory, Crooks following in her wake. The trio had played many scenes such as that in order to get some privacy, without arousing suspicion. Ron had turned out to be best at it; Hermione supposed growing up with five brothers had prepared him well for bouts of intrigue. After putting her things away, and a long chat with Crooks over a good brushing, Hermione re-joined her friends and headed off to the library. Upon entering, they made way to a study niche and--after warding it with a silencing spell--were at last free to talk openly.

"So how did the training go? I was shocked to see you back in the common room after only a week," asked Harry.

"It went well. Oh, I'll have to practice for years and years before I'm anywhere near as good at it as Andrene, but there's no more danger of me going mad. It was all very interesting."

"Do you really like him?" blurted out Ron. "Snape, I mean. Harry said he thought you rather...fancied him." Ron ended the statement with a look as if he were about to start belching slugs at the mere thought.

Blushing to the roots of her hair, Hermione began saying, "What in the world gave you..." Her mouth snapped shut. Damn it! As uncomfortable as the subject made her, these two were her best friends. If she couldn't be honest with them--and if they couldn't deal with it--then maybe they weren't as close as she'd always believed. She began to speak again, tone much softer and far less confident, "I think I do fancy him a bit. He's an interesting man. He's different when he doesn't have to play at 'Death Eater spy' and I quite liked him." The irate fireworks Hermione expected never materialized--the young men sat staring at her for a moment. Confused, Hermione gently probed their feelings. From Harry she got rather grudging acceptance, which made sense to her as he'd admitted finding Professor Snape a bit dashing himself. Ron was harder to figure out. From him she read an odd mix of protectiveness and resignation. In any event, neither of them seemed likely to explode over the matter.

"At any rate, it's a moot point. While he has been incredibly kind to me, he's been incredibly proper as well. I have no reason at all to believe he feels anything in return, and I expect he'd dismiss any feelings on my part as some misguided schoolgirl crush."

"Actually, Hermione, I rather think he fancies you," Harry said calmly.

"Harry," Hermione said, rolling her eyes, "you couldn't possibly know anything of the sort."

"It's just a hunch," Harry admitted.

"Besides," added Ron, "it's not like you can't figure it out, now you're all Empath-y."

"I haven't tried to. Honestly, what's the point? I've been avoiding doing just that because...if he thinks I'm only an annoying little schoolgirl--I don't want to know!" Hermione sighed. "It hardly matters at this point. Even if we ignore the fact that we're at war, and there are more important things to worry about, he's a professor and I'm a student. It's not as if anything can come of it until I graduate."

"Hermione, your Muggle heritage is showing," said Ron. "It's not like that in the wizarding world. Wizard population has been in a slow decline for the last two centuries, the last war with You-Know-Who and the present one have thinned the ranks even more. To put it bluntly, wizard government wants babies, so there are no rules at Hogwarts--or at any other wizarding school I know of--preventing professors and students of legal age from fraternizing."

"Ronald Weasley, how can that possibly be true?" Hermione asked, eyes wide.

"Oh, it's true enough. Mum told me--back when she was at school--the DADA Professor married a student still in the middle of her seventh year. Course, he got killed by a hag the next year, so I guess it's not a very cheerful example. Nowadays it hasn't been an issue, as Snape's really the only teacher close to young enough and who'd have him? Er...present company excluded, of course," Ron finished with a chagrined smile.

"But what's to keep a Professor from taking advantage of their authority?" Hermione asked in disbelief.

"Hermione, we're talking about *wizards*. The power's in the hands of the student. All they'd have to do is squawk to the nearest teacher, then both are given a nice cup of tea laced with Veritaserum. If the professor's done anything they oughtn't, they're sent packing at the least, or sent to trial if it's bad enough. I heard some woman at Durmstrang got sent to Azkaban."

"I expect that would make any professor think twice about getting involved with a student if they weren't serious about it," said Harry thoughtfully.

Gaping at the boys, it took a moment for Hermione to collect herself. She knew the wizarding world was different than the Muggle world she grew up in, yet she was constantly surprised by how much. "If this is true, and if Harry is right and Professor Snape...er...likes me...then why is his behavior towards me so bloody proper? I can't even give him a hug without him bemoaning my impropriety in some fashion."

"Hmmm...he might not be talking about school impropriety, Hermione. We're at war, and he's a spy," said Harry. "I've already been warned by Draco not to act out of character around Snape. No matter what we feel about him personally, if we change how we treat him in public we'll be bound to cause him trouble with Voldemort."

"That's true enough. I'll have to be careful. It doesn't explain why he acted the way he did when we were safe in his study though," Hermione said with a sigh.

"I think you're giving the man too much credit," Ron said with a smirk. "I doubt Snape's ever had a student who...er...liked him. He's probably completely clueless about how you feel."

Raising both eyebrows in surprise, Hermione said, "I've not considered that. I'll have to give the matter some thought," she finished with a grin.

Gazing out the window of his study at a starless night, Severus Snape was lost in thought. His face gave no clue to what he was thinking; he only stared calmly, quietly, into the black nothingness of a cloudy autumn evening. Eventually, he turned to glance about the empty room, the same unreadable expression in his eyes. Walking to the door, he gave the room one last glance, eyes coming to rest for a moment on the window seat, before he snuffed the torches into darkness with a quiet charm and went to bed.

Coming Out

Chapter 13 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Hermione found it odd to suddenly have her life back to normal. Once Andrene left, Hermione returned to classes, study, and hanging out with Ron and Harry as she always did. Well, it wasn't all the same. A month had passed since Andrene left, and Hermione was beginning to suspect Harry was insane when he said Professor Snape in any way cared for her. While Professor Snape had never been exactly pleasant to her in class, now he was an absolute terror. If she volunteered to answer one of his questions he berated her for doing so. If she refused to raise her hand, then she was met with various versions of the phrase "Can it be possible that such a ridiculously easy question has finally stumped Gryffindor's resident know-it-all?" Knowing that her Professor could not acknowledge the softer relationship that they had shared during her troubles, Hermione was nevertheless unprepared for a Potions master who seemed to exist only to make her life a living hell. He was particularly cruel to her if she showed Harry any attention and when Hermione tried reading his feelings she got an inexplicable mix of anger and jealousy. Surely he wasn't jealous of Harry? That was insane! Harry was his nephew's boyfriend, didn't he know that? Hmmm...something was going on, and she'd better get to the bottom of it. After one particularly hateful Potions class, Hermione told Harry to meet her in the room of requirement after dinner and bring his boyfriend along.

When Harry and Draco arrived, they found a pacing, scowling Hermione. She barely took the time to hit the door with the appropriate safeguards before rounding on Draco.

"Draco, does your uncle know about you and Harry?" she put forth with all seriousness.

"Well...he knows what the Order knows...I'm supposedly roping Harry into a relationship for the Death Eaters, so I can spy in addition to Snape," Draco said evasively.

"You mean to tell me you've never told your own uncle the relationship itself isn't a fake?" Hermione asked with a growl.

"The subject never came up, really..."

"Draco Malfoy! You adore your uncle--I know you do. He's the reason you joined the Order in the first place. I simply cannot believe you'd keep such a thing from him!" Hermione exclaimed.

"And exactly what bloody business is it of yours? I know you fancy Snape, and Harry has this ridiculous theory that he fancies you as well, but quite frankly, I just don't see it. The way he's been treating you in class lately...oh, bloody fuck!" Draco's eyes suddenly went wide in surprise.

"'Oh, bloody fuck' sums it up nicely. I didn't figure out what the problem was until today. Professor Snape gets particularly horrid if I so much as look at Harry in class. It hadn't occurred to me he wouldn't already know how ridiculous the idea was."

"You're going to have to tell him, Draco," Harry interjected.

"Tell him? Why do I have to tell him? He's the only real family I feel like I have, Harry, other than you. What if he throws a fit? What if he can't deal with 'actually gay' Draco when I tell him it's not just a Slytherin play?" Though Draco's tone was light, there was honest worry in his blue eyes.

"Draco," Harry said softly, "Snape is your family--along with me. I don't think you're giving him enough credit. He's going to figure it out at some point. Besides, if I'm right about how he feels about Hermione, he may be so relieved I'm not shagging Hermione, he won't be too upset that I'm shagging you!" Harry finished with a grin.

With a resigned sigh, Draco agreed to talk with Snape the next day.

Draco was as good as his word and had the proposed talk with his uncle the following evening. Severus didn't throw a fit, he simply appeared utterly confounded. When he eventually found his voice, he assured Draco he couldn't be arsed whom his nephew dated and asked Draco what the devil it had to do with him? In short, he acted his normal snarky self and Draco was pleased with the whole conversation.

Hermione was less pleased with the conversation when Harry told her about it. Though she was happy Draco had nothing to worry about where his uncle was concerned, she'd been rather hoping to get some clue of the stubborn man's feelings for her, if he indeed had any other than exasperation. Deciding there was nothing to be done until seeing how her Professor behaved next potions class, Hermione passed the time in a flurry of worry and studying.

Hermione's next Potions class was an eye opener, indeed. While it was true her Professor made the occasional snarky remark, the remarks themselves held none of the venom of the previous month. Looking up from stirring her potion of the day, Hermione caught him watching her. Their gaze held for but a moment before he dropped his eyes to the papers he'd been grading. She couldn't quite read his emotions--the wall of protectiveness she'd found so comforting was back in place. Though she practiced daily, her skills were growing at a snail's pace and she continued to have difficulty reading anything but the strongest of emotions from the secretive man. Well, she thought to herself with a mental smirk, I know one thing I can do.

When class ended, Hermione told Harry to go ahead, then took an unusually long time tidying her station and packing her knapsack. The final student to leave, when Hermione reached the door she paused to address her Professor. "Sir," she called, "I had a question about the last homework assignment. Could you spare a moment?"

Standing before his desk, he stared at her for a minute before replying. "I suspect, Miss Granger, you will hardly leave me a moment's peace until I answer whatever niggling question is keeping you awake nights," he replied in a world-weary voice.

Closing the classroom door, Hermione secured it with both locking and silencing charms before abandoning her knapsack and approaching Professor Snape. Severus gasped audibly when she wrapped her arms about his waist in a firm hug, resting her head against his chest. He moved to give her an awkward pat, but ended up resting one hand softly against her shoulder. Hermione could feel his warm breath stirring her hair. Twice she heard his sharp intake of breath, as if he intended to speak--yet he remained silent. Indulging herself for what seemed like an age, Hermione at last released her Potions Professor. She paused to look up at him, smiling warmly, then retrieved her knapsack and left the classroom. Severus again failed to manage one word in the entire exchange. Staring after her, Severus heard Hermione greet Ron and Harry through the now open classroom door. Good, the thrice-damned boys had waited for her. Miss Granger wasn't safe alone in Slytherin territory; Severus was a little surprised the boys had shown that much insight. It was dangerous for her to have stayed after class at all.

"Did you manage to wring any answers out of the git?" Ron hissed.

"I don't know why you even try, Hermione, when it's so obvious he hates you," added Harry.

"Oh, he eventually answers my questions," Hermione lied in an exasperated voice, "I simply have to endure eight to ten insults first."

Still standing before his desk, eyes focused on the exact point where the young witch had disappeared from his sight, Severus allowed himself a thin smile. Clever girl. The Firewalker was right; Hermione would have made a fine spy. If destiny was kind, this war would be over long before such a fate could befall the girl. Trying in vain to extinguish the memory of warm arms banding his waist, Severus began making preparations for his next class.

The after-class hugs occurred three more times before Severus found his voice. At first, he'd been content simply to enjoy them. Now wondering why the infuriating girl was behaving in such an inexplicable manner was beginning to keep him awake nights. This could no longer be explained by gratitude, nor could he wave it off as the girl looking for intelligent conversation--as he hadn't managed one intelligent word while alone in her presence since she left his study. The more Severus Snape thought on it, the more incensed he became. There was only one reason he could see for her behavior--she must pity him. Miss Granger must see him as some poor, forlorn, travesty of a man who never received enough hugs. Impossible! He was a formidable wizard, a clever spy, and the bloody head of Slytherin for fuck's sake. He needed no woman's pity and he would not tolerate Hermione's.

Following the next Potions class, Hermione followed the same pattern as the four previous. Turning from the closed and warded classroom door, she did not find Professor Snape standing before his desk but seated, barricaded behind it. Crossing the room to stand before him, Hermione raised a questioning eyebrow and asked, "Is something amiss, Professor?"

"Why are you doing this?" he growled.

"I beg your pardon?" Hermione asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Why is it, Miss Granger, that each and every Potions class ends with you attached to my person like a damned barnacle?" Severus almost shouted. "I will not be mocked, Miss Granger, nor am I in need of your blasted pity."

Andrene was right, the man is completely obtuse where I am concerned. "It's good you do not seek pity, sir, because I have not offered you any," she began. "I remain after class because for one brief moment I am allowed to treat you as I wish I could all the time. I'm fond of you, sir, and miss your company."

The angry flush that had swept over Severus' features slowly faded as he peered at her. His mind was whirling--of all the explanations he'd expected to hear, the one she gave was a complete surprise. The truth was he missed the chit as well--rather desperately in fact. It had driven him mad when he thought the girl cared for Potter; his heart had nearly leaped from his chest when Draco made his startling confession. Then these blasted hugs had begun again. Merlin's balls!! Knowing any sort of friendship between them was unadvisable--for a multitude of reasons--he nevertheless found the thought of being at all close to her more tempting than he could withstand. Bugger it. He could never have her love--he knew that--but if this was going to be the last months of his life then he would for once in his miserable existence have a taste of something beautiful, something good. If she wanted to befriend him, then so be it. He was not so altruistic that he could thrust away even this pale happiness.

"Actually Miss Granger, I wanted to have a word with you about that. You befriended my jarvey. Perhaps the plight of a mere animal means little to you, but Turpin was quite taken with you. He's been moping about my chambers since you left and continues attempting to convince me to read that horrid children's book you shared with him. It's been quite rude of you not to have visited him," Severus declared.

Hermione had opened her mouth to defend herself when she suddenly felt his amusement. Typical. Just like her snarky Professor to blame it on the jarvey. Well, two could play this game. "Professor, I'd like nothing better than to visit your chambers. What would you suggest?"

Saucy wench. If he didn't know it was a ridiculous notion, Severus would have thought she was flirting with him. "The password to the door leading to my study

is...er...Muggleborn vixen." When this garnered an amused snort from the young Gryffindor, he snapped, "Well, it's not likely to be guessed, is it?"

"No, sir," she said, trying in vain to look contrite. Muggleborn vixen, eh? Perhaps Harry is correct about this situation after all.

"Make certain you use Potter's blasted cloak, Miss Granger. I don't think I need to tell you how dangerous it is for you to be walking the dungeons alone at this time."

"I am aware, sir. I promise to be careful," Hermione said softly.

"See that you do," he snapped. "I am in no position to come racing to your rescue if you waltz into trouble. Well? You've remained long past the time required to ask me some insipid question--no matter how many times I insulted you first," he added with a smirk.

"Certainly, sir," Hermione replied, walking round his desk to stand beside him. "There is just one more thing...if you will stand, please?"

Breathing what was intended to seem a long suffering sigh; Severus stood and faced his stubborn student. "If you must."

"I must," she agreed, wrapping her arms around him and squeezing fiercely. Once again she felt his hand rest softly against her shoulder. "How many is this then?" she asked.

"Eleven," he replied automatically, inwardly cringing at how much that response implied.

Smiling into his chest, Hermione held the hug a moment longer before taking her leave.

Evening found Severus pacing in his study. Attempting to read had been a dismal failure and he'd given it up almost immediately. He'd graded every last student essay during class time, vainly attempting to ignore the ramifications of his hasty decision to allow Miss Granger access to his study. Now he had nothing constructive to do other than pace and fret. I'm an idiot for working myself into such a state. Giving the chit the password to my study doesn't mean she's going to run down here the first chance she gets. She has class work and friends; surely she's other plans for this evening. I'm a bloody fool for even imagining her rushing down to these dreary dungeons to spend time with her bitter, bad-tempered, and--let's be quite honest here--unattractive Professor. Pausing to stare for a moment into the framed mirror hung over the study's hearth, Severus tried to regard his face objectively. Secretly, Severus rather liked his appearance. He liked his strongly chiseled features and impossibly dark eyes. Severus thought his countenance rather imposing, a good thing for both Professors and spies. He'd never had much reason to care one way or the other about what he looked like until he'd begun having all these blasted feelings for a fresh-faced young student. While Severus was happy enough with himself, he was well aware that, whatever it was your average witch was looking for, he was not it. Scowling at the mirror improved his mood. He did indeed have an impressive scowl, and while he was quite certain it was definitely not what a young witch was looking for, it was a useful expression. Giving the mirror another fierce scowl, he turned to drop gracelessly onto the sofa in an unintentionally elegant sprawl of limbs, again picking up the useless book.

That was how Hermione found him when she quietly entered his study ten minutes later--her delay caused by class work she'd sped through in order to have the remainder of the evening free. Softly closing the door behind her, she turned to find her Potions Professor--barefoot, dressed in shirtsleeves and black trousers--sprawled on the sofa in never-before-witnessed abandon, scowling at the book in his hands. Hermione's heart literally skipped a beat. If she'd possessed any lingering doubts as to whether she found this enigmatic man attractive, they were finally put to rest. It took every last bit of willpower she had not to trot over and pounce on the darkly attractive man.

"Are you going to stand there and stare at me all night," Professor Snape growled, "or are you going to take that bloody cloak off and rescue me from this horrendous book?"

"I'm a Gryffindor," Hermione said with a grin as she removed the invisibility cloak, "we are excellent at rescuing people in distress." Crossing the room to sit at his feet, she asked, "If that book is so terrible, why then are you reading it?"

"It is equally valuable to keep up on what the fools of the wizarding world are thinking as it is to keep up with the wise. Not nearly as enjoyable, but valuable nonetheless," Severus replied, handing Hermione the slim volume he'd been trying to read. It was a book of Potions theory written by a wizard named Formaldius Porcini.

Hermione took one look at the author and gave a very unladylike snort. "I heard this man speak at a symposium in London last summer. He's a complete idiot. I'm surprised you're wasting your time with anything that dolt has written. You are quite correct, sir; you're in dire need of rescuing. I imagine I arrived just in time," she finished with a grin.

The two began an in-depth discussion of the dolt in question--a discussion evolving into a discussion of Potions theory in general. When Turpin came into the room, he greeted Hermione gleefully before curling up half on his master's feet and half in Hermione's lap. He seemed content to lie blinking in the warmth of the fire and listening to his two friends talk. When Severus' clock struck midnight, Hermione was shocked she'd stayed so late. Bidding her Professor goodnight, she demanded he stand for the requisite hug before she once again donned the cloak and departed for Gryffindor tower. Tired as she was, Hermione had as much trouble falling asleep as her Professor did alone in his dungeon rooms.

It had been a most enjoyable evening, indeed.

Discoveries

Chapter 14 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

November passed in much more pleasant fashion for Hermione than had October. While Professor Snape kept to his usual amount of sarcastic wit in class, when Hermione crept down to his study--as she did most every evening--they passed the time together in much the same manner as the first visit. They were often to be found sitting near one another on the sofa, engaged in heated debate about whatever subject struck their fancy. On those days when Hermione had not been able to finish her schoolwork, she would bring it to complete while he read or graded papers. Each visit, Hermione would be sure to read a bit to Turpin from *The Hobbit*, and she'd been amused to discover Professor Snape had indeed read to the Jarvey during her absence. In fact, they were almost through with the book and ready to begin *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

To Hermione, the whole situation was altogether wonderful and altogether infuriating. While she looked forward to each evening with eagerness, and enjoyed every blessed moment in her Professor's company, their relationship had never progressed past an easy friendship. Professor Snape had certainly relaxed around her--and she

thought she'd gotten to know the man behind the façade better than most--but he remained perfectly proper with her at all times. He never touched her, other than submitting to her frequent demands for a hug (he still kept track of the number, which now stood at 63). He never referred to her as anything other than a quite proper "Miss Granger." In fact, he never even shortened it to "Granger," as he did with the boys. Hermione did not attempt to call him by his given name--she knew he'd never stand for it. So she called him "Professor," and occasionally snuck in a "my Professor." When feeling particularly brave, she'd use "my dear Professor"--causing his eyebrows to raise in unspoken alarm, though he never told her refrain from referring to him as such. Admitting to herself that she sometimes said it just to watch his reaction, Hermione also knew she got secret glee simply from calling him "my dear."

Continuing to work on her Empath powers, Hermione practiced religiously every day and was disheartened by how slowly she progressed. Andrene had been quite right; it would take her years to achieve the skills that the older Firewalker possessed. Hermione could only hope her efforts would be of some use to the Order, so she spent hours working on her projection. She would meet Harry and Ron--sometimes Ginny and Draco as well--in the Room of Requirement and practice projecting at them. Sticking to amusement as a fairly innocuous test, at first her efforts only made them smirk a bit. By the end of November, she could get all four of them to roll on the floor, laughing uncontrollably. In that respect she was making definite progress. It was in the reading of the emotions of others--particularly one black-robed Professor--that she was still having trouble. His protectiveness of her she could always feel, and when she was able to slip past the strong emotion she could feel a clear affection for her, as well. However, that was all she could feel. As far as she could tell, she had fallen wildly in love with a man who felt no more than friendly affection for her. While she cherished his friendship, she couldn't help but yearn for something more, and spent many frustrated nights lying in bed--sleep eluding her--while she tried to determine whether that was indeed all he felt, or if she wasn't reading him clearly.

Twice during November she'd gone to his study in the evening to find him absent. When Turpin told her Professor Snape had been called to a Death Eater meeting, Hermione found she couldn't bear to leave his rooms until he returned and she knew he was well. So she stayed to keep Turpin company, and the two companions would read together and worry about Severus. Both times, Severus returned in the early hours of the morning to find his jarvey and his student curled on the sofa together, fast asleep. Both times, when Severus gently woke the sleeping witch, Hermione leaped off the sofa with a glad cry, hugging him fiercely as Turpin danced around them, hooting with glee. It astounded Severus that she worried about him so; he tried telling her that she really shouldn't fret on his account. Hugging him tighter, Hermione only replied, "You just try to be careful, my dear Professor. You can't stop me worrying about you, so you needn't try." It was all Severus could do not to return her hug just as fiercely.

On December third, when a hasty Order meeting was called in the Headmaster's office, Hermione and Harry talked in hushed tones as they walked through the halls on the way to the meeting.

"It must be something either important or awful for the Headmaster to call a meeting here," whispered Hermione.

"Draco called it," Harry whispered back. "He's really upset, Hermione, but he wouldn't tell me what was wrong. He said I'd better wait for the meeting."

"Damn, I expect it's something awful then," Hermione murmured worriedly.

Reaching Dumbledore's office, they noted many of the Order members had already arrived. Tonks and Moody were there to represent the members who were Aurors. Mr. Weasley was there for the Weasley clan. Remus and Sirius had arrived--so had the Professors at Hogwarts who were Order Members. Throwing one worried glance at her Potions Professor, who sat calmly in his customary seat near the door, Hermione sat on the sofa with Harry and Draco and waited silently for the meeting to begin.

"Thank you all for coming at such short notice," Albus began solemnly. "Draco has brought me some information that requires our attention. Severus, I know you have been called twice last month...did you witness anything leading you to believe that Voldemort is calling your loyalty into question?"

While Severus' eyes registered surprise at the question, he remained seated and regarded his employer and friend calmly. "No more so than usual. He has not completely trusted me since he returned, but as long as I make his potion he tolerates me."

"What potion is that exactly?" Moody asked with narrowed eyes.

The look Severus gave the Auror was cold and angry, yet he answered calmly. "The spell he worked with the blood of young Potter gave him his body back, but it did not give him his strength. There is a potion, made from the serpent Nagini's milk, which would restore his strength more quickly were it brewed correctly--which it is not," Severus ended with a growl and an expression which almost dared the Auror to find fault with him. He was not disappointed. Severus scarcely had finished the short explanation before Moody leapt to his feet in anger.

"I don't trust you, Snape. I find it altogether too convenient that you're making a potion that can restore Voldemort to his full power. Are we supposed to take the word of a known Death Eater that you willingly risk Voldemort's killing you should he ever think to check the bloody potion?" Having started in a low voice, by the end of the speech Moody was shouting as he reached for his wand. Drawing, Moody suddenly found himself face to face with five foot, six inches of furious young witch.

"That is enough!" Hermione practically screamed into the startled Auror's face. "Severus Snape risks his life every bloody day for the Order. I will not stand here and listen to such complete and utter tripe. Professor Snape spoke the truth when he said the potion is brewed incorrectly. I suggest you stop these useless accusations immediately."

"How in the world could you, a student, possibly know he spoke the truth?" hissed Moody.

"Because I'm an Empath you sad little man," Hermione hissed right back. Leaning until her mouth was at the angry Auror's ear, she whispered for only Moody to hear. "You're the one who lied. You lied when you said you didn't trust Snape. If you trust him, why must you attack him at every turn? Will you let your petty prejudices keep us from winning this war? Now put your wand away," she snarled.

Stepping back, Hermione waited until Moody had sheathed his wand, then returned to sit beside Harry and Draco--both regarding her with wide eyes and open mouths. Severus had watched Hermione rant at the Auror with both worry and amazement. She was an avenging angel in her wrath; he'd never seen anything so beautiful in his life. And on his account! His! Severus had no idea what it was Hermione had whispered to the mad Auror, but it must have been interesting indeed. Moody's face had gone white, his expression had fallen, his rage fled. Now Moody sat quietly in his chair, looking at his hands. Turning his gaze to Hermione, Severus saw she was still angry. She sat stiffly on the couch, arms crossed over her chest, staring resolutely at the floor with furious eyes--she was altogether exquisite.

Had Hermione possessed the presence of mind to glance up at her Potions Professor at that instant, the answer to the question which had been plaguing her would have been easily read in his black eyes. Unfortunately, by the time she risked a glance in his direction, the meeting had continued and his expression was once again calmly shuttered.

"Perhaps," Albus began in soothing tones, "we could now proceed to the matter at hand. Draco, tell them what you told me earlier."

"I was at Malfoy Manor over the weekend. On Saturday night, the Dark Lord was there." Lifting worried eyes up to meet his uncle's, he continued. "I heard him and my father talking...they know there's a traitor. They were laughing and making some kind of plans for how they were going to care for the problem."

"Did they speak of this in front of you?" Severus asked quietly.

"Yes, openly...though they would not speak the traitor's name--nor did they say exactly what their plans were. They behaved as if it were a fine joke."

Giving a relieved nod, Severus said, "Then they certainly did not mean you, Draco. They love their little surprises, so they would not have tipped you off. You should be safe enough."

"But what of you, Severus?" Albus asked quietly. "Surely the time has come when you should stop spying. If they did not mean Draco, they must have meant you. It simply isn't worth the risk of you returning."

Waving a dismissive hand, Severus said, "That is not necessarily so, Albus. They would call anyone who messed up their plans a traitor, not only those they considered a

spy. Had I given up my work the first time I heard such rumors, then I'd have quit the cause almost as I began it. This is too important to leave solely on Draco's shoulders. I will continue unless some more definite proof comes to light."

"How likely is it that the Death Eaters will discover your potion is a fake, Severus?" Remus asked softly.

Giving the werewolf a sharp glance, Severus was startled to see the honest concern in Lupin's eyes. "It is possible, but not likely. The potion is extremely complex--much more difficult than the Wolfsbane. The reason the Dark Lord suffers my presence is that there are only a handful of wizards in the world who could brew it at all."

"Are you certain," Albus said kindly, "that there is no cause for alarm? I understand your work for the Order is important, Severus...but so are you, my boy...so are you."

"I'm sure my work is no more dangerous than it ever was," Severus replied with a snort. "I will continue, Albus...I must." What Severus left unsaid was that he'd always been aware his life hung by the merest thread. This situation made it no different. Perhaps he had at last been found out. However--if he had not--he could still be of use in bringing the bastard's life to an end. That made it worth any sacrifice. He would carry on. He would carry on as he always had done.

The meeting continued, as various members of the Order presented the progress they'd made on their various tasks. It was all Severus could do to keep from staring at the young Gryffindor who'd so quickly jumped to his defense. Fire still sparked in Hermione's eyes, though she was obviously trying to calm herself. Now and again she glanced at Moody, the anger in her eyes flaring up again. Severus found her altogether enchanting. Perhaps that is what caused him to do something which he would later both regret and cherish.

When the meeting adjourned, Severus did not rush immediately out the door, as was his usual habit. He remained sitting in his chair, regarding Miss Granger steadily. Hermione noticed his attention, and remained seated as she told the boys to go ahead without her. Eventually only three were left in the Headmaster's office--Severus, Hermione, and Albus himself. Taking one look at the silent, staring young people, Albus left his office with an offhand "I believe I have an urgent appointment to do something...somewhere."

After Albus left, Hermione stood and addressed her silent Professor nervously. "I hope you are not offended, sir, by my interfering in your affairs. I am well aware that you can care for yourself, Professor...I was just so furious..." Her voice trailed off as her eyes fell to stare uncomfortably at the floor. Severus gazed at her with slight alarm. He'd been silent too long while figuring out what to say--now his avenging angel thought he was angry with her. She couldn't be more wrong. Standing, Severus still hadn't the faintest idea what to say, yet he knew he must do something. With scarcely a thought, he strode up to Hermione and clasped her fast in his arms in a tight hug.

For the minutest of instants, Hermione was completely stunned. Her heart skipped a beat, her breath caught, her eyes went wide. Then, with a happy sigh, she wrapped her arms around her professor's waist and tilted her head to snuggle her face into the crook of his neck. The feeling of his strong arms around her was devastating in its intensity. She felt safe, she felt accepted, she felt...oh sweet Merlin! Her heart again skipped a beat in the face of an unexpected discovery. Hermione's internal musing was brought to a halt by her Professor suddenly ending the embrace and stepping back to speak to her.

If the embrace had felt devastating to Hermione, to Severus it was apocalyptic. Knowing immediately he should never have tested his resolve so far, Severus still couldn't bear to end the embrace until several minutes had passed. To finally have his arms tight around her, yet to know he could never have her love, was almost more than his resolve could stand. Finally, he released her, stepping back to try finding a normally nimble tongue that couldn't seem to manage a single word while she was wrapped in his arms.

"Hermione...forgive me, that was...improper. I'm afraid I am woefully unused to having anyone jump to my defense. I was not offended, Miss Granger...shocked perhaps, but not offended. Indeed, the memory of you shouting into Moody's face--and on my behalf--is a memory I will cherish until my final breath. I thank you, Miss Granger."

Hermione's mind was awl. She wondered if he realized he'd called her by her given name. She wondered why in the world he thought a hug was improper, especially in light of recent discoveries. She wondered how--in all the circles of Hades--she was ever going to get the stubborn man to hug her again. His normally smooth voice faltered as he spoke to her, and he would not quite meet her eyes. Realizing she needed time to think on the situation, Hermione decided not to confront her obviously overset Professor just yet. However, she was not going to let him get away with calling a blasted hug 'improper.'

"Professor, you have no need to apologize--there was nothing improper about your actions. How many times have you allowed me to hug you?" she asked gently.

"Sixty-seven," he mumbled.

"And you have hugged me exactly once. Must I make you sixty-seven apologies, sir?" she asked with a slight grin.

Snorting briefly in amusement, Severus at last met her eye, giving a small smirk of his own. "I do not believe that will be necessary, Miss Granger."

"Good. That would be exhausting indeed. Now then, I believe I should trot off to my common room like a good little Gryffindor before Harry sends out the cavalry to see what's become of me. The meeting took longer than I expected--it's almost curfew. Tomorrow is Saturday...will I disturb you if I visit?"

"Not at all, Miss Granger. We have that discussion about the effects of Black Cohosh on the Wolfsbane to finish after all," Severus said, his voice at last back to its normal, smooth tones.

"I shall look forward to it," Hermione said with a grin. Taking one more moment to give him a brief hug, Hermione fled the room, shouting cheekily, "That makes sixty-eight!" over her shoulder.

Late that night, when Severus entered his bedroom to prepare for sleep, he found Turpin playing with an unfamiliar scrap of white cloth.

"What have you stolen this time, you damned weasel?" Severus growled.

"Mine! You bloody wanker! It's mine, you can't have it, Syphilis!" squealed Turpin as he snatched the scrap up and tried to flee. He was not quick enough. With a casual "Accio," Severus had the white cloth in his hand. It proved to be a handkerchief. Taking one look at the small, feminine monogram, Severus knew it was not his.

"Turpin, you blasted thief, this is Miss Granger's. You shouldn't have nicked it!" he said in an exasperated tone.

"It smelled so nice. An' it was just hanging out of the vixen's bag. Can't you let a poor sod keep it, you great git?"

"No, Turpin, you may not keep it. I expect if you were to actually ask Miss Granger for a token, she would happily give it to you. She spoils you rotten as it is."

"Bollocks," Turpin grumbled, "chelpy fuckhead took me prize." Still grumbling, Turpin stalked out of the room.

Folding the handkerchief carefully, Severus could not resist the urge to bring the square of fabric to his nose. It did indeed smell like the vixen. With a guilty glance at the cat flap through which his furry familiar had disappeared, Severus snuck the bit of cloth under his pillow. That night, as he fell asleep, Severus' hand crept under his pillow. Instead of grasping the wand he kept there, his hand wrapped around a small square of white cloth, clutching it tightly.

Elsewhere in the castle, a young witch was having her own trouble falling asleep. When Professor Snape had hugged Hermione, she'd finally sensed the answer to the question plaguing her for two months. Her Professor, Severus Snape, was in love with her!

Trouble No Set Like Rain

Chapter 15 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

A dim yellow sun broke over the snow-swept Hogwarts' grounds on Saturday morning. Standing at the window of his study, Severus watched the dawn break as he sipped at a cup of Darjeeling. He thought the day looked coldly aloof--beautiful perhaps, in its white simplicity, but distant and unfeeling. He knew he should heed the morning--emulate it--if he could but find the strength. Why the hell did I hug the vixen? Asoth's tail! I've turned into a foolish leech. I have worries enough with the war; Draco's information was not comforting, to say the least. Why do I find myself able to think of nothing but the feeling of my arms wrapped tight around her, her heart fluttering against my chest, her warm breath on my neck? Turning suddenly from the window seat--her window seat--Severus flung his empty cup into the unlit hearth across the room. The cup shattered with a small explosion of noise, bringing Turpin scampering into the room in alarm.

"Severus!" In his worry, Turpin actually called his master by name instead of insult. "What the bloody fuck is going on?"

Crossing to the sofa, Severus sat down and dropped his head in his hands. Turpin clambered onto the sofa and tried in vain to push his way under Severus' arms and onto his lap. Eventually Severus gave way before the paws digging at his arms, sitting up to give the jarvey some room. Jumping onto Severus' lap, Turpin sat with his front paws on his master's chest, his nose only inches from Severus' face as he regarded his master with concern.

"What's bugging you, you daft hinny? Is it the Muggleborn vixen? Was she cruel to you? I'll bite her ankles when she comes in here again."

"If you bite Miss Granger's ankles, she won't read you another word of Tolkien, you know," Severus said with a small, amused snort. The comical jarvey never failed to cheer him up, even when he was at his most despairing. "The girl is kindness personified, Turpin. She has done nothing to warrant your teeth."

"But she bothers you, I know the tart does. Why don't you just mate with her and get it over with?" the jarvey said in all seriousness.

"It's not that simple fur-face. It's much more complicated when you're dealing with wizards," Severus said with a sigh.

"Maybe you only think it's bloody complicated, Syphilis. No offense, but you're as good at social niceties as I am at flying."

"Want to try your paws at flying again?" Severus growled.

"Don't you dare hex me into a bat again, you fucking wanker! I'm serious!" groused the jarvey.

"I know you are, Turpin," Severus said, regarding the jarvey with serious eyes. "Actually, there is something we should talk about. This isn't just about the vixen--that...situation...only makes the rest more difficult. You know my work is dangerous. One of these days, Turpin, I won't be coming back. We need to discuss what's to become of you when that happens..." At this point, Severus' voice trailed off because Turpin had buried his head in Severus' armpit, keening piteously. Pulling the jarvey out, Severus cradled his upset familiar on his lap and spoke to him softly. "Hush now...hush...you daft hinny...I'm not going anywhere just yet...but it's important for me to know your wishes on the matter. I was thinking of asking the vixen to look after you. She's very kind, Turpin...she would be good to you and she'd keep you safe. It's true she has a familiar already, but you like cats well enough."

Looking up at his master, Turpin quieted his sniffing long enough to whisper, "I don't want you to go, Severus, even if you are a pervy toss-pot."

"I know you don't," Severus whispered back, his black eyes infinitely sad. "Truth is I don't want to go myself. It's far too late for me to turn back now, no matter how I might wish to." Severus cleared his throat gruffly. "What shall I tell the vixen then? Shall I ask her?"

"Yes, ask her," Turpin managed to murmur before he again buried his head in Severus' armpit.

Making her way to the dungeons after lunch, Hermione opened Professor Snape's study door to a charming sight. There sat her Professor on the sofa, reading a book with Turpin curled in his lap fast asleep. Slipping off Harry's invisibility cloak, Hermione said quietly, "Turpin looks completely knackered."

Severus gave her a small smile that didn't reach his eyes. "He's had a rough morning," he said, in equally low tones. "We needed to discuss a subject that was not to his liking."

Crossing to sit gently beside him on the sofa, Hermione turned to her Professor with serious eyes. "Is anything the matter?"

"No. Not at present, at any rate. However, it does concern you, Miss Granger. Perhaps it would be best if we discussed it now, while Turpin is asleep."

"Certainly, sir. As you wish," Hermione said, trying to quiet her wildly beating heart. Whatever could be the matter...

"Miss Granger, I am certain you understand quite well the danger involved in my work for the Order. We are at war--there is no...guarantee...that I will survive it..."

Hermione could not stifle her gasp. Yes, she knew they were at war, just as she knew he was a spy, but the mere thought of her dear Professor no longer being in her life tore at her heart. "The meeting yesterday, it frightened me, sir. Perhaps the Headmaster is right...perhaps it's time for you to stop..."

"I will tell you the same thing I told him--my work is no more dangerous than ever it was," Severus evaded.

Hermione was not fooled. "Forgive me if I don't find that statement very comforting. It only makes me think that your whole career as a spy has kept you in constant mortal danger."

Severus couldn't hide a small smirk of amusement. The girl really was the brightest witch of her age--even Albus hadn't caught that one. "My life is what it is, Miss Granger, there is no sense wasting time discussing it. What I need to ask you concerns Turpin, not my infamous war career. There are no guarantees for any of us, Miss Granger. Should anything happen to me--would you be so kind as to look after Turpin? He adores you, you know, and he should get along well enough with your Crookshanks."

For a moment, Hermione could not speak around the lump that had formed in her throat. This man, this sarcastic, difficult, wonderful man trusted her enough to ask her this. Trying to ignore the tears that pricked at the back of her eyes, Hermione answered him in such soft tones that Severus could barely hear her. "Of course I shall take care of him, should it become necessary. Turpin is my friend and I love him."

Gazing down at his familiar fondly, Severus replied softly. "I thank you, Miss Granger. Turpin's early life was most unpleasant. Knowing he shall be safe means more to me than you can imagine. You are most kind."

"Kindness has nothing to do with it, my dear Professor. I would look after Turpin regardless, because I care for him...just as I care for you."

At this declaration, Severus went quite still. He simply sat for a moment, staring at the jarvey in his lap, not speaking, barely even breathing. Don't be a fool, he thought. She didn't mean that the way it sounded. Hermione doesn't care for me--not like that--she means only that we are friends. That is as it should be...it's easiest...dear gods, but I wish...

Almost desperate to end his current train of thought, Severus spoke a bit gruffly, "Now that is settled, what did you think of the illustrious Porcini's latest potions article?"

Hermione smiled at the abrupt change of subject. Ron had been right; the man was clueless. One of these days she would have to use her Gryffindor bravery to make an all out declaration--but not today. Though she refused to put it off much longer, she still hoped to gently ease her stubborn Professor into realizing how she felt, rather than whacking him over the head with it. "I thought Mr. Porcini's article was complete and utter tripe, as per usual. I found that bit where he rambled on about adding mistletoe to the Draft of Peace particularly dense. Added in the amounts he was suggesting would make the whole lot poisonous."

Turpin slept on, unconsciously comforted by the voices of his two best friends as they fell into one of their usual debates.

December seemed to flash by. Almost before Hermione realized it, the Christmas break arrived. She would not be going home for the hols this year--the Headmaster had encouraged all Muggleborn students to stay at Hogwarts over the break. Death Eater activity had increased and there was no place safer for students such as Hermione than Hogwarts. Severus was called to the Dark Lord's side three times during December. Each time he noticed nothing out of the ordinary and the Dark Lord treated him much as he had always done. The general consensus was that whatever it was that Draco had overheard, it had nothing to do with the Order's main spy.

The Order's main spy was nigh about to drive Hermione barking mad. All through December, Hermione had tried 'the subtle approach' and either Professor Snape was more clueless than she imagined, or he was ignoring her advances. Hermione had tried adoring glances, calling him 'my dear Professor' more often, touching him more often, and increasing her normal rate of hugs, but all to no avail. She was fast deciding she must whack the man over the head--figuratively and perhaps even literally--if she wanted to have any sort of relationship with him before she turned eighty. So, with both great trepidation and great determination, Hermione decided it was time to face the matter head on.

The next time she gave Professor Snape one of her daily hugs (according to Severus' count, number 114), Hermione turned her face up and kissed him on the neck. His response was not quite what she was hoping for.

Pushing her bodily away, Severus regarded her with wide eyes and practically shouted, "Miss Granger, what the bloody hell do you think you're doing?"

"I was kissing you," Hermione said calmly, "at least I was trying to. You are a difficult man to kiss, my dear Professor. I've been trying to do so all month."

Her dear Professor looked completely gobsmacked. "Why in the world would you want to do that?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

Here it was, zero hour. Time to whack the man over the head with her feelings. "Because I'm in love with you, Severus," she said calmly, staring him fearlessly in the eyes. "I've been in love with you for months and I think it's time I did something about it."

He gaped at her, his emotions in such upheaval that Hermione couldn't quite sort them out. There was happiness, true; but it was mixed up with fear, protectiveness, and guilt--Hermione wasn't certain exactly what he was feeling. She'd been expecting him to either rail at her or kiss her; she'd not been expecting this whirlwind of confusion.

Eventually able to close his gaping mouth, Severus opened it again to speak. "I'm terribly sorry, Hermione, but I cannot love you."

Whatever she had expected, it was not this. "You're lying!" she shouted. "I know you are! Why are you doing this? Why must you insist on being so bloody stubborn? You love me, I know you do!"

Eyes going even darker than their usual black, Severus strode up to her. Placing his hands on either side of her face he gripped her head so tightly it almost hurt. Staring fiercely into her eyes, Severus hissed, "I did not lie, you foolish little girl. I said I cannot love you, not I do not." Still holding her head in a vise-like grip, he tilted her face up further as his mouth descended on hers like a thunderstorm. There was nothing gentle about the kiss; Severus kissed her with the desperate hunger of a condemned man. Her every conscious thought was swept away by the onslaught as he plundered her mouth in a searing, bruising kiss. Arms twining about his waist of their own accord, Hermione returned the kiss with equal passion. Abandoning his grip in her hair, Severus wrapped his arms around the young witch, clutching her tightly to his chest as he continued to assault her mouth. When he felt her tremble in his arms and heard her whimper into his mouth, Severus at last came to his senses. He halted the kiss as quickly as he had begun it. Releasing Hermione abruptly, he fled to the window, his back to her, staring into the dark night.

Hearing her quiet step as she moved to follow him, Severus raised a hand to ward her off. "Stay where you are, Hermione, please. I must talk to you...I must explain...and I can't even think when you're touching me." His normally smooth voice was hesitant and trembling with emotion. Hermione was so taken aback by the sound of it that she obeyed him automatically.

"I should never have let things go so far--I placated myself by believing you felt nothing for me but friendship. I truly believed the only heart I was putting at risk was my own. Had I realized your...feelings...for me would progress so far, I would never have encouraged you."

"There is nothing you could have done to stop me from falling in love with you," Hermione said quietly. "You have hardly been encouraging, yet it made no difference."

Bowing his head, Severus wrapped his arms around his chest as if he felt cold. "Be that as it may, no matter our feelings, this can go no further."

"Why?" she snapped. "Why can't this go further if we feel the same? Is it because I'm still a student?"

Dropping his arms, Severus spun to face her. "For Merlin's sake, Hermione, Have you forgotten that I'm the head of Slytherin house?" he snarled back. "I couldn't be arsed about you being a student, but I am NOT going to get you killed!" Taking a long breath, Severus forced himself to calm down before continuing. "We are at war, Hermione, and I am a spy. While I am efficient at Occlumency, I am not infallible. I could explain our friendship as a ploy on my part to get more information on Potter. However, I can in no way explain how a supposed Death Eater decided to involve himself more...intimately with a Muggleborn witch. Don't you see, Hermione? All it would require is one slip on my part and we'd both be as good as dead."

Hermione had not considered the fact their love put his life in danger. Severus could have made no better argument to get her cooperation. "I would never do anything to put you at risk, Professor Snape," she said softly, forcing herself back into a more formal form of address. "You mean the world to me, sir, and I want to keep you safe. I will do my best to be patient until the war is over."

"Don't wait for me, Miss Granger." Severus said while looking at her with haunted eyes. "I am a spy after all; the chances of my surviving the war fall somewhere between slight and snowball's chance in hell."

"I refuse to believe that, sir."

"Believe it or not, it's the truth. Now, Miss Granger, Could I ask you to leave me in peace for the remainder of the day...I need to...I need..."

"It's all right, sir. I need some time to calm down as well." Approaching him, Hermione did not hug him this time; she simply rested a hand gently on his arm and looked at him with her heart in her eyes.

"Goodnight, sir," she murmured. "I will see you tomorrow."

Hermione had no way of knowing she would do no such thing.

The next day, Hermione was walking towards the Great Hall with Harry and Ron, on her way to dinner, when she heard a commotion behind her. Turning, she saw Turpin running at her full-tilt. The jarvey was crying piteously. Bending down, she scooped the upset creature into her arms.

"Turpin! Whatever is the matter?"

"Meeting..." the jarvey managed to spit out between whimpers. "He went to a meeting and he never came home. He's gone! He said you'd take care of me, vixen...stupid wanker's gone and got himself killed." Here Turpin stuck his head under Hermione's arm and they could get no more sense out of him.

"Harry," Hermione began, her voice trembling, "Go talk to Dumbledore, find out if he knows what is going on. I'm going to take Turpin back down to...Professor Snape's study and sit with him."

"You go ahead, Hermione." Harry said calmly. "We'll find out what we can and meet you there."

Lady in Waiting

Chapter 16 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Sitting on the hearthrug in Severus' study, Hermione cradled the whimpering jarvey as she tried to calm her own racing heart. Murmuring a constant stream of soothing, nonsensical phrases to Turpin, she refused to let her own fears run away with her until she heard what the boys found out from the headmaster. The half hour's time she waited for their arrival seemed an endless age of fear and worry. When they arrived, they brought Hermione no hope. The boys sat near her, regarding her with solemn eyes before they found the will to speak.

"It's not good, Mione," Ron began softly, "Dumbledore has most of the Order out looking for any clue of what's happened, but they've found no trace of Snape."

"He's missing...and he's presumed dead," Harry added hesitantly.

At Harry's words, Turpin's whimpering began anew and Hermione took a few moments to try calming the sorrowful jarvey while quiet tears rolled down her own cheeks. "Turpin said it was a meeting...if that is the case, what does Draco know about what happened?"

"That's the trouble, Hermione," Harry said. "It's the hols--Draco always goes to Malfoy Manor for the hols. That's why Dumbledore has the Order searching...Draco's at home with his thrice-cursed father and there's no telling how long it will be before he can risk sending us a message."

"Do you mean to tell me," Hermione began in a tight and angry voice, "that no one has spoken to the one person who can tell us what's happened?"

"It's not that easy, Hermione!" Harry snapped back. "If something has happened to Snape--or if his cover's been blown--then Draco is the only spy we have left! He's now the only chance we have of getting any advance warning at all of when Voldemort's going to make his big move."

"This is war, Hermione. We can't risk Draco's position to find out what happened to a man who's probably already dead," Ron added.

"Don't say that!" Hermione snapped. "We don't know he's...that he's dead. This is simply insane! For all we know, he could be hurt somewhere...needing our help...and because we can't talk to Draco, you're going to sit there and tell me there's nothing to be done?"

"I know it's hard to sit and do nothing. Until we have some sort of information to go on, that's the only option we have," Harry said in resigned tones.

The useless argument was interrupted by a knock on the study door. When Harry opened it, he was surprised to see Remus and Sirius standing in the doorway. Their normally cheerful countenances were unusually sober.

"How is Hermione?" Remus asked softly.

"She's furious, but she's doing all right," Harry replied as he stepped aside to allow the older men entrance. Turning towards the young witch in question, they were all three startled to see Hermione sitting on the rug with Turpin, a drawn wand pointing resolutely at Sirius Black.

"Sirius," she began in a soft, yet steady voice, "I'm afraid I will have to ask you to leave. Severus would not want you here in his rooms."

"Now Hermione," Remus said soothingly, "I'm very sorry for your loss, love, but Sirius has only come here to see how you are doing and...well...it will hardly matter to Severus anymore, will it?"

Disengaging herself from Turpin, Hermione rose to her feet, wand still aimed at Black, who remained standing just inside the door. "How dare you," she hissed. "I will not sit here and listen to such nonsense. Just because we have heard no news does not mean that Severus is dead! While there is the slightest chance that he lives I am going to follow his wishes in regards to his rooms. Sirius, please leave...now."

"Hermione, please...I just want to see you," Sirius began. "I understand your wishes and I'll not go messing around in Snape's rooms. Damn it, girl, I feel bad for what's happened...can't I just stand here by the door for a bit? I promise I'll behave myself."

While Hermione stood pondering the matter, a small furry whirlwind suddenly launched itself at Black, squealing an unlikely war cry of "You chuffing bastard!" as he ran to Sirius and sank his teeth into the man's ankle. Yelping, Sirius drew back his free foot to kick the beast away.

"Don't you dare harm him!" shouted Hermione, raising her wand to again point it at Black's head.

Frustrated and bleeding, Sirius muttered, "Should have worn my boots..." as he reached down and deftly scruffed the upset jarvey by the back of his neck. Lifting the beast up to dangle helplessly off the ground, Sirius said, "Will you behave yourself, you mad thing? I'll let you down if you'll keep your blasted teeth to yourself!"

Turpin may have been physically helpless, as he dangled, squirming, from an angry Black's clenched fist, but there was no power on earth which could halt the upset familiar's tongue. "I'll be damned if I'll behave meself around a complete and utter awlarse like you! Set me loose! I'll bite your fucking tadger off, you tea-bagging, bugging arsehole! I'll beat the seven kinds of shit out of you, you scabby berk! I'll scratch your fucking eyes out! Cocksucking, mardarsed, dicksplash! You pathetic, toe-licking, toady fuckhead!"

"For God's sake, Hermione!" groused Black. "Come get this mad thing away from me!"

Putting her wand back up her sleeve with a sigh, Hermione retrieved the sputtering jarvey and cuddled him close. "Hush, love," she murmured. "I've got you. I know you don't like Sirius, but it's not likely he had anything to do with your master's disappearance."

"How can you be sure, vixen?" Turpin hissed. "He hates my master, 'e does!"

Looking up from where Remus was healing the bite mark on his ankle with a softly spoken healing charm, Sirius said, "You're wrong. Oh, we were never going to pick out china patterns together to be sure, but I don't actually hate the bastard." Turning solemn eyes on Hermione, he continued, "I'll never like the git...and I didn't trust his intentions when he volunteered to help you, Hermione, but I didn't wish him dead...I didn't want this."

Hermione didn't want to believe him, but when she probed Sirius' feelings she found no hatred there. All Sirius was feeling was an almost overwhelming sense of guilt. Her silent musings were interrupted by the jarvey.

"Codswallop!" shouted Turpin. "You tried to kill him before, you chuffing bastard. Why should I believe you haven't tried to off him again?"

"Because Sirius never actually tried to kill Severus before," Remus interjected calmly. "Hermione, I know everyone is upset. Could we all sit down and talk about this more calmly?"

Nodding her head reluctantly, Hermione sat on the sofa and settled Turpin on her lap before she looked at Lupin with narrowed eyes. "What do you mean Sirius didn't try to kill Severus before? He's the one who drew Severus to the Shrieking Shack while you were transformed. From what Harry has told me, if his father hadn't snatched Professor Snape away from the Whomping Willow, you would have attacked him." The guilt she had felt from Sirius was now washing over her in waves. The man obviously still felt very guilty about the whole thing. Was that why he treated Severus so shabbily? Was it not hate at all, but simply a man who couldn't deal with the guilt he was feeling?

When Sirius remained silently staring at the floor, Remus continued, "Sirius was only trying to scare him. What he did was stupid, poorly thought out, and horrendously dangerous, but he wasn't actually trying to kill Severus. What happened that night was partially my own fault. Normally, when I secluded myself in the Shrieking Shack, I shut myself into one of the rooms and put locking charms on the doors. When the boys could join me, they would come let me out. On the night in question, I forgot to ward one of the doors...by the time Severus got to the entrance under the Whomping Willow, I'd already broken through the door and was waiting just inside the tunnel. If James hadn't been as quick with Severus as he was with a snitch, Sirius would have gotten Severus killed--and turned me into a murderer."

Being able to tell the werewolf was speaking the truth did nothing to ease Hermione's confusion. Staring at Sirius, she asked, "But what the devil were you trying to do? Why did you want to frighten him...and what were you planning to do when you got Severus into the Shrieking Shack?"

Sirius sighed and rested his head in his hands. In a slightly muffled voice he began, "I thought if he went in and heard Remus howling and crashing about, Severus would think the place was haunted. That's what everyone else thought, after all." Sirius raised his head to look at Hermione with sad eyes. "I only wanted to give him a good fright. He was so hateful to Lily...and all she ever tried to do was stick up for the blasted prat. It made me furious he treated her that way. So I thought I'd give the git a good scare. Believe me, I understand now that it was a completely idiotic thing to do; I was a stupid kid for hell's sake. I didn't wish him dead then and I don't wish him dead now."

"Is he lying, vixen?" asked Turpin quietly.

"No love, he isn't," Hermione replied.

"I still think he's a chuffing bastard," Turpin groused.

Giving the jarvey a sad smile, Hermione said, "You may be right, but he doesn't mean your master any harm."

"I'm still going to keep my eye on the bumbo clot," Turpin growled.

"I'm sure that's very wise, dear heart," Hermione said with a faint grin.

"You won't leave me alone, will you vixen?"

"No, Turpin, I won't leave you alone. We'll take care of each other until your master gets back." Hermione tried to believe the words she spoke to the jarvey, but she couldn't stop a few quiet tears from rolling down her cheeks.

The next five days were hell on Hermione. With a week left in winter break, she didn't even have classes to distract her from her worry. In some ways, she was thankful for the lack of demands on her time as it left her free to stay with Turpin in Severus' rooms, awaiting news of his fate. The jarvey remained inconsolable and Hermione spent hour after hour speaking to him softly about his master, and reading to him from "The Two Towers." When Turpin was napping and Hermione found herself pacing back and forth before the enchanted window, she felt she would've given just about anything to have a class or two with which to distract her troubled thoughts. Five days had passed since Severus had failed to return to Hogwarts--five long, intolerable days. Trying to be hopeful, Hermione often spoke to Turpin about what fun they would have when his master returned home. Now she was afraid she had done the mourning jarvey a disservice. Perhaps it had been cruel of her to get his hopes up. Five days had passed; if Severus had been lost he would surely have found his way home by now. If he had been injured, and in need of assistance which never appeared...Hermione couldn't bear to finish the thought. Yet, how could her dear Professor possibly live if five long days had passed and they still received no word of him?

Headmaster Dumbledore came down to visit Hermione while she stayed in Severus' study. Assuring the young witch that Severus wouldn't mind, he had dropped the surly Potions Professor's wards on the remainder of his rooms. Albus encouraged the young witch to stay there as long as it brought her comfort, telling Hermione to make herself at home. Hermione spent hours walking through the rooms of his chambers, looking at his things, remembering in detail every word he'd spoken to her. Sleeping in Severus' bed at night, Turpin curled at her side, Hermione played the memory of their single kiss over and over in her mind. If Severus was indeed taken from her, she was infuriated to know that a single kiss was all of him she would ever have to remember. If the fates were kind, and her dark-eyed love were returned to her, Hermione swore she would give in to her desires if she had to tie the stubborn man up in order to do so. If she must be left behind, she would demand more than a single kiss to sustain her.

Such thoughts left Hermione weeping silently as she lay in her love's bed trying not to wake his familiar. It was well and good to have such determination...if only it were not already too late.

Harry and Ron spent most daylight hours keeping Hermione company in Severus' study. Her Professor's wishes in mind, Hermione wouldn't let them into the rest of Severus' chambers, but they passed the long, worrisome hours in the study reading and talking. Twice during the week, Sirius and Remus came by for the afternoon. Though the men had no news of her missing Professor, they did their best to cheer Hermione and keep her hopes up. While Sirius was there, Turpin kept a close eye on the scruffy wizard. Twice he pounced on Sirius' leg, attempting to sink his teeth into the man's ankle. Having wised up after his first visit, Sirius made sure to wear tough, dragon-hide boots, so his ankle was no worse for wear. Amazingly enough, Sirius showed an uncharacteristic patience when dealing with the overwrought jarvey. Gently disengaging the cursing beast's teeth from his boot, Sirius would then sit with the jarvey before the fire, softly explaining how he meant Snape no harm and expressing his hope for the Potion master's safe return. The quiet and serious manner in which Sirius addressed the jarvey brought tears to Hermione's eyes. She hadn't known the gruff man could act so kindly, nor so gently. After the second such episode, Turpin's vendetta against Sirius' ankles ended. While the jarvey still kept a close eye on the 'mardarsed bastard'--as Turpin insisted on calling him--man and jarvey began an uneasy camaraderie of sorts.

So the days passed--one dragging along after the other--without one clue as to Severus Snape's whereabouts. There'd been no word from Malfoy Manor, and when Hermione had tentatively asked the Headmaster whether they could get word to Draco, Albus had been firm in his belief that Draco's cover could not be risked.

"Miss Granger," Albus said kindly, "Voldemort's fall is something that Severus worked towards nearly his whole life. He would not wish us to risk that now...not even on his account."

Hermione knew Dumbledore was right--though it was cold comfort when she lay that night in Severus' bed, worried, frightened, and missing the surly man so desperately her chest literally ached with her loss.

On the sixth day, Hermione and Turpin's routine was interrupted--the pair startled from their quiet reading of Tolkien as they snuggled together before the fire.

"Hermione!" called Harry, as he rushed into the room. Rising to meet him, Hermione struggled to be patient as Harry caught his breath. "Hermione...there's been news. Draco managed to get an owl to us--he's been trying to do so all this time, but his father was watching him like a hawk."

Twining her hands in Harry's shirt, Hermione practically shook him in exasperation. "What did he say? Damn it Harry, what did he say about Severus?"

"I...he said...look Hermione, Dumbledore's called an Order meeting in his office, maybe you should wait and let him explain it..."

She did shake him then. "Harry James Potter--you tell me what you know, and do so immediately!"

"Hermione...there's a chance he's alive, but even if he is, it doesn't look good."

"Where is he, Harry?" Hermione snarled, her patience at an end.

Harry's eyes were full of sorrow for his friend as he revealed what he knew would only cause her fear and pain. "Severus Snape is imprisoned in Azkaban."

The last thing Hermione felt was Harry's arms catching her deftly as she fainted for the first time in her life.

Descent to Madness

Chapter 17 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

The Order meeting looked much like the one that convened to discuss Hermione's new gift--this time, however, Hermione was in attendance, while the black-robed figure normally seated near the door was conspicuously absent. Molly sat near an obviously grieving Minerva, trying her best to comfort the older witch. Moody and Shacklebolt stood near the door, conversing in quiet tones. Hermione sat on the sofa--a quiet Turpin in her lap--flanked by Harry and Sirius. Remus stood behind, resting a comforting hand on her shoulder. As Albus looked at the tableau--the sad young witch surrounded by protective Gryffindors--he deeply wished he had better news to report.

Clearing his throat to gain everyone's attention, Albus spoke. "Thank you for coming. As I'm certain most of you are aware, the news from young Draco is not good. Allow me to begin by reading his letter; you will then know as much as I of this sad business." With a heavy heart, Albus began:

Headmaster,

I must be quick. This is the first moment I've had free of prying eyes to contact you. I wish I could have gotten this to you sooner, but as you will soon see, it might not have made any difference. Uncle Severus is locked in Azkaban. Voldemort has some new recruit who has a flare for potions--some guy named Porcini--and they discovered Severus' potion was bogus. Tell Hermione he was very brave when they confronted him. He laughed in Voldemort's face and told him to kill him and get it over with. Voldemort said, "Why should I kill you when knowing you will suffer indefinitely is so much more pleasurable?" They smuggled him into Azkaban, switching him with a Death Eater already being held there. Voldemort said as long as there's a warm body in the cell, the Dementors won't know the difference. They beat him badly, but I don't think there was any serious damage. Voldemort wanted him to live to suffer--however, he's been in there for five days now; I'm afraid you know very well what that means.

Father's returning; I must get this off.

D

As Albus finished reading, Hermione contemplated what she'd heard. Suddenly, Porcini's poisonous version of the Draft of Peace seemed more devious than ignorant. Formaldious Porcini, the man she'd thought a complete and utter dunderhead, had caused her dear Professor no end of trouble. No matter--now they knew where her snarky professor was, they could plan to get him out of Azkaban and back to Hogwarts. The one thing she didn't understand was why Draco wrote as if it were already too late. Looking at the other Order members, Hermione noted each face reflected the same sad, resigned expression the Headmaster wore. What was with these people? Surely things were better off now that they knew where Severus was? "Headmaster," Hermione said, "I don't understand. Everyone looks as if this is a funeral. Now we know where Professor Snape is, let's go get him out."

"I understand how you feel, Miss Granger," Albus said softly, "but exactly how do you propose we orchestrate an escape from the most highly guarded prison in the wizarding world?"

"There must be a way!" Hermione began, hotly. "If they can smuggle him in why can't we smuggle him out?"

"Because the Dementors are already on You-Know-Who's side," Moody broke in. "While they would allow the Death Eaters to do pretty much anything they wish, the moment we arrive on a rescue mission, every Dementor in the place will swarm all over us. We would never be able to fight our way through--and we would likely suffer heavy losses if we attempt it."

"So storming the castle is out," Harry said. "What about Fudge? Professor Snape isn't supposed to be held there. If we told Fudge, wouldn't he have to do something about it?"

The older wizards exchanged disgusted looks. Shacklebolt spoke up for the first time. "Fudge won't do a damn thing, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, because he hates Albus and he wouldn't piss on Severus if he went up in flames. Secondly, if Fudge admits Severus has been wrongfully imprisoned, then he has to admit there's a serious problem with Azkaban--as well as the Dementors--and I assure you, he isn't about to do that for any reason."

"So where does that leave us, Albus?" Minerva said in a voice so soft and tentative Hermione scarcely recognized it.

"It leaves us with no alternatives, my dear," the Headmaster said sadly. "I can think of no possible way to free Severus, so I'm afraid in Azkaban he will have to remain."

"Like hell he will," Hermione snarled, rising to her feet to stand before the Headmaster's desk. "Severus Snape has devoted most of his life to the Order. There is absolutely no way I'm going to leave him to rot in Azkaban."

"But Miss Granger...Hermione..." began Albus kindly, "I assure you--if there were any way I could free him..." Albus' voice trailed off as he shook his head.

"I understand there's nothing you can do, Headmaster," Hermione said. "However I am not so helpless. If you cannot free him, then I will."

Hermione's heartfelt declaration created an immediate stir amongst the Order members. As they burst into a cacophony of incredulous commentary, only Albus remained calm, regarding Hermione with frank calculation. After allowing the others to vent a little more steam, Albus called them back to order. "Hermione, exactly how strong is that protective wall of yours?"

"It's quite good," Hermione replied in all honesty. "It's the first thing Andrene had me work on, and I've practiced it daily. My projection is still weak, but my wall has become quite easy to maintain."

"Be that as it may, Miss Granger," Moody interrupted, "you will be facing literally hundreds of Dementors. How can your fledgling skills possibly stand up to such numbers?"

"Forgive me, sir, but you are looking at it backwards. I don't have to fight hundreds of Dementors; all I have to do is block one witch's emotions. My wall is perfectly up to blocking my emotions completely. It doesn't matter whether there's one Dementor or a thousand."

"What of the human guards? There aren't many, but even one human guard coming upon you at the wrong time could spell disaster," said Shacklebolt.

"That's a chance I will simply have to take. I'm going to get Severus out of there--and if I die trying, so be it," she replied hotly.

"I understand why you feel this way, Hermione," began Albus kindly, "but you must understand that I am loath to let you waltz into Azkaban alone."

"She doesn't have to go alone," a hesitant voice said from behind her. Sirius Black rose from where he sat on the couch to stand beside Hermione. "I can go with her...as Snuffles. I can scout ahead to keep her from running into any human guards patrolling the corridors; if there is trouble, I can help her fight."

Studying Sirius carefully, Hermione noticed--despite his brave words and aggressive stance--the older wizard was visibly trembling. Letting her focus slip towards him, she gently probed his feelings. Why, the man was terrified! Fright, determination, and guilt swirled around her senses. Hermione understood why he was afraid; the man had been imprisoned in Azkaban for twelve years. Only his abilities as an Animagus had allowed him to keep any semblance of sanity. The determination was harder to understand, though the guilt gave her a clue. Hermione decided he meant the offer very seriously. Sirius still felt very guilty about what had happened at the Shrieking Shack all those years ago, he now had a way to atone for those foolish actions. If he was so determined, Hermione couldn't bring herself to refuse his help. "Are you quite certain you wish to go back to Azkaban, Sirius?" she queried softly.

"I think I'd rather die than go back to that hellhole," Sirius began with a nervous laugh, "but I won't let you go there alone, Hermione. Besides, it's the least I can do after I almost got the chuffer killed."

"Well then," said Albus, "it looks as though we have a rescue to plan after all. Let us get to it, then. How shall the two of you get into Azkaban?"

"I can Apparate us to the grounds before I transform," said Sirius. "Hermione has never been there, but I have, and I can handle a dual Apparation."

"Don't they have anti-Apparation wards in place?" asked Remus.

Shacklebolt gave a snort of disgust. "The Ministry Aurors have been trying to get Fudge to let us place such wards for years. However, Lucius Malfoy convinced Fudge it's an unnecessary expense, since the inmates have no wands. I'm sure that's why the Death Eaters had no trouble getting Snape in there--or getting their own man out."

"All right," said Hermione, "that gets us to the grounds. How do we get in?"

"I came out through a sewage pipe," Sirius said. "I'd really rather not go back that way."

Deciding if the two fools were determined to take up this idiotic rescue mission he'd better help keep them out of trouble, Moody spoke up. "From the grounds you can Apparate to the roof. The top two floors of Azkaban are storage and unused cells. If you have to break in, there isn't much chance of you being overheard there."

"So, we Apparate to the grounds, Sirius transforms, and I will Apparate us to the roof. We do what we have to in order to break in," Hermione summarized. "How do we find Severus, and how do we get him out of there?"

"Getting out is no problem," Albus said while opening a desk drawer and removing an object. Holding out a small, worn tin, he continued, "I believe you may recognize this, Miss Granger."

"That's the portkey that leads to Professor Snape's study!" Hermione exclaimed, obviously pleased. Taking the battered Altoids tin from her Headmaster, she asked eagerly, "How do I activate it?"

"It's keyed to a mental picture of Professor Snape's window seat. Make sure you are all touching, then picture the window seat clearly in your head. If that fails to work, tap it with your wand and say 'snarkypants'; that will activate its emergency back-up spell," Albus said with a wry grin.

"That takes care of everything but finding out which cell he's been shut up in," said Sirius. "Anyone have any clever ideas? There are almost three hundred cells in that dismal place."

The Order members were uniformly silent. There was no easy way, magical or otherwise, to tell which cell Severus had been locked in, and the longer Sirius and Hermione spent looking, the more likely they'd be caught. Turpin had remained sitting by Harry when Hermione rose to address the room; the humans had forgotten all about the unusually silent jarvey until he spoke. "I can find the wanker. I'm his familiar, after all."

"Can you really?" Hermione asked, returning to sit next to the jarvey.

"I always know where he is, if the pervy toss pot isn't too far away," Turpin replied in serious tones.

"All familiars have a magical knack for finding their wizards," explained Minerva. "Of course, owls are best at it, but even Mrs. Norris can always find Filch so long as he isn't too far away. Makes it easy for her to help Filch patrol the halls."

"Won't the Dementors flock to him?" Remus asked quietly.

"No," said Albus confidently, "They will take no more note of him than Snuffles. He may be able to talk, but he's still an animal--no offense meant, Richard."

"No offense taken, you barmy old codger," Turpin replied cheerfully.

"If you go with us, you'll have to keep quiet no matter what, Turpin. Do you understand?" Hermione asked softly.

"I understand, vixen. If Syphilis is there, I'll find him."

"It sounds as if we have our plan," Albus said. "When shall you leave?"

"We should wait until tonight. The Dementors are more active at night, and even less pleasant to be around than usual. Very few human guards stay at night because of this," Sirius explained.

"Very good," Albus said. "I think that's all we need to discuss at this meeting, then. I'll send word to everyone as quickly as possible." As the order members began filing out of Dumbledore's office, he motioned Sirius and Hermione to remain behind. When they were alone, he continued, "Hermione, there's something I must explain that I wish I could avoid. However, I feel obligated to make very certain you understand the situation before you risk your own life on this rescue mission."

"I can't imagine anything you can say which would cause me to change my mind, sir," Hermione said with quiet determination.

"Possibly...possibly. I fear that there is no gentle way to explain this. Severus has been in Azkaban for five days. Being in Azkaban is difficult for anyone, but it is quite dangerous for some. The Dementors feed on the prisoner's feelings of joy and happiness until they suck them all out. When that happens, the prisoners generally go mad. Now some prisoners have many cheerful memories and can last in Azkaban quite some time. Sirius is the only one I've heard of who used his Animagus form to put off madness. Unfortunately for Severus--"

"That's what Draco meant in his letter...when he said it may already be too late...isn't it?" Hermione interrupted, wide eyed.

"I'm afraid so, Hermione. Severus has had a hard life, my dear; he has little in the way of pleasant memories. It's quite likely he has already gone mad."

"It doesn't matter," Hermione said, doing her best to ignore the despair threatening to overwhelm her. "While there is even the slimmest chance he is sane, I will go to him. Even if he is--that it is...too late, I won't leave him in that horrible place. If Severus is mad, he will at least be taken to St. Mungo's, where he will be treated kindly."

"You are determined then?" Albus asked kindly. When Hermione answered with a firm nod, he continued, "And you, Sirius?" Sirius also answered with a nod. "Then nothing is left but to wish you both the best of luck."

The unlikeliest of trios crouched in shadow at the edge of the lawn surrounding one of the most feared and dreaded places in the wizarding world. The castle Azkaban rose up from the lawn like a malignant growth, a hideous protuberance of black stone and haphazardly bricked-over windows. The building itself was a gothic horror, capable of inspiring nightmares even if one had no idea of the atrocities committed within.

Before Sirius transformed into Snuffles, he spoke in hushed tones. "Remember Hermione, do what you have to on the roof, but then keep magic to a bare minimum. There are wards within which will alert the guards of any magic workings. The guards here are not the cream of the wizarding world, but eventually even they will notice the wards if you go casting things willy-nilly."

"I understand, Sirius," Hermione replied solemnly.

"Once we are inside, let Turpin and I stay well ahead. Turpin will guide us to Snape; I'll use my nose to keep us away from any humans mucking about the corridors. Can you get a good bead on that broken spire on the roof?"

"I see it...yes, I can get us there. Sirius, I'm glad you're here," Hermione whispered as she gave the startled wizard a quick hug.

Flustered, Sirius only said, "Let's go, then," before he quickly transformed into a shaggy black dog. Hermione held Turpin in one arm and wound her free hand in the fur at Sirius' scruff. Gazing intently at the broken spire, she Apparated them. Once on the roof, they quickly located an old, disused iron door. It proved impervious to Alohomora, but a well placed Bombardo left the sturdy door barely hanging on its hinges. The three rescuers waited impatiently on the roof to see if the noise had been noticed. When twenty minutes passed with no sound of approach or alarm, they cautiously entered the uppermost floor of Azkaban. Letting Sirius and Turpin lead, Hermione was pleased how quickly they made it through the unused upper floors of the hateful place. However, as they drew closer to the occupied cells, the castle became even more oppressive.

The air was filled with the babbling speech and terrified screams of the inmates. It was poorly lit, almost too dark for the lone human rescuer to see. The corridors were cold and damp, the air was foul. Through the hallways wafted a multitude of disgusting scents: blood, sickness, excrement, rotting food, and rotting bodies. It smelled of insanity. It smelled of death. It was all Hermione could do to stay silent as she tried to keep herself from gagging again and again. Eventually, they began passing Dementors drifting through the corridors.

The Dementors took no interest in them at all, not even when one brushed up against Hermione when she didn't move out of its way quick enough. However, their effect on the rescue party was apparent. Even without the Dementors' undivided attention, contact with the foul creatures began to wear on the three rescuers. Thanks to Sirius, they ran into no human guards, though they were forced several times to backtrack and take alternate corridors to avoid them. Hermione found such delays excruciating; she took hope in seeing that the further they progressed, the more excited the strangely silent jarvey seemed to get.

After what seemed, to Hermione, an eternity of directionless rambling, Turpin at last stopped before a cell door. When Hermione raised her brows in question at the jarvey, Turpin nodded enthusiastically. They had planned for this moment. Hermione would enter alone to access Severus' mental state and see if she must calm him in some way before they used the portkey. Sirius and Turpin would wait just outside the door and keep watch. If the small bit of magic she needed to open the cell attracted any guards, Sirius would regain his human form, suppress Severus however necessary, and they would depart in all haste. Hermione sincerely hoped they could handle Severus more gently than that. With a quiet "Alohomora," Hermione entered the cell.

It was pitch black and the weak light from the dim corridor did nothing to chase away the shadows. Determining she would have to risk a little light, Hermione breathed a quiet "Lumos Minimos." A soft glow from the tip of her wand revealed a heart-wrenching sight. Severus Snape sat on the cold damp floor, legs stretched out in front of him, head leaning against the filthy stones of the cell wall. Always thin, he now looked skeletal. There were old bruises on his face and dried blood crusted over his chin from what appeared to be a broken nose. The flesh around his eyes was sunken and dark. He sat there--not saying a word--glaring at her where she'd stopped in shock.

"Severus?" her voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

Severus' voice was louder, though it was scratchy from disuse. "Get out!" he growled. "Get the hell away from me, you false bitch!"

Feeling tears begin to creep down her face, Hermione regarded him sadly. Severus Snape was obviously mad.

Going Home

Chapter 18 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Continuing to glare at Hermione, where she remained frozen in shock, Severus growled to himself, "Why do I imagine you're weeping? You've got more backbone than that, you tormenting harpy." Raising his voice slightly, he hissed, "I refuse to give you any satisfaction, you infernal scourge. Remove yourself immediately!" With that said, Severus resolutely closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the stones. He continued to ignore her even when she called his name.

Finding herself at a loss, Hermione stared at him a moment. She couldn't use her Empathy to access his mental state, as one slip of her wall would draw the Dementors like flies to honey. Perhaps if she could get him talking, then she could decide if it was safe to risk him seeing Sirius--or if the mere sight of the Animagus would send him into a fury. "Severus," she began softly, "I've been so very worried about you. It took five days for Draco to get a message to Hogwarts, and I was terrified you were dead. You have no idea what joy it brought me to hear you lived. I love you so very much, Severus."

Barely cracking his eyes open, Severus regarded the young witch with obvious disdain. "This is a switch for you, chimera."

"What do you mean, Severus?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

"Shall I humor you and thus humor some sick and malignant part of myself? What is the point of that? The moment I do so, you will undoubtedly begin to rant at me again...telling me how I let you down...telling me you never cared for me..."

"Severus, I have never said such things to you. Nor will I, as they are so far from the truth as to be comical," Hermione explained calmly.

"That is not what you said last night, you torturous phantasm," Severus growled in his raspy voice.

"Severus," she began, her voice going a bit high in exasperation, "I wasn't here last night. I've only just arrived to...well--to rescue you."

Closing his eyes again, Severus spoke, his voice low and resigned, "Now you lie, you ridiculous fabrication, as you have been haunting my nights all this insufferable week."

Releasing her breath in a relieved sigh, Hermione spoke cheerfully for the first time since entering the cell. "Oh, blessed Merlin! I thought you'd gone barking mad, beloved. It seems our only trouble is that you can't believe I'm real."

"Of course you aren't real; you are only a product of my growing dementia." Opening his eyes again, he gazed at her sorrowfully. "Oh, my vixen, how I wish it were otherwise."

Walking to where he sat, Hermione gently knelt between his legs. "And how, my dear Professor, shall I convince you that I am really here?"

"There is no way you can convince me, you are but a figment...a mirage...all you can do is talk, and thus torment me--" Severus broke off suddenly when Hermione reached up, tucking a strand of his filthy, tangled hair behind his ear. Leaving her hand there, Hermione rubbed her thumb gently across his cheekbone. At the first touch, Severus' eyes went wide, his breath catching in his throat. "Perhaps this will convince you, beloved," she whispered, leaning forward to softly brush her lips against his. Pulling back to meet his eyes, Hermione saw his lips move to form her name, though he had no breath to lend sound to the utterance. Raising a trembling hand, he lightly touched his fingertips to his lips, pure disbelief upon his face. That same hand then traveled the brief distance between them and--after a moment of insecure hesitation--Severus pressed his fingertips softly against Hermione's mouth. With a wild, inarticulate cry, Severus wrapped both arms around Hermione and tugged her forward against his chest. Still incapable of speech, he buried his face in the crook of her neck. Feeling his whole body tremble with emotion, Hermione hugged him back tightly. Rubbing her hands up and down his back, she murmured that he was safe now, that he was loved, that she was going to take him home.

"To Hogwarts?" he croaked into her neck.

"Yes, love, home to Hogwarts."

Though he made no sound, she could feel his hot tears against her skin. Resuming her calming words, Hermione held him tight for the short time Severus required to get his emotions under control. When he raised his face from her neck, Hermione saw that his black lashes were wet. The few tears he'd shed left clean trails of pale skin on his dirty, bruised, and bloody face. "You are the most beautiful thing I have seen in my entire life," she whispered. He smiled then, reaching a hand up to tangle in her hair and pull her face to his. Gently at first--as if still seeking to prove she was real--he then deepened the kiss as he explored her mouth hungrily. Severus was filthy...he stank...she could taste the dried blood on the skin around his lips--she didn't care. So joyous was she to find her love alive and sane that she happily wound her hands in his matted hair and did her best to snog the living daylights out of the man. For a long moment the two people crouched on the floor of a cell in the midst of Azkaban forgot where they were--forgot there was need to hurry. They forgot that any world existed except the divine feeling of lips and tongues and hands. When Hermione felt his hand slip around her torso to knead her breast, she moaned into his mouth, arching her back to press firmly into that welcome caress. They may have gone on in that fashion until Sirius and Turpin came in to see what the delay was, but at that moment an enthusiastic turn of Hermione's head caused her to bump her nose into Severus' broken one. At his hiss of pain, Hermione came to her senses.

"Love, I could snog you forever, but what say we get you home first?" she said, with a chagrined smile.

"How are we getting out of here, vixen? We've been damned lucky so far, the Dementors won't stay away forever," Severus said, his normally smooth tones still rough and scratchy. Hermione hoped desperately his voice was rough from disuse and not from screaming. He'd been through a terrible ordeal; she knew there were bound to be aftereffects--no matter how enthusiastically he snogged her. Vowing to do her level best to help him forget--once she got him safely home--Hermione reluctantly disengaged herself from Severus' arms and stood.

"Headmaster Dumbledore gave me the portkey that goes to your study. We'll have you home in a moment," she replied with a smile. "Let me just go and collect the others."

"Others?" he asked with a scowl that looked so exactly like his normal self it made Hermione giggle.

"Yes, others. One whom I think you'll be happy, indeed, to see. One whom you will likely not be pleased to see--to say the least." Hermione leaned down to look him in the eye. "Before you even think about letting one nasty comment fall out of your lovely mouth..." here she paused to give said mouth a quick peck, "I want to make it very clear to you that I wouldn't have gotten here safely without his help."

The kiss distracted Severus just long enough that he failed to question Hermione further before she turned to go to the cell door. Severus was startled for a moment when a small, furry, missile launched itself from the dim corridor and raced across the cell floor to land firmly in his lap. By that time he had identified the missile and cheerfully caught his familiar.

"Syphilis! Syphilis!" the jarvey chattered happily.

The smile Severus gave to his familiar fled abruptly from his face as he looked up to see who else followed Hermione into the room. He knew that mangy mongrel...Black!

Walking into the cell, Sirius took one look at the glare on Snape's face and the tentative wagging of his scruffy tail immediately halted. Though he could not stop the instinctive raising of his hackles as he looked at the bedraggled and obviously angry Potions master, Sirius managed to stop short of growling. Damn stubborn man! I should have known better than to think the blasted git would appreciate any sort of effort on my part. He's said to be so bloody brilliant; doesn't he realize how fucking hard it was for me to come back to this madhouse? I waltz back in here--risking my own sanity for the bloody bastard--and for what? To be fucking glared at like he caught me pissing in his wardrobe! Well fuck that...and fuck him. I didn't do this for gratitude...I did it because I owed him. We're even now, that's enough for me. Sirius forced himself to calm down as he watched Hermione help Snape to stand.

Once she had him upright, Hermione handed Turpin to Severus to hold in one arm and then pulled his free arm around her shoulders to steady him. Though Severus made

every attempt to hide it, his weakness and pain were easily apparent. When Severus was situated, Hermione motioned Sirius closer as she took the worn Altoids tin from a pocket of her Muggle jeans. Once again she wound her fingers in the fur at the scruff of Sirius' neck as she prepared to activate the portkey. Hermione hoped mental activation would work. With one hand full of dog fur and the other holding the tin itself, she would never manage a wand as well. Closing her eyes, Hermione pictured the window seat in Severus' study. The familiar--if nauseating--tug in her stomach was welcome, indeed. In the blink of an eye the putrid cell in Azkaban was left behind and the odd foursome found themselves back at Hogwarts, safe in Professor Snape's study. When Severus stumbled, Hermione dropped the portkey and let loose of Sirius' neck in order to use both hands to steady him.

Albus, Minerva, and Poppy were waiting for them. As they appeared, Minerva gave a glad cry as she fairly flew off the sofa, giving Severus a fierce hug. Severus' eyebrows flew up in pleased shock. Despite the fact that the overenthusiastic embrace made him wince with pain, he returned the hug for a long moment. Eventually, he was forced to speak. "Minerva, while I am quite pleased to see you as well, this embrace is not doing my broken ribs any good," he said in his strange, raspy voice.

"Sweet Merlin--Severus, I'm so sorry!" Minerva said as she loosened her grip. "I was so glad to see you...I'm afraid I got quite carried away."

"I'm rather glad...to be home as well," Severus replied quietly.

"Help me get him into his bed, Minerva, and I'll see what he's done to himself this time," Poppy said, coming forward to help the injured man to his bedroom.

The two women led him away as he groused, "I assure you, Madame Pomfrey, none of these injuries are self-inflicted."

Albus chuckled as they left the study. Turning to Hermione, he said, "It's good to see the boy's snark is still intact. Considering what he's endured, he seems little worse for wear." Looking Hermione up and down, Albus chuckled again. "In fact, I'd venture to guess Severus was feeling rather frisky when you found him." If Hermione was puzzled by the Headmaster's obvious amusement and odd statement, she didn't have long to wonder about it.

"What the bloody hell did he do to you in that cell?" the now human Sirius snapped. "Now we're here in the light, I can see exactly why it took you so blasted long to *calm him down!*"

Hermione stared at Sirius in shock. How could Sirius know what had happened? Had he been spying on them instead of looking for trouble in the corridor?

"Sirius, that's quite enough, my boy. Hermione, perhaps you might like to adjourn to the lavatory and...er...freshen up a bit?"

Now completely confused, Hermione gave up attempting to figure out the odd situation and docilely headed for the lav. Once there, the mirror showed quite clearly what caused the Headmaster's amusement and Sirius' gruffness. The skin around her mouth and jaw line was smeared with dirt. There were smudged, but obvious, fingerprints on the pale skin of her throat--and what could only be described as a handprint on her jumper, directly over her left breast. Hermione blushed to the roots of her hair, then burst into a fit of laughter. Why, anyone at all could tell exactly what she and Severus had been up to in that cell! "Let them tease me," she muttered to herself as she tidied up her appearance with a few well-placed charms. "Severus is alive, he's home, and he's no longer a spy. They may tease me at will; there's nothing that can tarnish my happiness!"

Returning to the study, Hermione found the Headmaster and Sirius discussing Severus' situation. She was surprised to learn Professor Snape would not be returning to teaching his classes.

"It simply isn't safe for him, my dear," Albus explained. "Voldemort will eventually learn Severus is no longer in Azkaban--no matter how we handle this situation. Tom's quite mad, you know. If he thinks Severus has escaped Azkaban unharmed, he will stop at nothing to ensure Severus is killed. However, if we keep the boy's whereabouts secret from all but the Order, Voldemort will likely assume he died and was disposed of by the Dementors."

"Do you think that will work?" Hermione asked.

"I believe it will. Even if Voldemort suspects he is alive, he can't kill Severus if he can't find him. With Draco in place to assure the Death Eaters that Severus is not here, I think he will be safe enough."

"But will the stubborn bugger stay put?" asked Sirius.

"We can persuade him to, of that I am certain. Severus is a brave man, but he's no fool--and I know very well that he wants to be around for Voldemort's fall," Albus said with confidence.

"Won't he miss teaching his classes, sir?" Hermione asked.

Albus gave a snort of laughter at that. "I imagine he will enjoy the break. He's been complaining of not having time enough to do private research on potions that might aid the war effort. With no classes and no more DE meetings, he'll have all the time he wishes."

"It's not like the students will miss the bastard at any rate," Sirius sniped.

"Possibly not," Albus said with a chuckle. Then his expression grew more serious. "Though we may very well miss him doing it. Severus is the best Potions Professor Hogwarts has ever seen."

Now it was Sirius' turn to laugh. "Surely you're joking, Albus! The man's a menace in the classroom."

"He certainly does have a...distinctive style of teaching," Albus admitted. "He is, however, the only Hogwarts Potions master who has never had a fatal accident in one of his classes. Potions is a dangerous subject, Sirius. We are quite lucky to have Severus as an instructor, despite his lack of popularity with the students." Here the discussion was interrupted by the return of Minerva and Poppy. "How is the patient?"

"Severus is resting comfortably," Minerva answered. "Draco was correct--none of his injuries were too serious. He had a fractured fibula, three broken ribs, assorted cuts and bruises, and his nose was broken again, I'm afraid. Poppy has fixed him up, now he just needs rest and some decent food."

"Miss Granger," Poppy said briskly, "Professor Snape needs to take a Dreamless Sleep potion, but the stubborn man refuses to do so until he speaks with you. I would've forced the issue, but...well--I didn't want to be gruff with him when he's just gotten back from that terrible place. Perhaps you could go speak with him for a bit?"

"I would be happy too, Madame Pomfrey, if you think it will do him no harm?"

"Not at all, his injuries have been healed; I'm only concerned that he gets his rest. The draught is on the bedside stand; do make sure he takes it before you leave."

"I will, Madame Pomfrey. Thank you." That said, Hermione left the study. She was eager to see with her own eyes that her snarky Professor was none the worse for wear.

Severus lay motionless in his four poster bed, his head propped up on the pillows. Minerva and Poppy had cleaned him up, as well as healing his injuries. All trace of the filth of Azkaban had vanished from his pale skin, his still-damp hair lay across the pillow, and Minerva had helped him into a grey flannel nightshirt before tucking him in beneath the coverlet. As Hermione approached the bed, she couldn't help but be distracted by the dark, curling hair peeking out the open neck of his nightshirt. He looked tired. He looked pale. He looked absolutely delicious.

"How are you feeling, sir?" Hermione asked as she reached the bedside.

"Minerva informs me that I am no longer your Professor, Hermione," Severus said with an amused smirk. "I believe a lovely young witch who has just saved my sanity--if not my life--might be allowed to use my given name."

"Then let me rephrase that query," Hermione said with a happy grin. "How are you feeling, love?"

In answer, Severus reached a hand out to her. Hermione thought he simply wanted to hold her hand, but she failed to recall that a recuperating Slytherin was still a Slytherin. As she put her hand in Severus', he gave a hard tug. Unprepared for such a maneuver, Hermione toppled over and came to rest sprawled half over Severus' prone form.

"At the moment," he murmured, winding a hand in her hair, "I'm feeling surprisingly well." Severus pulled her head down until her lips were pressed firmly against his own. Hermione could tell he was exhausted--this kiss had neither the strength of their first kiss nor the almost frantic quality of the kiss they shared in Azkaban. It was slow, sultry...and completely consuming. Hermione felt heat from the kiss speed down her spine, causing a flood of arousal, and literally curling her toes. When the same wandering hand that had caressed her breast in Azkaban again found its target, Hermione moaned into his mouth, arching against him once again. Severus' caress reminded Hermione that she had hands of her own. One found its way down Severus' side, clutching at his hip, as the other journeyed to the opening of his nightshirt to play happily with the crisp curls she'd glimpsed earlier.

Hermione could feel Severus' growl of pleasure vibrate through his chest. She could also feel the growing proof of his desire against her hip. A short battle raged in Hermione's understandably distracted mind as she weighed letting Severus get much needed rest against taking this delightful embrace a little farther. Severus' tongue stroking her own, his hand wound tight in her hair, and his fingers--which had begun tweaking and teasing her nipple--made up her mind for her. Shifting farther over Severus so she straddled his hips, Hermione began to rock gently. Even through nightshirt, blanket, and Muggle jeans, the feeling of rubbing her tingling sex over his hard cock was almost painfully arousing.

Evidently, Severus enjoyed it as well. With another rumbling growl he pressed up into her, falling easily into a rhythm which meshed with her caresses. At last, breaking the kiss, he spoke, "Love, as amazing as this feels--I fear I'm not up to much more than this tonight. I cannot...damn it, woman! Thoughts of you...of having you wrapped around me like this...that's what kept me sane in that horrid place and now I cannot..."

"Hush," she interrupted. "There will be other times for me...other nights for love. Darling, I know you're too exhausted for anything more, let me give you this now. Do you honestly wish me to stop?"

"Gods, no, vixen," he said as he pressed up into her again. "Even with all this blasted cloth between us you feel amazing."

"Then hush," Hermione said, bringing her mouth back down to halt his protests.

Hermione writhed against him as he ground his hips up into her. His hands traveled down her back to grip her hips tightly, encouraging her thrusts. It wasn't long before Hermione felt his body tense beneath hers. He once again broke away from her lips to whisper roughly into her ear, "Yes...oh, my vixen, yes." His words turned into a throaty growl as he pumped his release into the blankets. Almost immediately, his body relaxed and his hands fell limply away from her hips.

Looking at him fondly, Hermione saw his eyes were already closed. He was falling asleep with what could only be described as a pleased smirk on his dear face. Carefully removing herself from atop him, Hermione took a moment to hit the blankets with a quiet cleaning charm before taking up the potion Poppy had left. Raising Severus' head with one hand, she roused him enough to drink the potion, then gently laid his head back down.

Hermione wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed next to him. Deciding it wouldn't be prudent, she gave him a last kiss on the forehead before leaving his quarters for Gryffindor tower. Classes began in the morning and Severus needed rest to recover. As difficult as it was for her to leave his side, it seemed for the best.

Hermione couldn't have known the trouble she'd have avoided had she only stayed.

The Space Between

Chapter 19 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Hogwarts was a bustle of activity on the first day of classes after winter break. The halls rang with the chatter of students hurrying from class to class, while the teachers had their work cut out for them as they tried to get their pupils' minds off the recent holiday and back on their studies. Madame Pomfrey had a busy day as well--with the children's spirits so high, there was always a rush in the Hospital wing. She spent most of the day dealing with scrapes, bruises, and hexes gone awry. Even Albus had more to do than usual--with his Potions Professor out of action, he had asked Remus Lupin to take the lower level classes. Unfortunately, there were few able to handle the potions taught to the upper levels, so Albus took those on himself.

There was one place in the midst of this activity which was strangely calm. Far below the hustle and bustle of the main floors, the Potion master's dungeon chambers were unusually quiet. The man himself was in his bed, propped up on pillows as he attempted to read. Severus would have liked to have some more interesting employment to distract himself from his thoughts, but each time he rose and attempted to do anything more strenuous than stumble to the lav, a small delegation of house elves popped into his rooms and scolded him back into bed. Poppy might have no time to visit the recuperating Professor herself, but she'd obviously left the house elves strict instructions. He couldn't even hex the little beasts, as Albus had put Severus' wand away in a drawer of his desk and the troublesome creatures wouldn't let him wander as far as his study. Always an energetic man, Severus found the forced bed rest extremely tiresome. As his solitary day wore on, he did far too little reading and far too much thinking.

Severus had escaped Azkaban remarkably unscathed; that is not to say that he came away unaffected. Had he been able to return to his usual routine and pursuits, these effects would've faded gradually and, most likely, caused him little trouble. As things stood, Severus returned from Azkaban to a solitary period of inaction, leaving him far too much time to think. Dementors have a detrimental and lasting effect on humans. Even if one escapes insanity, prolonged exposure to such fiends causes a heaviness of spirit which no amount of chocolate can easily alleviate.

Severus Snape was a brave man. Honorable, intelligent, and sly, as well as an accomplished duelist, he was as at home in battle as before a simmering cauldron. Respected as a scholar, Snape's potion work was above reproach; his research had been published in all the discerning Potions journals. In his own way, Severus Snape was an amazing man, however, there was one area where the formidable man was completely out of his depth. Severus knew very little about women, and almost nothing about love.

Severus did not realize how out of his depth he was with the subject. He rather naively assumed his well-developed powers of logic would serve him well in this area, as they had in the rest of his life. He really couldn't be blamed for not understanding logic has little to do with matters of the heart.

Having awoken that morning screaming from a dream where he was back in his squalid cell at the mercy of the Dementors, Severus spent the first hour of his day simply

relieved to be home. His relief turned to thoughts of exactly how his freedom had been won. The next hour was spent blissfully re-living every moment, every word, and every touch he'd shared with his beloved rescuer. As the day wore on, his pleasant reflections turned more serious and Severus took to fretting over his situation.

I may no longer be a spy, but that does not change the fact that my days are numbered. If anything, my death is more of a certainty now I've been found out. The Dark Lord will never rest until he feels I've paid for the horrendous crime of realizing he's an insane bastard. He'll use every power in his command to make sure I'm killed--actually, if I can manage to stay alive until the final battle, that may prove very useful. I'd be quite the distraction to the damned madman. I've no chance of besting the beast, but I could hold my own long enough to draw his fire and give the others a chance to act. That bears some serious thought.

I've another issue which bears serious thought: what the bloody hell am I going to do about the vixen? Last night was enchanting...had I not been so exhausted I would've taken things well past the point of no return. Hermione insists she would have fallen in love with me no matter what, but what if that isn't true? I've stolen her heart--I cannot change that--now shall I destroy her innocence as well, leaving her without even that when I meet my demise? Every fucking thing I've ever touched in my life I have sullied in some way. I will not do the same to Hermione. She is young; she doesn't understand the consequences of giving herself to me--body as well as heart--only to have me leave her. No, I won't besmirch her in any fashion. Hermione will hurt when I die--I cannot save her from that, but I can save her from giving her innocence to a man who won't be around long enough to make it worth the loss. I will simply have to convince her it's for the best. When I die, she will grieve, then she will move on. Such a lovely young woman will have no great difficulty finding love again. My duty is to ensure that she has as little to regret about our...association...as possible.

Unlike Severus, Hermione had a wonderful day. Bored with her classes, she found her thoughts drifting with increasing frequency to the man who fretted in the dungeons. It amazed her how quickly one's spirit can rise from despair to elation. Only yesterday her life had seemed over, now Severus was home safe and he was no longer a spy. The memory of their kisses was a light in her heart. The memory of feeling his body writhing beneath her own sent tingles of excitement through her whole being. Barely able to pay attention in class, Hermione suffered through the day, waiting impatiently for it to end so she could make her way down to Severus.

At last, donning Harry's invisibility cloak and making her way to the dungeons, Hermione could barely calm the wild beating of her heart.

Severus had at last been cleared by Poppy to leave his bed. When Hermione entered his study and threw off the invisibility cloak, she found Severus pacing before the fire. Stopping as if frozen in place, he stared at Hermione, his expression unreadable. If his odd behavior even registered with Hermione, she didn't show it. Thrilled to see him on his feet and looking so well, Hermione did what she'd wished to do all that long day. Rushing to the enigmatic man, she threw her arms around his waist in a tight hug. Feeling his body stiffen in response, Hermione wondered what was amiss. Her puzzlement grew as she felt that familiar, but unexpected, awkward pat on her shoulder. After the events last night, why wasn't he embracing her in return? A brief probe of her Empathic power did nothing to enlighten her. All she could feel was that comforting, if distracting, wall of protectiveness.

"Severus, what is wrong?"

"Miss Granger..."

"My name is Hermione. I thought we made it clear last night that I am no longer your student."

"Be that as it may," Severus said as he gently unwound himself from Hermione's arms, "we need to talk. I think it necessary to keep up proper forms."

"Whatever is wrong, I would feel more comfortable discussing it if you would address me by name. We are friends at least, aren't we?"

"Yes...Hermione...we are friends. Would you care to sit down? Can I offer you some tea?"

Becoming a little frightened by his attitude, Hermione declined tea and sat down on the sofa. She was further distressed when Severus did not join her, but resolutely sat in one of the black leather arm chairs.

"Hermione," Severus began, looking into her eyes with an expression of resigned sadness, "as...enjoyable as last night was...I do not feel that I can continue such a relationship with you with a clear conscience."

Alarmed now, Hermione bit back a gasp as she made every attempt to remain calm. "I don't understand. I admit, while you were still a spy any attempt to...deepen our relationship could have had dangerous consequences. But you are a spy no longer--why should we refuse ourselves something we both want?"

Hermione looked so innocently insecure when she made that last statement, that it took Severus every ounce of his will to stop himself from taking the young witch into his arms and proving to her just how much he did want her. That would never do. As little as he would enjoy the pain his words would inflict on her, he must stay strong. It would be better for her in the end. "Hermione, as much as we both do want this," he couldn't help but reassure her, "it simply isn't wise. I may not be a spy any longer, but I am still a marked man. There is no conceivable way that I will survive the final battle with Voldemort..."

"You can't know that!" Hermione interrupted.

"Of course I can," he snapped, beginning to lose his façade of calm. "I am a marked man, Hermione. When I show up at the final battle Voldemort will do all he can to ensure my death. One does not go against that madman without serious repercussions."

"Then don't go!" Hermione snapped back. "If what you say is true, then you can be little help to the battle anyway. Stay here...stay safe," she pleaded.

"Absolutely not!" he shouted, rising to his feet in anger. In a vain attempt to still his sudden ferocity, Severus resumed pacing before the fire. After a moment of silent pacing, he turned his back to the fire to regard her with flashing eyes. "On a strategic note, my very presence might drive Voldemort to make serious mistakes in order to get to me. All that aside, I have a chance to do something I have been denied my whole adult life. For once, for once in my whole blasted life, when I go to fight this time I shall be able to stand proudly at the side of the people I care about. I shall be able to stand up and fight for what I know is right. I *have* to do this. Can you understand?"

It took all her power not to leap up from the sofa and wrap her arms around him. She understood that a hug was not what he needed now. "Of course I understand. You are an honorable man, Severus Snape; it is one of the many reasons that I fell in love with you. Forgive me, it was selfish of me to even suggest you do anything other than be the brave man you are."

Temporarily mollified, Severus returned to sit in the chair. His composure would not last long.

"I understand that things will be dangerous for you, but the war is dangerous for us all. I don't understand why you think this must change what we have between us."

"All I wish is to spare you as much pain at that separating as possible," he said simply. "It isn't fair for me to take this relationship farther when I know you will only be that much more hurt when I leave you."

"Severus," she said, the pitch of her voice going a bit high in exasperation, "even if you are right about not surviving, it doesn't work that way. I am already in love with you; I will already be hurt. Denying me the joy of physically expressing how I feel about you will not lessen my pain. It will only cause me despair that I was not able to take full advantage of every moment I was lucky enough to have you by my side."

"Forgive me, Hermione, but you simply don't have the life experience to make that choice."

"I beg your pardon?" she snapped.

"Hermione, you are only seventeen years old. You could not possibly understand the repercussions such a thing..."

"And you do?" Hermione interrupted, nearly shouting. "Forgive me, Severus, but while I find you brilliant in many things, I think what you know about love wouldn't fill twelve inches of parchment."

"Be that as it may," he growled, "I think, in this case, I am more qualified to know what's best for you."

This time it was Hermione who leapt to her feet in anger. "How dare you! How dare you think for one moment that you know more about what's best for me than I know myself! I assure you, I do not in any way need some male to make my decisions for me. I am quite able to make up my own mind. I would think you would respect me enough not to attempt to make decisions on my behalf."

Severus rose to his feet to face her. What had begun as a calm discussion was fast approaching an all out row as they shouted into one another's face. "Someone has to make decisions for you, as you appear far too insipidly stupid about this whole situation to make the obvious logical choice!" he bellowed.

"Logical? You call your stand logical?" Hermione screamed back. "What sort of twisted logic have you used to decide what's best for me? No couple's future is certain, you bloody idiot! You might die in the final battle. I could get flattened by the Knightbus tomorrow. There are no blasted guarantees! Why is it more logical to deny what we both want because of things which may or may not happen?"

"The odds state..."

"Love is not ruled by odds and statistics, Severus!"

"Spoken like a true imbecile, when the logic of a debate is not going her way," he hissed.

Hermione's face suddenly went calm, the volume of her voice dropped so low it sounded little louder than a whisper. "Is this what you think of me then? Do you think me so moronic that I cannot make my own life choices? I don't buy that, Severus. I think you are simply afraid to finish what we started."

"I'm no bloody coward, Hermione," he snapped, his voice going dangerously low.

"Perhaps not on the battlefield, but pushing me away 'for my own good' is the highest form of cowardice. You would have me act as if you are dead already, when every day should be precious to us."

"My mind is made up. I will not be swayed."

"Obviously. And equally obvious to me is how unimportant my feelings on the matter are to you," Hermione hissed.

"I never said your feelings were unimportant," Severus shouted.

"You didn't have to, you pathetic man. You made that perfectly clear when you decided to take my choice in the matter away from me." Hermione shouted back.

"Get out!" he screeched.

"Oh, I will. Believe me--you won't have to worry about pushing me away ever again," Hermione snapped as she stormed for the door. Opening it, she turned back for one last shot. "You act as if you are dead already. If you do die, I wonder if you'll notice the difference."

The slam of the door as Hermione left was answered by a resounding crash as Severus hefted the coffee table and threw it at the door, smashing it into kindling. The coffee table was shortly followed by one of the armchairs and then every object in Severus' reach that he could lift. Eventually, he stopped from sheer exhaustion. Ignoring the debris, Severus made his way to the liquor cabinet, thankful his store of firewhisky had escaped his wrath unscathed.

Calm before the Storm

Chapter 20 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

For the next three weeks, Hermione was nearly impossible to be around. Her friends tried to comfort her, but when that just seemed to fuel her anger, they resorted to behaving as though everything were normal. While this didn't exactly calm her, it did make her stop short of hexing anyone. Throwing herself into both her schoolwork and the practice of her Empathy powers, Hermione rarely spoke to any of her friends unless it was to give a short diatribe on the stupidity of men in general--and Potions masters specifically. The first days after the potions master's return from Azkaban, Hermione's friends feared the dour man had hurt her in some way. Her dissertations on the matter made them realize the stubborn man had only made her furious. This made even Ron feel a bit sorry for Snape, though the general opinion of Hermione's friends was relief her fury was not aimed at any of them.

The emotional projection practices were an everyday occurrence now; Hermione seemed driven to increase her skill as quickly as possible. Each evening found the trio (with the addition of Draco and Ginny) in the Room of Requirement, as Hermione honed her skills. For the most part, the practices went off without mishap, despite Hermione cautiously exploring the projection of emotions other than humor. Two weeks into the intense experiments, Hermione made the mistake of projecting anger. Unleashed, the fury she tried to hold in check lashed through all five participants. Though Hermione ended the projection abruptly, it was not soon enough to stop the rush of hexing that overtook the group. All five of them ended up spending a night in the infirmary as Poppy tried to sort them out. By morning they were back to normal--all except Draco, who still sported the tail of a cat. Poppy had done her best to deal with the furry appendage, but it resisted her every attempt to remove it. Exasperated, Poppy told Draco there was nothing further she could do; he would simply have to wait until it wore off. This did not please the young Malfoy at all. Not only would he have to put up with the horrid jokes the Gryffindors tormented him with, it was rather painful when he had to tuck it into the leg of his trousers, and it made sitting for any length of time uncomfortable, indeed. After the second day of watching his friends smirk as he squirmed uncomfortably while sitting in class, Draco decided something had to give, and he made a resolution to seek his uncle out after classes ended for the day.

Draco had tried to see his stubborn uncle shortly after the infamous fight. If Hermione was prickly, Severus was like a walking hurricane just waiting for the smallest excuse to unleash his fury. He barricaded himself in his rooms, threw himself into research, and hexed anyone foolish enough to disturb him. Barely sleeping, rarely eating, he looked little different than he did when he'd first returned from Azkaban. Speaking to no one, he buried himself in parchments and potion ingredients. After the first week, even Albus gave up trying to speak to the angry wizard, and Turpin left Severus to his own devices after his master hexed him into a bat for the third time in a single week. Turpin took to sneaking up to Gryffindor tower when the students were in classes. There he found Crookshanks to be excellent company, and the two familiars had fun playing simple games like hide and seek.

Draco made his way cautiously through Snape's rooms and toward the volatile man's private lab. This room he entered with his wand already drawn; he hadn't forgotten the last time he had attempted to talk with his hex-happy uncle. Sure enough, as Draco entered the room, the ex-spy spun to face him, wand drawn and a scowl on his face. Noticing Draco's own wand was leveled at his chest; Severus forwent hexing him immediately and stood scowling at the young blonde.

"I need your help, Uncle Severus," Draco drawled. "That is...if you think you might possibly stop wallowing in self-pity long enough to speak to me."

"I do not wallow," Severus hissed. "I am working."

"Well stop working and take a look at my arse!" Draco snapped, turning around and baring the body part in question.

Severus was momentarily taken aback when his admittedly gay nephew dropped his trousers. Taking one look at the striped, furry tail as it unfurled, he snorted in amusement. For the first time in weeks, Severus felt vaguely human. Sliding his wand back up his sleeve, he crossed his arms over his chest and said, "I've heard the Slytherin girls admiring your tail...but, I had no idea this was what they were referring to."

"Very amusing," Draco grumbled. "I'm surprised you waste your time with potions when you'd make such an excellent jester."

"Got clipped by a Mutatus Cattus hex, did we?" snapped Severus. "I believe I remember who uses that curse. Serves you right for being stupid enough to fanny about with know-it-all Gryffindors."

"A bit bitter are we? We weren't just fucking around you know...we were helping with Hermione's research."

Suddenly Severus' wand was back in his hand and pointing at the young wizard. "Speak her name again and you'll wear that tail until the end of time," he snarled.

"Fine, Uncle," Draco said, through clenched teeth. "Now do you think we could get on with it, or would you prefer to pout a while longer?"

Answering only with a vicious growl, Severus strode to one of his bookshelves, searching the books with piercing eyes before selecting one to page through impatiently. As he scanned through the spells, he could not stop himself from asking, "She is well, then?" in a tone of voice which belied the scowl he kept clamped on his features.

"As well as can be expected...when the man she's in love with is behaving like a whopping great prat," Draco replied, unable to mask his amused smirk completely. "What in the many levels of hell did you say to the chit?"

"I will *not* discuss it," the irritable Potions master spat out. Snapping the book closed, he growled, "Turn around."

Fearful that he had pushed his uncle too far, Draco was concerned until he heard Severus voice a simple "Reformus Exemplar" and felt the tail melt from his body. Feeling bolder now the distasteful appendage had been removed, he buttoned up his trousers and headed for the door, throwing over his shoulder a flippant, "Thank you uncle. Now if you don't mind, I think I'll seek out more cheerful company."

He had to duck a hex as he scurried out the door, snickering.

No more was heard from the man who haunted his chambers like a dark wraith until another week had passed. The group of students working on Hermione's projection reached a major impasse. Hermione then offered their findings to the Headmaster with a heavy heart. It was her fondest wish to be useful in the war; if they could find no answer to the problem which recently came to light, then all her work would be for naught.

Albus was not nearly as hopeless. After listening to Hermione's findings, he assured the young witch that--even if no immediate answer was forthcoming--it did not necessarily mean there was no answer to be found. It warranted an Order meeting and, as one of the Order members was in hiding, Albus commandeered the still sulking potions master's study for the meeting place. Though Severus wished to protest this decision, he did not. Unreasonable as he could be, Snape was the last person who would put personal feelings above finding every way imaginable to bring about the Dark Lord's fall.

It was a glowering, but strangely subdued, Snape who sat barricaded behind his desk watching the Order members file in from behind a curtain of untidy hair. Though he would never have admitted it aloud, Severus couldn't hide from himself the rapid beating of his heart as he waited impatiently to glimpse that face that was dearer to him than all others. Still furious at what he labeled her 'childish attitude' on their situation, Severus could not quite ignore the fact that the nerve-racking vixen's absence from his life had left in his chest a never-ending ache. Of course, this only proved to make the easily irritated man more angry than usual.

All that day, Hermione had resolutely told herself she didn't give a damn that she would soon be seeing her impossible ex-professor. He was an impossible, difficult, foolish, and chauvinistic arse. Unfortunately, no matter how vehemently she told herself this, it did nothing to still the fast flutter of her heart, or fill the empty feeling haunting her arms. Though she intended to ignore him--indeed she meant to not even settle her eyes on the man--the moment she crossed the threshold, her traitorous eyes locked onto the object of her anger and distress. With her heart skipping a beat and the breath freezing in her lungs, Hermione stood frozen in the doorway. She'd imagined there had been little change in Severus' life--he'd probably put her immediately out of his mind and gone back to his books and his research. That was obviously not the case. Pained black eyes locked on Hermione's from beneath tangled locks of uncombed hair. His cheeks were sunken, his normally pale complexion almost grey. Hermione wanted only to approach the ragged man, wrap her arms firmly about him, and tell him everything would be all right. The conviction that Severus would undoubtedly thrust her away shocked her into movement. Tearing her gaze away from him, Hermione fairly staggered into the room, making her way to one of the armchairs near the fire. Staring into the fire, Hermione waited patiently until the meeting began. She paid little attention to what other members had arrived, except to note the room seemed full of Weasleys.

Calling the meeting to order, Albus then took one look at the shaken young witch staring resolutely into the flames and decided to explain the situation himself. "We have another problem to solve," he began. "You are all aware Miss Granger has been honing her projection skills, in effort to use that skill as a distraction when the fight with Voldemort comes. Her efforts on behalf of the war have not been in vain, and I believe she will be of great use, indeed. However, we have met with one problem. Miss Granger's projection is quite strong, and will affect every person within a fifty yard radius, but it cannot be focused to affect only select targets. What we require is some sort of protection for our own side that will work much as Miss Granger's protective wall does, blocking her projected emotions. Does anyone have any ideas?"

"The Aurors don't have anything like that," Moody grumbled. "We've been working on some charms that block mind penetration, but they are very specific. I don't believe they could be adapted for emotions. Quite frankly, we've never had the need for such a thing until now."

"What about that buffering charm that Filius adapted for this room?" Remus asked softly. "It was very effective in helping Hermione; I was witness to a quite forceful demonstration while she was staying here."

"I've already spoken to Professor Flitwick about that," Hermione spoke for the first time. "I'm afraid it requires an inanimate barrier to attach itself to--like these stone walls. Professor Flitwick has attempted to adapt the charm with no success."

"What of the Firewalker," Minerva began, "perhaps she..."

"I have spoken to her as well, Professor. While Andrene has heard folktales of such a thing, if the knowledge really existed, it has been long since lost."

"There is a potion," a deep voice rumbled from the corner. All eyes turned to regard the glowering man seated behind the desk. "The Redactum Maeror. It is used by St. Mungo's to help those whose grief is all-consuming. Mayhap it can be adapted..."

"Excellent!" Albus exclaimed with a grin at his Potions master, which Severus found quite irritating. "You must begin researching the matter immediately. We don't know when Voldemort will strike, so an expeditious solution is high priority. You will need an assistant; Miss Granger will do nicely, I think."

"I do not need some clumsy student to assist me, Headmaster," Severus hissed.

"Nonsense, my boy, utter nonsense. You have told me yourself that Miss Granger is your best potions student. Besides, you will need her handy to test your results as you go along. My mind is quite made up. Miss Granger will meet you here evenings to assist you."

"As you wish, Headmaster," Severus growled.

Throughout the next week, Hermione dutifully joined Severus in his private lab and assisted him with his brewing. The two were strangely silent work partners. Only words relating to the project at hand were spoken, and in clipped, icily polite tones. The first three attempts at a blocking potion were dismal failures. It was during the brewing of the fourth attempt that all hell broke loose.

"Miss Granger," Severus began in a stony but civil tone, "this next attempt will require three drops of virgin's blood," he paused to hold out a phial, "if you would be so kind." When Hermione made no move to take the phial from him, he looked up, and was surprised to see the young witch blushing to the roots of her hair as she studied the floor intently. "I assure you, Miss Granger, there is no need for embarrassment. It is a simple request. The phial is charmed to collect three drops only; you will not even feel it."

"I'm...sorry, sir," Hermione stammered, "but I'm afraid that is...unacceptable."

"Unacceptable?" he snarled. "Miss Granger, you understand the need for us to hurry with this venture. I do not have time for you to get missish about such a simple matter."

Snapping narrowed eyes up to meet his, Hermione's embarrassment turned to anger. "I am not being missish, sir," she said through gritted teeth. "I cannot make this donation because I am not qualified to do so."

To say that Severus was shocked would be a gross understatement. For a moment he simply stared at her with widened eyes and parted lips as the same three words ran in a continuous loop in his head--*not a virgin not a virgin not a virgin not a virgin*. His mind then proceeded to be not as concerned with what as it was with *who*. The rage simmering in his mind for the past month now came to the forefront, to be met with a searing jealousy as his mind jumped to conclusions.

"Who?" he snapped.

This was not the question Hermione was expecting. Taking one look at his flashing eyes and clenched fists, she risked a brief peek at his emotions. The pure rage rolling over her was frightening. Certainly Severus had been angry before, but never like this. In a reflexive move, she found her hand creeping towards the wand in her robe pocket. "I beg your pardon, Professor?" she began, purposely keeping her voice smooth, in a doomed attempt to calm the furious wizard before her. "Perhaps we should sit...have a cup of tea..."

"I asked you a question, Miss Granger." Severus stalked towards her as Hermione retreated step by step. "Who was it? Who was the ham-fisted lout who dared to touch you?" His voice grew louder with each word. "Which one was it, Hermione? Was it Weasley? Was it Potter, before he developed his penchant for buggery? Tell me which it was and I will see they do not live to see the next dawn!"

Hermione watched Severus with wide eyes. He looked as if he'd gone barking mad. Wild-eyed, shouting, practically foaming at the mouth; he raised one hand as if to grasp her about the neck--Hermione acted out of desperation. Whipping her wand out and leveling it at her Professor, Hermione fairly screamed "Petrificus Totalus!" The effect was immediate. A shocked look on his face, Severus grew stiff as a board and toppled over backward to lie frozen on the lab's floor, staring at the ceiling.

Both frightened and embarrassed by Severus' reaction to her lack of virginity, Hermione spent the next five minutes sitting on the cold floor, weeping, next to her petrified Professor. Eventually able to halt her tears, she wiped her eyes, stood, and wondered what to do. Her first thought was to leave him lying there; he deserved it for behaving the way he had. Looking him over, Hermione knew she couldn't do it. Severus still looked so thin--almost frail--no, she couldn't leave him lying on the cold stone. With the way he'd been acting of late, there was no telling how long it would be until someone found him. With a sigh, she levitated his stiff form, guiding him into his study to set him softly onto the sofa before the blazing fire. These simple actions calmed her fear, but as she stared at the man lying immobile on the sofa she grew angry. Pacing before the fire, Hermione began to rant.

"What the bloody hell is wrong with you? Do you think because you foolishly pushed me away that all men have? How can you be jealous of something you didn't want yourself? You have some nerve! Too noble to touch me were you? And now you're right bent that someone has. So what do you do...do you ask me about it like a reasonable adult? Oh no! You rant like a lunatic and make ridiculous accusations. Harry or Ron; that's disgusting! They're like my brothers, you prat! Maybe it wasn't because of them that you threw an eppy. Maybe you just think I'm disgusting." Here Hermione stopped ranting and returned to a bit of crying.

Severus' fury abruptly fled, his thoughts spinning. What in the nine levels of hell have I done? Now she thinks I'm disgusted by her! Will I never learn to control my blasted temper? Gods, if she would only give me a chance to explain...she doesn't understand. Let me up, Hermione, let me free. It might make no difference, but I could show you I don't think you disgusting because you aren't a virgin! His thoughts stilled as he heard Hermione continue in a soft, sad voice.

"It wasn't anyone here. It was the summer before my sixth year. I was home for the summer at my parent's house. There was a Muggle boy...a childhood friend. I was curious, he was willing. It was...well...it was pleasant enough, I suppose. I still don't see what all the fuss is about."

Damn and blast! Whoever the imbecilic boy had been, he obviously hadn't known what he was doing. Let me up, Hermione! I swear by all that's holy, if I am ever blessed enough to get the chance, I will show you the difference between a clumsy Muggle boy and a man who loves you with all his heart.

"What must you think of me? You were so angry...you must think I'm horrid. I have to get out of here...I need to go." Mind set on fleeing as quickly as possible, Hermione quickly murmured the counter-hex and fled towards the door.

Fast as lightning, Severus was on his feet, wand drawn, sending a locking spell at the door. He wasn't about to let Hermione flee before he explained. Hermione beat her tiny fists ineffectually against the door, and when Severus came up behind her, she forwent her attentions to the impartial wood and beat against his chest instead. He simply threw his arms around her and drew Hermione so close against his chest, the struggling young witch didn't have enough room to get a good punch in.

"Let me go!" Hermione wailed.

"Hermione, listen to me--please. I know I've behaved like a right bastard...give me a chance to explain. After I do, if you still wish to leave, I won't try to keep you. Let me explain, and if you still wish to beat at me with your adorable little fists, I swear I won't do a thing to stop you."

Though she still wasn't completely convinced, Severus' impassioned and--more importantly--softly spoken words did much to calm Hermione down. Ceasing to struggle, she glanced at his face warily. His expression was kind, gentle, and full of affection. Risking a brief probe of his emotions, she didn't feel the disgust she'd so feared. All she felt was love and a strange yearning, which she didn't quite understand. Making her decision, Hermione gave him a quick nod of agreement. Expecting Severus to release her, Hermione was surprised when he swept her up into his arms and carried her to the sofa, sitting with her cradled tightly to his chest. Leaning his cheek against her hair, at first Severus reveled in the feeling of having her tightly wrapped in his embrace at last. Closing his eyes, he began to speak.

"There is no excuse for my behavior. I can only try to explain why I acted as I did, and hope you find it in your heart to forgive me. There's a reason Turpin calls me a 'paedo' all the time, Hermione. I have...loved you...since early in your sixth year. I would never have acted on my feelings--you were too young, I was a spy--you know all the reasons. I could not act on my feelings, neither could I put a stop to them. I watched you, watched you with your friends. Watched Potter and Weasley share your laughter, your tears, your dreams...everything I could not. I was jealous of their friendship with you, intensely, madly jealous. When I wrongfully jumped to the conclusion that one of them had also shared what I had so thoughtlessly pushed away, something in me snapped. I don't blame you for hexing me, I must have been terrifying." Here Severus opened his eyes and, with one hand, gently lifted her face until her gaze met his own. "I swear to you, Hermione, no matter how angry I am, I would never do anything to harm you."

"You don't think I'm disgusting?" Hermione asked, voice trembling.

Chuckling lightly, he looked at her with all the love he felt reflected in his black eyes. "Hermione, I am not such a hypocrite that I would demand conditions on you which I cannot meet myself. I am almost forty years old, my love. I assure you that I have neither the desire nor the patience to run about deflowering young virgins."

Throwing her arms around his neck with a glad cry, Hermione said, "Oh Severus, you damned stubborn man! I've missed you so horribly."

Holding her tightly, Severus buried his face in her hair and murmured, "And I, you, my vixen. Gods, how I have missed you." Drawing back to look in her eyes, Severus gave a small smirk and said, "Vixen, would you like me to show you what 'all the fuss is about'?"

"Yes," she breathed. "Oh, yes."

His eyes flashed with sudden fire as he lowered his mouth to hers.

Rhygin Grindsman

Chapter 21 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

As Severus' mouth came down hard on Hermione's, he couldn't help but think how he would at last be nestled between Hermione's thighs, a place he'd yearned to be for such a very long time. Instantly hard, he tried to ignore how she wriggled against his cock as he plundered her mouth. He had wanted her for an age. Now, as he was so close to plunging into her heat, Severus worried--in his already overexcited state--he would come as soon as he entered her. That would never do. Not only did he want their first time to last, Severus was determined to show Hermione exactly why he was preferable to some nameless Muggle boy. In an attempt to slow the pace, Severus swirled his tongue languidly around hers while his thoughts whirled.

Sweet Arcadia, her mouth is so hot. Will she be this hot when I thrust into her? Easy, old man...easy...you're letting the carriage get ahead of the Thestral...must take this slow. She tastes like heaven. I could kiss her like this for all eternity...ah...but there is so much more of her to explore...inch by delicious inch.

Tearing his lips away from hers, Severus ignored her whimpering cries as he wrapped a hand in the hair at the nape of her neck, pulling her head back to expose her throat. Her whimpers turned to needy moans as he showed the delicate skin of her neck the same attentions he had lavished on her mouth. Particularly attentive to the hollow at the base of her throat, he felt the pounding of her pulse on his tongue as he laved the tender spot. Nibbling his way along her jaw line, Severus nestled his nose behind her ear for a moment simply to breathe in the spicy scent of her hair. He then proceeded to attack her earlobe with the same enthusiasm he had shown her throat. Nipping it gently, Severus growled softly as Hermione wriggled on his lap.

Severus was not the only one making every attempt to take things slow. While Hermione was enjoying all Severus was doing--her knickers were so soaked she was rather embarrassed by it--she was growing impatient for more. When Severus nipped her earlobe, Hermione could no longer hold herself in check. Wanting to feel his hard length where she most desired it, she slithered off his lap long enough to re-position herself. Straddling him, she clenched both hands in his hair and dragged his mouth back to hers as she began to rock against him. It was Severus' turn to groan as he planted both hands on her arse, squeezing and encouraging her movements against him.

Completely distracted by the hard length on which she was rocking, Hermione failed to notice Severus' hands moving from her bum to the buttons of her blouse. By the time she did notice, the sneaky Slytherin was sliding the blouse off her shoulders, dropping it unceremoniously to the floor. Momentarily abandoning Hermione's mouth, Severus pushed her away slightly in order to get a good view of what he had stealthily uncovered. Eyes roaming hungrily over her, he noted the soft curve of her stomach and the generous swell of breasts covered in the silky fabric of a Muggle bra. Studying the clasp between her breasts intently for a moment, Severus snapped the clasp open with a seemingly nonchalant flick of his dexterous fingers. The bra soon met its compatriot on the floor as Severus leaned forward to attach his mouth enthusiastically to one breast. His appreciative growl vibrated over her tightening nipple.

Rocking momentarily forgotten, Hermione arched forward, a sound falling from her lips that was half sigh, half needy moan. This soft envoy went in Severus' ear and traveled directly to his cock, which twitched sharply in growing anticipation. With another throaty growl, Severus switched his attentions to Hermione's other breast, causing her to utter more delicious sounds.

Running her hands up and down his arms, Hermione grew impatient with the cloth still covering him from neck to toe. Pushing him abruptly back against the sofa, she began to unbutton his waistcoat. She gave up after the fifth tiny button.

"Stop smirking at me and do something about these blasted buttons!" she teased impatiently. "Why you barricade yourself behind a multitude of buttons I shall never understand."

As Severus slipped his wand from his sleeve he answered her. "I trust Potter has told you of the scene he witnessed in my Pensieve?" he asked softly. He continued after she answered him with a small nod. "Then I imagine you might understand I have never had any reason I would wish to be easily undressed...until tonight," he purred, giving a smooth wave of his wand. Every button on his clothing, from his waistcoat to the last button on the cuffs of his trousers, popped open.

Hermione had become momentarily saddened by his confession about why he stayed so buttoned up; the sudden sight of the lightly-haired chest bared by popping buttons drove all thought from her head. Winding her hands under his clothes, she then simply leaned her face into his chest and breathed in his scent. She noted that he smelled nothing like her Muggle friend. George had routinely doused himself in his father's Old Spice cologne, which Hermione had found barely tolerable. Severus smelled like himself... earthy, musky, with a slight sharp tang of sweat. He smelled addictive and Hermione was a willing addict. Nuzzling further into his clothing, she began to explore his chest with wandering hands and a hungry mouth.

A hissing intake of breath was Severus' reaction when Hermione's exploring mouth found one of his small, flat, nipples. The hiss merged into a groan as she nipped at it with her teeth. Severus was having growing difficulty keeping the pace slow. Aeval guide me, he thought. How in the world shall I keep myself in check when she devastates me with a simple caress? I've laughed in the Dark Lord's face, yet now I find myself trembling because of this slip of a girl. Perhaps it is time to pick up the pace.

Taking a moment to toe off his boots, Severus was amused when Hermione took a quick look over her shoulder to see what the noise was and then--giving him a quick grin--followed his example, ridding herself of her own shoes. Still grinning, Hermione then stood and--pulling Severus to his feet--slid his coat and shirt off his shoulders, letting them drop to the growing pile on the floor. Hermione's grin faded to a look of frank appreciation as she ran her hand up his arm and over the curve of his bicep. Severus had been a bit worried about what she would think of him, especially as thin as he now was. Her last lover had been some nubile young Muggle, after all. Her hungry gaze quieted his last fears. Indeed, she didn't even shy away from his Dark Mark, giving it barely a glance as she ran her hands over him.

Suddenly impatient, Severus knelt before her. His hands found the closure at the back of Hermione's skirt. In a trice, it was open, and Severus slid the garment slowly down her legs. After taking the time to gently remove her socks, he then pressed a reverent kiss to Hermione's stomach, just above the band of her knickers. Standing, he

removed his own trousers and socks with far less grace. For a tiny eternity they simply gazed at one another as they stood with naught but a small pair of knickers and soft cotton boxers to come between them. Later, neither would remember who made the first move. In truth, it was at the same instant. As Hermione moved forward, wrapping her arms around his waist and resting her cheek against his chest, Severus enveloped her in a hug as tight as the one he'd given her in Albus' office. Resting his face against the top of her head, Severus continued the familiar embrace for an age before at last reaching down to slip an arm under her knees and sweep her up into his arms. Never taking his eyes off Hermione's, Severus carried her into his bedroom.

Entering the room, Severus lost no time in striding up to the four-poster and laying Hermione upon it. As soon as she was settled, Severus reached for her knickers and slid the damp cloth smoothly off her body. As he leaned down, intending to join her on the bed, he was startled by Hermione's response.

"No!" she said, glowering at him.

"Hermione?" he asked uncertainly, clearly puzzled. Had she suddenly changed her mind? If she has, I'll go barking mad...or I'll throttle the vixen...what the hell...

Severus' inner ranting was interrupted by her next words. Narrowing her eyes at him and pointing to his boxers, she said imperiously, "You will take those off this instant!" The confusion Severus felt turned immediately into aroused amusement at her eagerness. She was indeed a vixen, and--more importantly--she was his vixen. Taking a moment to release his rigid cock from the confining fabric of his boxers, Severus drank in her reaction as he let the fabric slide down his legs to the floor. The combination of flushed embarrassment and blatant interest on her dear face was enchanting. Sliding onto the bed beside her, Severus drew her into his embrace and kissed her deeply. It was time to show Hermione exactly why he was preferable to some clumsy young Muggle boy.

Had Hermione known what was going through Severus' mind, she would have reassured him that he was already preferable to her Muggle friend, George. She was more aroused by Severus' kisses and caresses than she'd been by actually having sex with George. Earlier, when he had attacked her breasts with his hot, hungry mouth, Hermione had felt practically at the edge of orgasm. Now, feeling his naked body at last pressed close to hers, Hermione was fast approaching that precipice. When she felt his dexterous fingers slip inside her wet folds, she was already so aroused that it took but a few firm caresses before she came, crying out into the mouth still devouring her own. When Severus slipped his fingers inside her, the hot, wet, proof of exactly how much Hermione desired him it was a balm to his soul. Sweet Nimue, but the little vixen was so responsive! He had thought Hermione likely quite passionate under her bookish exterior, and Severus was pleased to find out that this was indeed so. Why, she came almost as soon as he stroked her inner folds, and the sound she made into his hungry mouth was an absolute delight. A high, slightly wavering, crooning note; sweeter than song. By all the gods, he'd make her sing so over and over simply for the pleasure of hearing her in her passion.

Some women need a touch of recuperation time after achieving orgasm. Some get sleepy, distracted, or overwhelmed. Some, on the other hand, feel energized, talkative, or even more excited. Perhaps it is no great surprise that Hermione belongs to the latter group. As her cry faded, Hermione grasped her hands in Severus' hair and peppered his face with kisses while making small appreciative sounds and happy humming noises. At last, she drew slightly away from him to gaze into his eyes.

"You darling man!" she exclaimed. "I've never come so fast in my life, not even..." here she paused a moment, blushing, "er...on my own."

This enthusiastic confession made Severus chuckle. The warm, rich sound echoed around the chamber as she pretended to scowl at him. The scowl on her face--so unmistakably an imitation of his own--made him laugh harder. When Hermione opened her mouth to chastise him, he halted his laughter to silence her with a heated kiss.

"I trust that you find me preferable to your little Muggle friend?" he asked between kisses.

"Severus," she murmured breathlessly, "there is no comparison."

"Ah, but vixen," he growled, "I have not even begun to show you why I am preferable." This confident statement--growled so sexily into her ear--caused Hermione to tremble in anticipation. Her trembling increased as he left her mouth to blaze a trail of kisses down her torso. Arching off the bed, Hermione scarcely knew what it was he was doing to her. She only knew she wanted more...she needed more of his stroking hands, his hungry mouth, his deep and growling voice.

Noting that Hermione was writhing and whimpering before he got as far as her belly button, Severus decided to take pity on the vixen and give her another taste of what she so obviously craved. He was ready for a taste of something, as well. Lying between her legs, Severus lifted her hips off the bed with both hands and plunged his tongue into her dripping sex. Always an articulate man, Severus put his dexterous tongue to a more intimate use as she bucked against his mouth in growing abandon. It was not long at all before Hermione was once again crooning her release. Gods, but he could become addicted to that sweet sound.

At last nearing the end of his patience, Severus surged back up her body to give her a searing kiss. Hermione showed the same enthusiastic response as she had after her first orgasm. Yes, indeed, Severus thought, he could definitely get used to spending time with this passionate young witch.

Pulling his mouth from Hermione's, he spoke. "As enjoyable as these preliminaries are, vixen, I grow impatient for the main event."

"Yes," she breathed. "Oh, yes...please...now..."

Reaching a hand down to position himself, Severus gazed into Hermione's eyes as he slowly slid inside her. She was gloriously tight...deliciously hot...and so wet he slid in to her tight heat easily.

"Sweet heaven," he murmured, beginning to stroke in and out of her blissful channel slowly and firmly. Severus found Hermione was quite vocal during sex, but she was also quite inarticulate. The amazing array of whimpering cries and pleased moans that issued from Hermione's mouth spurred Severus to speed his thrusts. All too soon he was thrusting into her wildly as Hermione shouted with growing excitement.

Feeling himself nearing a precipice, Severus lowered his mouth to Hermione's ear to growl breathlessly into it. "Sing for me, my vixen. Sing for me again."

As if she were only waiting for his command, Hermione crooned again as she found her release. That longed for sound, combined with the feeling of her walls clenching and trembling around his cock, was all it took to send Severus over the edge to his own release. Screaming her name, Severus' strokes grew shallow and erratic as his seed pumped into her. It had been so long since he'd lain with a woman. The sweet shock of his orgasm was so intense he nearly passed out. His body going limp, he collapsed atop Hermione.

When he regained his senses, he heard Hermione cooing soft reassurances in his ear as she stroked her hands up and down his back. Realizing he must be crushing her, he tried to at least raise himself to his elbows as he muttered, "I'm too heavy for you..."

"Don't be silly!" Hermione replied. "I love the way you feel on me."

Giving in, Severus continued to rest atop her, enjoying her caresses. When he felt his softening member slip from her sex, he rolled to the side, pulling Hermione with him so that she landed sprawled half over him. Hermione burrowed happily against him as he held her close.

"I trust you now know 'what all the fuss is about'?" he couldn't help asking, his lips curling into a satisfied smirk.

"Indeed, I do," she replied seriously. "I didn't know it could be like that, love. I don't think it would be with any man but you."

"I hope you don't intend to attempt to prove that theory," Severus growled possessively. "For as long as I live...you are mine."

Before Hermione could argue with his conviction that he was doomed to die, the recovering couple was abruptly interrupted. Richard "Dick" Turpin had become bored and journeyed into the bedroom to see what Severus was up to. Finding the couple in bed together and scenting what they had been up to in the air, Turpin scrambled gleefully onto Severus' bed and began to chatter happily as he bounced around them.

"You mated! It's about fucking time you stubborn gits. What the bloody hell took you so blasted long? If this is how all wizards act, I'm surprised the whole fucking lot of you haven't died out," Turpin said with great good cheer.

A bit embarrassed, Hermione had to remind herself that Turpin was still an animal and that the situation was really no worse than when Crookshanks caught her coming out of the shower. Hermione managed to keep herself from trying to hide under the bedclothes which they sprawled on top of, but she could do nothing to hide her blush.

"Turpin!" Severus shouted. "Leave us in peace immediately! You know damned well this sort of behavior is not permissible!"

"But Syphilis! You promised! You promised to tell me the answer! Did she taste better?"

Completely befuddled, Hermione made the mistake of asking Turpin what he was talking about. She was both appalled and amused as Turpin launched into a spirited, if off-key, rendition of "Do Virgins Taste Better."

"A dragon has come to our village today.

We've asked him to leave, but he won't go away.

Now he's talked to our king and they worked out a deal:

No more homes will be burnt and no crops will be stolen.

Now there is but one catch, we dislike it a bunch:

Twice a year he invites him a virgin to lunch.

Well, we've no other choice, so the deal we'll respect,

But we can't help but wonder and pause to reflect:

Do virgins taste better than those who are not?

Are they salty, or sweeter, more juicy or what?

Do you savor them slowly? Gulp them down on the spot?

Do virgins taste better than those who are not?"

"TURPIN! You will stop that infernal singing immediately!" Severus shouted. Noticing that Hermione had buried her head in his armpit and seemed to be crying, Severus made an awkward attempt to soothe the agitated witch. "Hermione, you really shouldn't pay such attention to Turpin, you know he can't help himself, I assure you..." Severus trailed off as he belatedly realized that Hermione was not crying into his armpit, but giggling. "Oh for fuck's sake!" he snapped. Turning his attention to the still singing jarvey, he hissed, "Turpin, if I answer your blasted question will you leave us in peace for the remains of the night?"

Abruptly stopping his singing, Turpin regarded his master with serious eyes. "Deal," he chirped.

"Then I must tell you that I do not know the answer to that question, it was not pertinent to this situation."

"You mean the vixen wa..."

"Turpin! I assure you that Hermione is pleasing in all ways. I have no complaints in any department, nor do I particularly care about the culinary pleasures of virgins. Fuck virgins!"

Satisfied with this answer, Turpin scrambled off the bed and headed for the door, all the while gleefully chuckling as he shouted "Fuck the virgins!" over and over. After his familiar had vacated the room, Severus turned his attention to the witch still giggling into his armpit. Suddenly rolling her over, Severus landed atop her and proceeded to distract Hermione from her amusement. Her giggling mouth was soon issuing an assortment of whimpering moans. With a satisfied smile, Severus lowered his mouth to hers as he thrust his cock deeply inside her.

It was shaping up to be a most satisfying evening.

Trouble Brewing

Chapter 22 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Severus awoke to find himself at the brink of orgasm. Hermione was half atop him, her mouth devouring his neck, her hand stroking his already dripping cock. With a husky groan he reached down to stop her enthusiastic stroking. Lifting her head, Hermione was momentarily worried that she had gone too far by pouncing on the oft touchy man while he slept. Severus' slow smile and the wicked light in his eyes both calmed and excited her.

"I wasn't finished," she said, mock-pouting at him.

"And I, my impatient love," he purred, "have not yet started."

Then he was reaching for her, enveloping her, deep...so deep inside her and there were no more words, only throaty growls and sweet, crooning bliss.

The second time Severus awoke, it was to find a depressingly already dressed Hermione straddling his hips as she rather ineffectually shook him.

"Wake up, Severus!" she demanded.

"Don't you have something more important to do than pester a man while he's trying to sleep? Why aren't you in class, Miss Granger? More importantly, why do you have all those blasted clothes on?" He raked his gaze over her, scowling at her attire.

"No class," she said smirking, "it's Saturday. As for why I am dressed," Hermione paused to give his bare chest a hungry perusal while voicing a regretful sigh, "I fetched

you a present." Holding up a familiar phial, she continued, "Your three drops of virgin blood, Professor."

"Clever girl," Severus murmured as he reached up to tug her down against him. Kissing her hungrily for a moment, Severus eventually released her, raising an eyebrow and growling, "Well? Get off me woman, we have work to do."

Their brewing was very different now. Though they worked in companionable silence, the work was peppered with warm looks and swiftly stolen caresses. Severus had worried he would find Hermione far too distracting and might have to request she leave. Instead he found her a very pleasant distraction, one which made the work all the more precious to him, rather than interfering with it. Indeed, the two brewers worked well together now they weren't fighting. Severus did the actual brewing, while Hermione prepared ingredients as she hummed happily to herself. They made a good team and the brewing went smoothly.

When it came time to test the new potion, Hermione was in a mischievous mood. They had been working steadily all that morning and she was impatient to feel Severus' arms around her once more. That was why she projected desire at him instead of the humor she normally used. The new potion was a partial success; Severus was able to withstand her projection for many minutes before he at last gave in and dragged her into his arms to kiss her soundly.

"Vixen," he murmured into her hair after she had stopped projecting, "that was not your usual projection."

"No it wasn't," she agreed. "Are you complaining?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Indeed not," Severus said as his mouth descended again to hers. After kissing her breathless, he reluctantly released her. Striding to his potions cabinet, he removed several more of the phials charmed to collect virgin's blood. "We are obviously on the right track but we need to strengthen the potion in order to get it to last longer. Can you collect more virgin's blood while I determine how best to adapt the potion?"

"Of course." As she collected the phials from him, Hermione leaned up to brush his lips with her own. "I'll return soon," she promised.

"Good," he said shortly, with another one of his slow smiles.

It took Hermione a good hour to track down enough Gryffindor fourth years to collect the blood they needed. Returning to Severus' rooms, Hermione found him at the desk in his study, buried in books and scribbling like mad on a parchment. Hermione didn't want to disturb him, but it was clear he hadn't taken the time to eat anything and it was long past the lunch hour. Severus was still so thin; he'd never gained back the weight he had lost in Azkaban. Well, if he wouldn't take care of himself then she would, Hermione determined with a nod. Flooding the kitchens for some sandwiches, Hermione set a plate at his elbow along with a mug of tea. Giving the top of his head a quick peck, Hermione then whispered in his ear, "Eat."

"Busy," he muttered.

"Eat, or I'll take your toys away from you until you do!" she demanded.

Severus threw his most nasty glare at the young witch. When it did nothing more than make her cross her arms over her chest and tap her foot at him, Severus rolled his eyes at her and picked up a sandwich before returning to his reading. Pleased with herself, Hermione settled down with her own lunch.

All that afternoon they worked, side by side, as Severus tested the first of his ideas on how best to strengthen the blocking potion. By the time they finished the third disappointing test, Severus realized the lateness of the hour by his assistant's drooping eyelids.

"That's enough for tonight, vixen," he said, walking up to the sleepy witch and enfolding her in a tight hug. Sighing as he felt her arms locking tightly around his waist, Severus was content to hold her and be held in return. The work had left him too tired to ravish her as he wished, yet the thought of simply curling around her warm form and drifting off to sleep seemed a precious pleasure in itself. But was it prudent? "Hermione, I should like nothing better than to share my bed with you, but what of your dorm mates? What will they say of your absence? It must not be discovered that I am at Hogwarts..."

"Severus, don't fret," Hermione interrupted, chuckling softly. "I'm afraid I'm about to forever ruin your belief in the inherent innocence of female seventh years." When this comment earned her an impatient glare, Hermione chuckled again and continued. "Both my dorm mates have boyfriends, Severus. At the start of term they made a strict don't ask, don't tell rule about our whereabouts at night. The thought is that if any of us were discovered missing, the others couldn't tell what they didn't know."

"And have you made use of this rule before, Miss Granger?" Severus demanded with a possessive growl.

"My dear Professor, the only time I made use of it was while you were missing. It broke my heart when they mistakenly congratulated me on my conquest." Here she paused to give him a slow grin. "Now when they behave that way I shall be quite smug, indeed. If they press me for a name, I shall tell them it is a great secret because the 'boy' I adore is a Slytherin."

"I had thought, vixen, that I had proved to you that I am no boy."

"So it seemed at the time," Hermione said lightly, "but that was so long ago I'm afraid the memory fades. I fear your only recourse is to prove it to me again."

Feeling his weariness fade away in the face of his sudden, throbbing arousal, Severus swept Hermione up into his arms. Staring deeply into her eyes he purred, "It will be my pleasure."

Lost in his eyes, Hermione later remembered nothing of the journey from potions lab to bedroom. It seemed to her one moment she was in the lab, and the next, he was laying her upon the bed and whispering charms to dissolve their clothes. Then it seemed his mouth was everywhere; his hands were everywhere. Her world dissolved into a realm of hot, sliding flesh and breathless cries of delight.

They fell asleep with their arms still latched tight around each other. Even sleep did not chase away their pleasantly exhausted smiles.

Brewing the next day was as frustrating as the day before. Yes, they were making progress, but it was slow indeed. Both professor and student felt the need to hurry and both were frustrated by their lack of results. Despite Severus' best efforts to strengthen the potion, he could not get it to block Hermione's protection for more than fifteen minutes. That might do well for a quick skirmish; it was not long enough to make Hermione's gift useful for the final battle. Mid afternoon found Severus sitting at his desk with, head propped in his hands, while Hermione paced restlessly before the fire.

Pausing, Hermione stared at the frustrated older wizard thoughtfully. She'd had an odd thought, and--while it may not amount to anything--at this point having any direction in which to turn their research would be a good thing. "Severus," she began, "I had a thought..."

"Oh really," he snapped sarcastically, "the great Gryffindor brain had a thought...how very unexpected."

Sighing in exasperation, Hermione paused to count to ten. Then she did it again...in Goblin. She did indeed love the great whopping git, but she was well aware of his horrid temper. Taking a bracing breath, she reminded herself that a row was not going to accomplish anything and kept her voice low and reasonable as she spoke. "Muggle chemists..." she began, only to be interrupted again.

"Miss Granger, I hardly think there is anything a Muggle chemist can do that could possibly have the least bearing on a wizard's potion dilemma," he hissed with the utmost contempt. "Perhaps we would make faster progress if you could at least attempt to control these childish flights of fancy..." Here Severus was interrupted by the slamming of the lav door as Hermione barricaded herself inside. How dare she! How dare she waltz out of the room when he wasn't through speaking to her! Furious, he strode to the door of the lav and assaulted it with his wand until he could rip the door open.

His rage abruptly fled as he stood in the doorway, mouth open, blushing in embarrassment as he saw that Hermione was sitting on the toilet relieving herself. Crossing her arms over her chest, Hermione simply glared at him as if daring him to say one word. Finding himself incapable of rising to the challenge, Severus only managed a

strangled, "Er..." before he fled the lav and headed straight to where he kept the Firewhisky. Gulping directly from the bottle, Severus wasn't certain which had bothered him more; the utter mortification of barging in on Hermione while she was taking a piss or the inexplicable fact that his prick had twitched hard with arousal when he had realized that was indeed what she was doing.

Groaning to himself, Severus thumped his head against the bookcase and muttered, "I am a ridiculous old leech."

An amused voice spoke from behind him. "You won't find me arguing with that." As Severus spun to face her, Hermione could not help but see the tented state of his trousers. "Since you are my ridiculous leech," she continued, as Severus rolled his eyes at her obvious omission, "you won't find me complaining about it either."

That was all it took. Long arms reached out to sweep her into a tight embrace. One of Severus hands took a firm hold on her arse as he pressed his arousal tightly against her. "Hermione..." he murmured, almost pleading.

"Hush love," she said against his neck. "I think we are both in dire need of a break." Lifting her head to look him in the eye, she said, "Take me to bed, Severus."

"Yes..." he hissed, sweeping her up into his arms.

Impatient with need, Severus fairly threw Hermione onto the bed. Pausing only long enough to voice the charms that left them both nude, he then threw himself atop her. His mouth descended onto Hermione's hungrily as he slipped a hand down her body and between the soft folds of her sex. Growling with growing abandon as he found her already dripping with desire, Severus lifted his lips from Hermione's long enough to murmur, "Vixen...I need you...now...now..."

"Yes," she moaned against his lips. "Now."

Wriggling beneath him, Hermione pulled at his hips until he found himself seated firmly between her own, his throbbing cock poised at her entrance. Biting her bottom lip, Severus thrust in to the hilt, groaning in pleasure as her tight heat enveloped him. Within moments he was pounding into her, fast and hard and deep. Hermione was equally frantic beneath him, raising her hips to meet his every powerful thrust, her breath exploding out in little pants with each impact.

"More," Severus muttered breathlessly. "More." Pulling out suddenly, Severus drew Hermione's legs up and put her ankles over his shoulders. Bending her almost double as he leaned back over her, he pounded into her again. "Yes," he ground out between clenched teeth, "so deep...so good...so...tight."

Having never tried this position before, Hermione at first found it difficult to catch her already panting breath. When Severus resumed pounding into her, she found that every thrust hit a deliciously sensitive spot deep within her. When she then realized she could feel his balls smacking hard against her arse with every sharp thrust, she decided breathing was overrated. Within moments she was crooning in abandon as her orgasm swept through her.

The feeling of her walls clenching around him sent Severus quickly towards his own release. His strokes became short and erratic as he approached it. At the end, he could only twitch his hips and howl as he pumped his seed deep within her. Barely coherent, Severus managed to lower Hermione's legs before collapsing atop her.

Coming slowly to his senses, Severus found himself still lying over Hermione. His head was pillowed between her breasts; her hands were running softly through his hair as she murmured endearments. Sweet Merlin! Who would have ever thought any woman would find enjoyment in stroking the lank travesty he called hair? What had he ever done to deserve such unmitigated joy? What kind of fool was he to risk what little time they had together by behaving like such a git? While he couldn't imagine that Muggle chemists would have any insight on their current potions dilemma, would it hurt him to simply listen to the girl--no matter how far-fetched the idea? Hermione had already given him more joy than he deserved. He owed it to her to at least make an attempt to be more patient. While he had no desire to try to change who he was--he was a difficult man and Hermione didn't seem concerned about it--Severus realized he needed to at least make an effort to be less volatile if he wanted to keep Hermione close to him.

"Hermione," he murmured into her breasts, "tell me about your idea."

"Later," she replied in soft tones. "It isn't important."

Raising his head enough to look into her eyes, he continued. "Tell me, vixen. Please."

With a reluctant sigh, Hermione gave in. "There are muggle medicines and supplements, like iron, which work more effectively if they are not absorbed all at once. So Muggle chemists have worked them into pills which break down slowly; they call it 'time release.'

Eyes widening in surprise, Severus considered what Hermione had said for a moment before raising up to crush her lips enthusiastically beneath his own. "You, my vixen, are brilliant," he said. Withdrawing from her, he fairly jumped out of the bed and began to throw on his clothes.

"You have an idea!" Hermione fairly shouted as she rose to dress beside him.

"I do," he admitted. "You are right...I've been working on the potion's strength when I should be working on its breadth. There are several substances I can try binding it with to increase the breadth."

Smiling happily as she finished buttoning her shirt, Hermione said, "Let's get busy then!"

Hand in hand they rushed back to the potions lab.

The Potion Thickens

Chapter 23 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

High above the dungeons where Severus and Hermione began to try ideas to increase the blocking potion's breadth, two young wizards lay naked in each others arms in the lone bed which graced the Room of Requirement. Limbs tangled together, pale skin meeting tan, black hair brushing against blond, Harry and Draco caressed each other as they waited for their hearts to stop pounding. Worried, Harry paused even after he had caught his breath before beginning a discussion he knew he must--no matter how much it frightened him. Eventually, Harry realized he could put it off no longer. Draco's lovemaking had been nearly frantic. As much as Harry had enjoyed it, he knew something was wrong.

"Draco," he began with a sigh of resignation, "what happened when you were at the Manor this weekend?"

"Why do you think something happened?" Draco evaded.

"Love, as much as I enjoyed that," here Harry paused to kiss Draco affectionately on the forehead, "surely you must understand that I can tell something has upset you."

It was Draco's turn to sigh. "Harry, I don't want to worry you for no reason. I don't actually know anything. The best I could call it is an impression."

"Snape always said the reason you made a good spy was because you have good instincts. You're very intuitive, love. If you've gotten wind of something, then there's good reason to believe that something is up."

Looking into Harry's eyes for the first time since the discussion had begun, when Draco spoke, his voice was so soft and hesitant that Harry barely recognized it. "Harry, as I said before...I know nothing for certain...but, by the way my father was behaving..."

"What did he do, Draco?"

"It's hard to explain. He wasn't himself. He was obviously a bit nervous but he kept smiling all the time. It wasn't a pleasant smile; it had a...manic glee about it. I don't know how to make you understand...I just think it will be soon..."

"What will be soon, love?" Harry asked, his voice gone as soft and strange as the blond in his arms.

"The final battle," Draco whispered. "Something big is about to happen, Harry...I think the Dark Lord has finally decided to come after you."

"Good," Harry said simply as he hugged Draco tightly to him, "I'm tired of waiting. We shall have to warn the others," he added, beginning to withdraw from his lover's embrace.

"Not yet," hissed Draco, refusing to loosen the arms wrapped tightly around Harry. "It won't be immediately, Harry...I've been given no instructions. Stay...please...for tonight, stay with me. Tomorrow is soon enough..."

This was the closest thing to pleading that Harry had ever heard the confident young wizard in his arms utter. He found that he could not deny him. Giving a brief nod of consent, he stared into Draco's pale eyes for an age before he lowered his head to crush Draco's mouth beneath his own.

Monday morning came too quickly for Severus. The weekend had been an astonishing and joyous mixture of Potions research and lovemaking which he desperately wished would never end. Watching Hermione dress in her school robes as she prepared to go to class made him remember all too well that these were dangerous times, and his time in particular was short. If Hermione missed so much as one class it would draw unwanted attention to her. The last thing they needed was to have anyone curious about where Hermione disappeared to with such frequency. As long as they kept her disappearances to evenings and weekends, most would assume she was revising for her NEWTs and her roommates would assume she was meeting some nameless Slytherin boy. As much as Severus wanted to keep her close, Hermione had to keep up the appearance of her normal school life. With a resigned sigh, Severus kissed her goodbye as she promised to return after dinner in the Great Hall that evening.

Solitude was no stranger to the Potions Professor. The long day would give him plenty of time to explore the ideas that he and Hermione had brainstormed about what ingredient would be the best binding agent to increase the blocking potions breadth. Together they had created three options the previous evening using Linden flower, Balm of Gilead, and Pennyroyal. Those three cauldrons were still simmering and would be ready to bottle soon. As they had the three most likely herbal binding agents taken care of, the task Severus set for himself that morning was to explore other avenues. He began a fourth cauldron of the blocking potion in which he would add powdered Yppotryll tusk, which was not only a powerful binding agent but also had the added effect of giving the drinker a slight resistance to hexes. If it worked, it would be most useful, indeed.

Despite the fact that--for all his life--Severus was used to brewing completely on his own, he found, as the morning progressed, he missed Hermione more and more. The young witch was not only a balm to his very soul, but an admirable assistant as well. With an unconscious sigh, Severus lost himself in the calming familiarity of his brewing.

Upstairs in the Room of Requirement, two young wizards woke in a bit of a panic. They had been awake most of the night and as a result of that they had overslept horribly.

"Damn and blast!" hissed Harry, as the two hurriedly dressed. "We've got to warn the others about what you suspected at the Manor! We've already slept through breakfast. Maybe I should skip Transfiguration..."

"Not on your life, Harry," Draco cut in. "Use your head! If what I suspect is true neither of us can afford to give the least clue that we are aware something is happening."

"But Dumbledore must be warned...and so should Hermione and Severus. They're working on that potion for Hermione's projection...they need to know they may be nearly out of time."

Finally dressed, Draco sat on the bed for a moment trying to gather his thoughts. "We can warn Hermione in class. I have a half hour free before lunch and I can speak to the Headmaster then, but I simply can't think of a way to get word to Uncle Severus until after dinner. Because he's in hiding, his chambers are warded against owls and even his Floo has been taken off the Network."

Harry's eyes fairly lit up with a sudden idea. "Remus is in class this morning, but Sirius is staying in his chambers. I can Floo him from here!" As he spoke the words, the obliging room produced both a flaming hearth and the necessary pot of Floo Powder.

"That will have to do, but tell him to be careful. Uncle Severus has been a complete beast lately," the blond added with a grin.

Severus' morning was going peacefully, though he did find himself strangely lonely. If the prickly wizard had known how this loneliness was going to be broken, he may have reached for the Firewhisky, research be damned. As it was, he was completely unprepared for his unexpected visitor. Standing in indecision as to whether he should start his next experiment or wait to bottle the first of the herbal-bound potions nearing completion, Severus was startled by movement at the door leading into his private lab.

Face contorting into a reflexive sneer, he regarded Sirius Black with obvious distaste. His hand automatically twitching toward his wand, a sudden thought stopped Severus from completing the action. His mind took him back to a dark night in Azkaban. A smiling Hermione withdrew from his embrace to walk towards the cell door. Her voice echoed in his mind, "Before you even think about letting one nasty comment fall out of your lovely mouth...I want to make it very clear to you that I would not have gotten here safely without his help."

Damn and blast! He would never like the thrice-damned mongrel, but even the bitter Potions master could not ignore the facts. Black had ventured into that hellhole in order to get Severus out, and he had undeniably kept his Hermione safe on the journey. Knowing he could not, in good conscience, hex the unwelcome intruder, Severus' mood became even darker as he resigned himself to attempting to be somewhat civil. Forcing himself to relax, Severus crossed his arms over his chest and did his best to regard Black calmly before he spoke.

"Black," he said with the barest nod of his head. "May I ask you how you have managed to gain access to my rooms?"

Though the question was anything but friendly, Black was nevertheless discomfited by Snape's manner. He had fully expected the prat of a man to hex first and ask questions of his smoldering corpse after. Opening his mouth to speak, he was interrupted by a chittering voice at his feet.

"No time for fighting, you sanfri bitch!" barked the excited jarvey bouncing at Black's feet. "Dog's bollocks here was knocking at the study door. It's important, Syphilis, so I let him in."

Though Severus sent an unhappy scowl at his agitated familiar, he realized something like this had been bound to happen. Turpin had told him about the conversations he'd had with Black while Severus was in Azkaban. It displeased him to admit it, but it was obvious to Severus that Turpin had struck up a reluctant friendship with the scruffy wizard. Sighing inwardly, Severus realized that Black's kindness to his familiar was one more reason he must attempt to be civil to the irritating Animagus. Honestly, some days it didn't pay to get out of bed.

"I see," Severus said evenly. "We will talk about it later, Turpin. In the meantime, why don't you go play with Crooks and leave us to our discussion."

Turpin hesitated for a moment, but he knew his master well. It was obvious to the jarvey that Severus was not gearing up to do battle. With a happy chortle he sped out of the room to go visit his friend.

Not able to hide another resigned sigh, Severus used every atom of his self control to attempt to be pleasant. It was not a resounding success, but it was so far from the venom he usually spouted at Black that the scruffy wizard made an equal effort not to be offended.

"Actually, Black, you have interrupted me in the midst of a quandary. I am anxious to start my next attempt at the blocking potion, but that green potion needs to be bottled. Perhaps you could bottle it while we talk. I know that Potions was never your strong suit, but I imagine even you could manage such a simple task."

"Yes, I can manage it. Go on with your brewing." Black said simply.

While one wizard brewed and the other bottled, Sirius told Severus what he had learned from Harry and Draco not a half hour ago. Severus agreed that if the sneaky young Slytherin thought something was up, then he was probably correct.

"How is the research going, then?" Sirius asked. "Have you come up with anything useful?"

"Yes, indeed," Severus replied. "Hermione and I had quite a breakthrough yesterday. There is still work to be done, but I have high hopes we will have the answer we need soon."

Noting the use of Hermione's given name--as well as the odd hint of a smile which played briefly around Snape's lips--Sirius realized whatever had been the trouble between the odd pair, they must have gotten past it. He wasn't certain how he felt about that, but the image of Snape kindly comforting a distraught Hermione after Sirius' first disastrous visit to the study came back to haunt him. Snape was a strange man, yet it was obvious he cared for the girl. Equally obvious was what the young witch felt for the sarcastic wizard. "Well," he thought, "it could've been worse...it could've been Filch."

The morning proceeded apace. When Sirius finished bottling the first of the herbal-bound potions, the next had been ready, so he stayed and began bottling that. The two toiling wizards spoke only a little; most of their comments dealing with either the work at hand or the battle ahead. It surprised both men that--while they still didn't especially care for each other--being civil was not as difficult as they had anticipated. The lunch hour arrived and, since Black had volunteered to continue assisting Severus until Hermione returned, Severus felt he had no choice but to feed the irritating man. The wizards retreated to Severus' study to eat sandwiches brought by a brace of House Elves.

They ate in silence. After a while, Severus realized Black was practically biting his tongue in an attempt not to say something. "Spit it out, Black," he growled. "Your fidgeting is most annoying. If you have something to say, then say it."

Irritated by the black-eyed man's manner, Sirius blurted out a question that had plagued him for years. "Why did you join the Death Eaters, Snape? Was it...well...was it because of what I did?"

At first the question angered Severus; when he glared at the offensive man, he found the transparent Gryffindor's sincerity all too easy to read. Damn and blast! A little token civility and this ridiculous situation was getting completely out of hand. "That's a bit presumptuous of you, Black, to think you could have such effect on anything I decide. There was no single event which determined my choice." Hopefully that would be enough to placate the nosy arse. His hopes were dashed as Black continued.

"But I just don't understand it, Severus. I know we hated each other in school, but even I had to admit that you were dead intelligent. What could have made you do such a fool thing if I didn't push you into it?"

"For fuck's sake, Sirius," he snapped, "I was eighteen bloody years old! I don't suppose you can accept that I made a foolish, bone-headed decision and leave it at that? I'm certainly not the only person at Hogwarts that made an idiotic choice when young."

"No...that you are not," Sirius said with a sigh. "It seems like most of us made some fool choice at one time or another. But I can't accept that as the end of it. What were you looking for Severus? Power? Acceptance? Revenge?"

"Trust me, Sirius, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," Black fairly growled.

Dropping his head into both hands, Severus' voice was so low that Sirius could barely make out the single word Severus spoke. "Justice."

"What?" Sirius practically shouted. "You went to a pack of Death Eater's looking for justice? Were you mad?"

"I was eighteen!" Severus snapped back. "I knew nothing of justice...I had never experienced it in my life! I went from a hell of a childhood where I had to learn curses to protect myself from my own father, to a school career that was little better. When Dumbledore didn't expel you for what you did, it was the last straw. Malfoy and Riddle knew just how to play me. They preached to me a vision of a world where justice ruled and offenders were punished. I know I was a young fool, but at least give me credit for realizing my mistake almost as soon as I took the blasted mark!"

Shaken by the honest outburst, Sirius spoke in strangely calm tones. "I do give you credit for that, Severus. I never understood why you became a Death Eater, but I understood why you turned spy."

"Thank you for that, at least, Sirius," Severus muttered. Pulling himself together, Severus managed a small sneer as he said, "I haven't got time to listen to any more twaddle. I suggest we get back to work immediately."

"Yes, sir! Right away, sir!" Sirius teased.

Severus sighed yet again. It was going to be an awfully long afternoon. The two wizards made their way back to the potions lab. Neither one had noticed that they had slipped into the habit of addressing each other by their given names. Later, both wizards would realize this with a touch of horror, but the damage was already done.

Hurrying through the corridors in Harry's invisibility cloak, Hermione was relieved dinner was over and she could get back to work...and back to Severus. The day had seemed eternally long; Hermione had sat in class after class barely able to concentrate and sneakily scribbling ideas about the blocking potion project onto a spare bit of parchment. It was a relief to reach Severus' study and throw off the cloak. Striding briskly through Severus' chambers, the young witch stopped so suddenly at the

threshold to his private lab that she almost lost her footing completely.

The two wizards she least expected to see in the same room with one another were making awkward small talk while they both worked. Sirius bottled a potion while Severus cleaned up the equipment used by his completed potions. For a moment, Hermione simply stared at the two men in astonishment. At last finding her voice, she said, "Now here is a sight I never thought I'd see. Severus Snape and Sirius Black, alone in the same room--apparently of their own free will--and I see no evidence of hexing, no sign of blood or bruises. How do you two explain such a thing?" she finished lightly, arching her brow in obvious imitation of one of the men now scowling at her.

While Sirius seemed too flustered to talk, the ex-spy said coolly, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Stalking up to Hermione to give her a short, possessive kiss, Severus continued. "Now, Miss Granger, if you are finished with your gawking, we have some potions to test."

Hermione simply smiled at him. She laughed out loud when Sirius left with a less than formal, "Goodbye, Severus," and her love responded in kind.

"Not another word!" Severus threatened after Black had gone. Humoring him, Hermione remained silent but could not quite hide a pleased grin.

Thunder

Chapter 24 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Once Sirius Black had left the lab--and Severus had stopped glaring at Hermione for her obvious amusement at his expense...they retrieved samples of the six trial potions that had been completed and retired to Severus' study to test them in more comfortable surroundings.

Two hours later found both witch and wizard disappointed in the trials. They had tested all the herbal concoctions and...while the Balm of Gilead had stretched the duration of the blocking potion to a half an hour...Severus and Hermione knew that they needed longer than thirty minutes for the potion to be truly useful. Taking a break from their efforts, they sat together on the sofa, wrapped in each other's arms. Eventually, Severus noticed that Hermione's muffled voice was rising up from where she had burrowed against him.

"What was that, love?" he asked.

Lifting her head reluctantly from his chest, Hermione spoke again, "What if we don't find an answer, Severus? We are fast running out of time..."

"We have three potions still to test. I have every hope that one of them will be effective. If I am wrong, then we will continue with our research. Certainly the Death Eaters will make their move soon, but we have no reason to believe it will be immediate. There may yet be time."

"It seems odd to hear the Death Eater spy speak of hope," Hermione said with a lazy smile.

Severus brushed her lips with his own and then spoke softly against them. "Sometimes, my love, hope is the only game in town." For a time, all was silent in the study as Severus kissed her breathless.

Reluctantly they broke the embrace to continue their testing. Severus had started with the herbal brews because the ingredients were easy to obtain. If one of the herbal-bound blocking potions had worked, it would have been simple to brew sufficient quantities to aid the Order. Now that the easy solution had failed, Severus was ready to try the mixture he had the most confidence in. Selecting the potion that had been bound with Yppotryll tusk, Severus quickly drank it down and the testing continued.

Severus and Hermione continued to snuggle on the couch, speaking softly to each other of inconsequential things as the test proceeded. Every five minutes, Hermione would take a moment to project. Wanting to keep the testing simple, Hermione stuck to projecting humor...much as she had when she worked with Harry and Ron in the room of requirement. Both Hermione and Severus were guilty of watching the clock as they conversed and when they reached the forty minute mark neither could contain their hope as they spoke of it in breathless tones. When they passed the hour mark, they both rose from the couch in triumph. The blocking potion now worked long enough to be of use in a prolonged battle.

Sweeping Hermione into a tight hug, the two stood before the fire embracing as they continued the test. The embrace led to kissing and rather frustrated grasping at various body parts as the two testers did their level best to keep their attraction at bay until the test was over. When the Potion finally failed at a total time of two hours, it was a relief to the now naked and panting couple, embracing almost frantically by the fire. As if of one accord, Severus and Hermione lowered themselves to the hearth rug, neither willing to wait the time it would take to make it to the bed...or even the sofa. Their coupling was swift and fiery...almost desperate as they strained against each other.

At the edge of his own release, Severus tore his mouth from Hermione's to growl into her ear, "Come for me, love, let me hear you sing...now...please, now..."

As if only awaiting his husky order, Hermione arched up against him, crooning his name over and over as she shuddered in her release. To Severus, it felt as if her sweet voice wrapped around his very heart. Thrusting deeply inside her, her name spilled from Severus' lips as he emptied himself into her depths.

Sated, the couple remained sprawled before the fire. Severus shifted so that he lay on his back with Hermione draped over him, her head resting on his chest as they gazed into the flames. Neither wanted to break the moment, but peaceful moments are fleeting in wartime and they still had plans to discuss.

"Do you have enough of the tusk in your stores to brew it for everyone in the Order?" Hermione asked quietly.

"No, nor can I use my usual resources while I am in hiding."

Raising her head to gaze at him worriedly, Hermione continued, "What shall we do?"

"Don't fret, love," he murmured as he ran his fingers through her tangled hair. "I'll have Albus owl Shacklebolt. As a Ministry Auror, he has connections even I do not. I have no doubt he'll be able to get us what we need."

"Best get to it then," Hermione said as she rose reluctantly to her feet. "I could lie draped all over you until the end of time, but...well...I can't help but be terrified that we don't have as much time as we hope."

"I'll hardly berate you for that, as I have that fear as well. Go on to bed, Hermione. As soon as I get a house elf to take a note to Albus I will join you."

Giving Severus a gentle kiss, Hermione gathered up the clothes strewn about the hearth rug and retreated to Severus' bedroom. It took little time for Severus to write his short message and send it off with Dobby...one of the few such creatures he trusted with an important task. Soon he was slipping beneath the covers next to Hermione.

Severus was unsurprised when the young witch's arms wrapped tight around him as her mouth latched hungrily onto his own. Brewing potions was not the only thing they both feared they were running out of time for.

Awakened by a small hand shaking his shoulder, Severus blinked sleep-crusted eyes. Gazing at the hand, it took him a moment before his eyes trailed from the hand at his shoulder, down the tiny arm attached to it, and at last beheld the small figure shaking him.

"Master Snape," squeaked Dobby, giving Severus' shoulder another small shake, "you is waking up now! Dobby is sorry you is waking up, but Dobby is being told you want package as soon as it is getting here. It is here!" Dobby finished with a nervous smile as he held up the small package for Severus' contemplation.

Rubbing a hand over his itchy eyes, Severus struggled to sit on the edge of the bed before taking the package from the excited house elf. His gruff, "You did well to wake me," made Dobby smile and bow as if Severus had given him a particularly hideous pair of new socks. Noting that the package was from Shackbolt, Severus was pleased by the Auror's speed in getting back to him. Rising from the bed, Severus gave one wistful glance at the witch still sleeping there before heading to the bathroom. Pausing at the door, Severus turned to regard the still smiling house elf.

"Is the master needing anything else?" Dobby asked eagerly.

"Yes, Dobby, I could use some tea, Miss Granger needs to be awakened in time to change before breakfast, and..." here Severus paused for a long moment, a slight scowl on his face. "Is Black still bunking with Lupin?"

"Yes, sir," Dobby replied with a slight frown of his own. It was apparent that Dobby liked the Animagus almost as little as Severus himself did, but Severus had never been able to get the house elf to say why. Whenever he pressed Dobby on the matter, Dobby would go into a flurry of self-punishment and would only say "Dobby is a good elf! Dobby is not being disrespectful!"

"Then you'd best ask him to come to my lab after breakfast. As distasteful as the prospect is, I could use the help. Have you got all that?"

"Yes, sir!" replied Dobby happily. "Tea, wake young miss, fetch dog man."

"Thank you, Dobby," Severus said simply before heading in to shower.

"Dobby is pleased to be helping the master," Dobby said with a grin. He disappeared with a soft pop, off to the kitchens to fetch the tea.

The day passed much as the day previous had. The students who were expecting trouble at any time did their best not to alert those that knew nothing. Sirius and Severus spent a civil if uncomfortable day chopping, brewing, and bottling the new version of the blocking potion. By dinner time, the Yppotryll husk had been brewed into enough potion to give every Order member one precious phial. Keeping one phial for himself, Severus reluctantly allowed Black to take the rest of the doses to Albus for immediate distribution.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat at dinner in the great hall keeping up appearances. Hermione and Harry were having an intense discussion of a recent DADA assignment when Ron interrupted them so quietly that it took all Harry's concentration to understand him at all.

"Harry," Ron murmured as he continued eating, "he's giving you the Quidditch shed signal and it's not the obvious one."

"I won't look up then, tell me when he's looking."

At Ron's quiet 'now,' Harry returned the counter-signal without looking at his blond boyfriend.

After dinner, Harry first escorted Hermione down to Snape's rooms before using the cloak for himself to head out to the Quidditch shed. As he took off the cloak, he was greeted with a swift peck by a distracted but intense Draco Malfoy.

"What's happened?" Harry asked calmly.

"I had an owl from Dad just before dinner. I'm to sneak out and meet him soon at the Hog's Head. Harry...I'm certain this is to give me my instructions about the Dark Lord going after you. Dumbledore has always said they'd use me to get you outside the Hogwarts grounds and I think he's right. As soon as I've left, get to Dumbledore...have him put the Order on alert. I've no way of knowing how long we'll have once I get my orders."

"Do you think it will be tonight?"

"I doubt it. They know I've no reasonable way of getting to you once you are in your common room for the evening and they won't want me to make you suspicious. They won't have given me too much warning though, so it's a good bet it will be soon."

After giving the blond a fierce kiss, Harry said, "Be careful love. I'll go to Dumbledore then I'll come back here. I expect they'll be watching you like a hawk after tonight. Slip in on your way back and then I can tell Dumbledore whatever you have to report."

"Constant vigilance!" Draco mocked with a quiet snort. "You're right though...you're right. I'll do as you say." With that, Draco gave Harry one more kiss before he opened the shed door to disappear into the night.

Wizarding newspapers had long speculated on what they had outlandishly dubbed "The Final Battle" for ages. With Death Eater activity on the rise, the journalists spent pages on describing a grueling war ending in one grand spectacle of a battle with thousands dead by the end. These lurid articles were often titled things like "You-Know-Who: Apocalypse Approaches!"

The Order knew very well that they would eventually have to face down Voldemort and his followers if they had any change of getting rid of the man for once and for all. They even jokingly referred to the confrontation as "The Final Battle"--implied caps and all...though the general consensus of what that would entail had little to do with the lurid articles on the subject. The Order of the Phoenix was thirty-two members strong and not all of those members would be fighting. Mrs. Figg was a squib, and would be no help in a magical battle of any kind. Aberforth was currently missing and Albus himself didn't seem all that interested in finding him. Elphias Doge had simply become too old and frail; he spent much of his time in libraries around the wizarding world researching old spells which might be useful to the fighting. Then there were a number of members who were simply out of the country at the moment. All in all, the Order fighting force which was ready to be mobilized at a moment's notice was around twenty people.

At best guess, the Death Eaters numbered around forty. It was to be assumed that every single one of the Death Eaters was probably not always available at all times either. Both Snape and Draco had reported during their spying missions that the most they had seen at any one gathering was around thirty and most gatherings were quite a bit less than that. So while the Order expected to be outnumbered, they didn't expect it to be by a great deal. They also didn't expect the Death Eaters to make a direct assault on Hogwarts itself. Even with all of their forty plus members, trying to attack through the school's wards would be extremely foolish of them, and Voldemort was no fool. Besides, Voldemort wasn't looking to wipe out the entire Order at this time. He simply wanted Harry. He wanted Harry dead.

Taking all of this into consideration, Snape had always ascertained that Voldemort would try another snatch, much as he had after the Tri-Wizards tournament. Albus had

agreed with that assessment, and the big questions had been when and how. After Draco had slipped into position as Harry's boyfriend, it seemed obvious that the Death Eaters would use that to their advantage. In fact--once Draco had joined the Order--the whole boyfriend business had started as a plan of Albus' with the express intent of giving Voldemort a method of kidnapping Harry that gave the Order some hope keeping track. It was a surprise to both the young men how quickly their faked relationship had become a real one. In the end, it wouldn't matter whether they gave Draco apparition coordinates or a Portkey to accomplish the task; the Order was prepared to deal with either once Draco received his instructions. The only worry had been that Draco would be notified of the snatch too late to make a report of it.

Luckily for the Order, though Voldemort was a clever fellow he was also a very egotistical one. Apparently Draco's young Death Eater act combined with his being the son of one of Voldemort's staunch supporters was good enough that he got notified well ahead of time.

"Set it up gently," Lucius told Draco that night. "We don't want to make the brat suspicious by rushing things."

When Draco slipped into the Quidditch shed afterward, he was out of breath from hurrying over the grounds. The young men didn't have much time to waste, Draco needed to give Harry the information and hurry on to the Slytherin common room so that no one would notice his side trip.

"Day after tomorrow," Draco managed to sputter out between breaths. "Eight o'clock. I'm to convince you to sneak out for dinner in Hogsmeade...a "real date" and all that rubbish. They gave me a Portkey." With that said, Draco pulled a leather pouch out of the pocket of his school robes. "It's in here," he said as he handed it to Harry.

"I'll get it to Dumbledore so that he can duplicate it. I'll give it back when you meet me to discuss our "date." Two days. Damn...I know we're lucky to get that much notice...but, two days..."

"Two days," Draco echoed hollowly. The young men gazed at each other for a brief moment, their eyes full of both worry and affection. Then, with a quick kiss, Draco sped off toward the castle. After carefully putting on his invisibility cloak, Harry followed the path his love had taken with a heavy heart.

That night, Albus carefully visited every member of the Order who would be available. With Moody's 'constant vigilance' echoing in his head, Albus trusted neither owl nor floo for the information he needed to spread. His first stop was the dungeons, where he talked to a Potions master and student who showed all the signs of having dressed hastily. If Albus noted this, he said no word on the matter. He simply told them both the facts of the plan and hurried out to continue his spreading of the news.

After the Headmaster had left, Severus regarded Hermione with haunted eyes. "Two days," he murmured. Sweeping the equally effected young witch into his arms, he carried Hermione to the bedroom, where he did his level best to show her how very much she meant to him. Their lovemaking was slow and exceedingly sweet. Yet it was heart-wrenchingly obvious to Hermione that her the man who touched her so tenderly was still convinced that, come Friday, he would no longer be around to show her how deeply she was loved.

Two Days

Chapter 25 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

Both Hermione and Severus found the following two days nerve-racking in the extreme. As the infamous "date" was scheduled for Friday night, Ron, Hermione, and Harry had to attend classes as they normally did, take their meals in the Great Hall, and behave in general as if they were ordinary school days. It was quite a strain on Hermione; all she wanted to do was creep down to Severus' rooms and never come out. Instead she tried vainly to be attentive in her classes and laughed and joked with her friends as they walked through the corridors from one class to the next. If her laughter seemed a bit forced, no one made mention of it.

Down in the dungeons, Snape wasn't fairing much better. Now that the blocking potion had been finalized, he had little to keep his mind off worrying. Indeed he did not even have the dubious companionship of Sirius Black. Albus, unwilling to draw attention by being absent himself, had sent the scruffy Animagus off to give instructions and Portkeys to the Order members who weren't already at Hogwarts. At his wits end, Severus eventually spent all day Thursday in a flurry of potion brewing. Concentrating on healing potions, pastes, and elixirs, Severus was mindful that--if Voldemort had his way come Friday evening...Poppy was likely to have a lot of injuries to look after and no potions master to do her brewing. By the end of the day, Severus had given several small crates of carefully packed phials to Dobby. Dobby, in turn, tucked them away in the infirmary where they would wait until needed.

By the time Hermione flew into Severus' study that evening and threw off Harry's invisibility cloak, Severus was pacing restlessly before the fire. For a moment, they simply stared at each other. Both their faces wore a mixed expression of worry and desire. Some unknown signal started them into action and they met before the fire in a tight embrace. Wrapping her arms around his familiar waist, Hermione squeezed him as tight as she could. Laying her head against his chest, she took comfort in the heartbeat she could feel beneath her cheek. Severus wrapped his long arms securely around the young witch and rested his cheek against the unkempt mane of hair he had come to adore.

Eventually, Hermione leaned back far enough to look thoughtfully into the tall wizard's eyes.

"How many is this then?" she asked softly.

Severus automatically opened his mouth to reply to the question she had so often asked him teasingly. His mouth snapped shut again as he realized he had absolutely no idea of the answer. Befuddled, Severus lips parted again as he confessed, "I'm afraid I seem to have lost count."

One of Hermione's arms relinquished its hold on his waist as she lifted a palm to tenderly cup his cheek. "Good. That's good. I've long hoped to give you so many hugs that even you would lose track. I'm glad it's finally enough."

Fisting his hands in her riot of hair he tilted her head back even farther as he fiercely said, "Should I live to be ten times the age of Albus, it shall never be enough!"

His lips descended on hers with the power of a thunderstorm as his hands tightened their grip in her hair. Magical energy crackled around them; Hermione realized that Severus must be much more emotionally upset than he seemed if the iron control which usually gripped his magic was slipping. This was one time she didn't need her Empath power to know how he felt, for she felt the same. Those who love most, fear most, and they both had so much to lose.

Even Hermione knew that sometimes words were not what was needed. Stroking his back with gentle hands, she softened the kiss until its fiery desperation eased into something far more tender. With her mouth and her hands she calmed the upset wizard until the sparks of unchecked energy faded. Only then did she pull away from his mouth to speak.

"Take me to bed, Severus. Let me show you how very much I love you," she whispered.

"Beloved," was the sole word he whispered back as he swept her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

Though he had been in a hurry when Hermione had first stepped into the study, Severus now kept himself in check. If it was the last thing he did...and he privately suspected that it would be...he wanted to take the time to show his beloved how intensely she was loved. Should he die the next day, Severus wanted Hermione to at least have the memory of his devotion to help sustain her. He did not worry about how he should manage if she died and he did not. The one time he had considered the matter he decided that he would simply follow her, even unto death. Hermione was unmistakably the one shiningly good thing in his sad excuse for a life. If the fates were mad and left him to live while she was taken from him, then he would follow her and do everything in his power to find her beyond the veil.

Severus had never spoken of this to Hermione; he knew very well what her reaction would be. It wasn't worth an argument when it was a moot point to begin with. Knowing what he planned to do when the fight came, Severus also knew it would take a bloody miracle for him to survive it.

Reaching his bed, Severus set Hermione softly on her feet next to it. Trailing kisses from Hermione's mouth to the soft skin of her throat, his hands made short work of the fasteners of her school robe. When he parted the fabric, he was pleasantly shocked to see she wore nothing beneath it. True, he had been hoping to undress her slowly, but the sudden and unexpected sight of the bare flesh so dear to him made his heart literally skip a beat as he gazed at her. Slowly he ran his hands over the soft skin of her shoulders and down her bare arms as he slid the robe off to let it puddle, forgotten, on the floor. After his eyes had swept up and down Hermione's body in frank appreciation, Severus knelt at her feet. Wrapping his arms around her hips, he pressed one cheek against the pale curve of her stomach for a moment. Now, so close to what he perceived as the end of his life, Severus ardently wished they hadn't been so guarded. Though he had sometimes dreamed of leaving her with his child, his sense of honor had balked at the idea of abandoning a woman to raise a child alone. No matter how much he longed that things were different, his life was what it was and he would die with his honor intact. His lips brushed against her skin as he whispered the charm that would keep her safe from pregnancy. Hermione's regretful sigh echoed his own as he reached up to tip her down onto the bed.

Hermione landed with her back flat on the coverlet, her legs hanging over the bed, and her feet still on the floor. Surprised that Severus didn't immediately join her on the bed, Hermione tilted her head up to see Severus still kneeling. The surprise changed to anticipation as he reached for her knees. Firmly pushing Hermione's thighs farther apart, Severus crept forward. His hands trailed slowly up her legs and over the sweet curve of her stomach. When his hands at last came to rest upon her breasts, Severus took his time kneading and stroking them as he watched her nipples crinkle in response. Arching into his hands, Hermione could not hold back the soft sounds of pleasure that began pouring out of her mouth. As if he were only waiting for her response, Severus immediately lowered his head to the nest of curls between her now trembling thighs.

Her breath catching in her throat, Hermione arched up again as Severus nuzzled his nose between her folds and followed it with an energetic tongue. The combination of the insistent tongue driving into her and that glorious nose grinding against her clitoris soon had Hermione's breath coming in ragged pants. The hands on her breasts became more forceful, kneading her flesh almost roughly. With a high-pitched, crooning cry, Hermione's orgasm thundered through her, leaving her trembling and breathless.

Barely aware of her surroundings, Hermione felt Severus' gentle hands as he turned her and lifted her legs onto the bed so that she lay flat. Opening her eyes, Hermione watched him pad around to the other side of the bed and then climb in to join her. Snuggling close to the nude and still panting witch by his side, Severus wrapped his arms tightly around her as he waited for Hermione to recover.

It was then that Hermione realized Severus was still wearing his trousers and shirt. While it seemed strangely naughty to be naked in his arms while he was still clothed, it simply wouldn't do. It wouldn't do at all. Pushing against him with both hands, Hermione rolled Severus onto his back and scrambled up to sit astride his hips.

"This is grossly unfair!" she said with mock outrage.

Raising an eyebrow, Severus replied in a patronizing drawl, "Unfair? I hardly think you have reason to complain, madam, when I've just made you sing like a wanton skylark." The satisfied grin which Severus couldn't quite hide did nothing to calm Hermione down.

"Humph!" snorted Hermione. Rising up slightly, Hermione abruptly bounced down upon the hard length she could feel easily though Severus' trousers. Severus hissed at the impact and glared up at her, but Hermione noted that he couldn't keep himself from raising his hips to grind against her in response. "Now that I have your undivided attention," she said as she grinned wickedly down at him, "The injustice at hand..." Here she paused to insinuate a hand between their hips so that she could grasp him firmly through his trousers...which resulted in another hiss and glare from her lover, even as he thrust up into her hand. "As I was saying, the injustice at hand," another squeeze, "is that while I am delightfully naked, you--you naughty man--are decidedly overdressed!"

"You're a clever witch," he growled. "I'm certain that you can think of some way to level the playing field."

"Indeed," she replied calmly. Then, with the suddenness of a striking snake, Hermione grabbed the placket of his now rumpled white shirt and yanked it open. Buttons rained upon the coverlet as they were abruptly parted from the garment.

Severus' eyes widened in pleased surprise at his vixen's sudden streak of aggression then they snapped abruptly closed again as Hermione lowered her head to lap at first one nipple and then the other. Severus had never though his nipples particularly responsive until Hermione had started playing with them one night with her hot mouth and tongue. Now he growled in pleasure as Hermione continued to toy with them while she ground her hips against his still cloth covered cock. This was a torturous bliss indeed. He almost wished he had taken the time to disrobe before he climbed into bed, but then he would have missed Hermione's playful aggression. Damn and blast! There were so many things he would love to discover with her and no bloody time to do so. His wistful train of thought was disrupted as Hermione leaned back, wrapping her arms around his shoulders to sit him up so that she could sweep the maltreated shirt from his body.

Following her lead almost docilely, Severus used the time it took for her to remove his shirt for a brief volley of his own. Nipping and licking at Hermione's throat, as soon as his arms were free of his sleeves he wrapped them around her. Hands settling on her arse, he rocked her hips against him as his mouth found Hermione's. For a moment, Hermione was content to suck on his tongue while she ground against him, but those trousers were seriously trying her patience. Using all of her weight, she pushed Severus roughly back down against the bed. Giving him both a wicked grin as well as a small kiss on the end of his nose, Hermione scooted down his body until her face was at the front of his trousers. Once there, she nipped gently at the hard length no mere cloth could conceal, before bringing her mouth to the buttoned placket of his trousers. These buttons she undid slowly...with her teeth.

Severus raised his head to watch her, bit back a groan as she nipped at his cloth covered cock, and then groaned in abandon as he watched her soft mouth and sharp white teeth slowly unbutton him. It was the most charmingly erotic sight he had ever seen. Indeed, he thought he had never felt so hard nor so aroused in his entire life. He growled again as he obediently lifted his hips so that Hermione could tug off his trousers. The head of his cock was eagerly protruding from the fly of his boxers. When Hermione latched onto it with a hungry mouth, Severus had to literally bite his lip to keep from coming then and there. Luckily for Severus, Hermione's patience was now at an end. There was a brief struggle as Hermione tried to push his cock back through the opening of his pants while yanking them roughly off, but no harm was done and Severus found he had no desire to complain as she quickly straddled him once more and impaled herself forcefully on his shaft.

She nearly knocked the wind out of him, so hard was the impact, yet Severus thought it was worth suffocating to feel her wrapped around him at last. Never quite catching his breath, Severus panted and moaned in pleasure as Hermione rode him hard. Severus kept his eyes open, studying her every expression, her every move as if he wished to engrave it in his memory. Hermione's head was thrown back, her eyes closed, her hair a glorious tangle which haloed her sweet face. As he noted the delightful bounce of her breasts as she bounced above him, Severus remembered he had hands. He eagerly grasped the bobbing globes with both hands and gently twisted her nipples between fingers and thumb. This must have sent Hermione over the edge; her mouth opened with that delightful croon he so loved and she bucked briefly against him before collapsing over his chest.

That was the utter end of Severus' control; the way she cried out in her ecstasy went straight to his already desperate cock. Not waiting for Hermione to recover, he rolled her beneath him and pounded into her. Hips pumping fast and furious, he lost himself in a world of desperate need and growing fire. Severus' triumphant shout echoed through the room before he too collapsed in a lifeless heap. When he at last tried to pull away so as not to crush the smaller witch under him, Hermione's arms wrapped tight around him, trapping him against her.

"Stay," she whispered, "just for a moment."

"Yes," he replied as he buried his face in her neck, "for a moment."

All too soon, worry about the morrow as well as their more pleasant reasons for exhaustion caught up with the lover's and forced them to sleep.

The next morning, after he had kissed Hermione breathless and sent her off to class, Severus spent the entire day with Turpin. Turpin was more silent than usual; he knew the danger his master would face that night and it weighed heavily on his jarvey heart. Yet the two comrades spent a quiet day together, playing games and reading Tolkien. Having set his mind to making certain that they finished *The Return of the King* before evening came, Severus read to the Jarvey for hours over the course of the day. When the last page was finished and the book closed, Turpin regarded Severus with serious eyes.

"That wanker Frodo thought he'd never be home again, but he was fucking wrong," Turpin said sharply.

"True enough," Severus replied while ruffling the fur on Turpin's head. "Let's hope I'm wrong as well." His words were brave, but his tone revealed how little he believed in that hope.

Hermione arrived at half past seven. They would Portkey directly from Severus' study at eight o'clock. Hermione was to keep Harry's invisibility cloak and wear it during the battle. She would stay to the edge of the action and concentrate on distracting the Death Eaters with her projection. Alastor Moody had promised to keep track of her with his magical eye and come to her aid if she was discovered and in trouble. While Severus worried that he would not be able to see her, he admitted that it was for the best. If he could not see her, he could not be distracted from his own business; the Dark Lord himself. Knowing he had no chance to best such a powerful foe, he nevertheless was determined to stick to his plan of distracting the madman for as long as humanly possible.

They stood by the window seat, arms wrapped around each other's waists as they waited, staring out the charmed window into the fading light. Not a word did they speak; all the things they had most wished to say had been said the night before. At ten minutes of eight, they broke apart briefly while Hermione donned the invisibility cloak and Severus downed his phial of the blocking potion. At precisely eight o'clock, both the visible wizard and the invisible witch felt the internal tug of the Portkey's activation.

Alone in the study, Turpin put his paws over his face and wept.

Dogheart Man

Chapter 26 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

There are no ranks and files; indeed, there are no armies in the Wizarding world. Wizards use short skirmishes and sieges rather than prolonged combat. Even during the Goblin Wars, combatants in any single battle numbered in the hundreds rather than the thousands and the battle itself was little more than a free for all, with only rudimentary tactics being used by either side. The Order of the Phoenix had more in common with guerilla forces than it did with any traditional Muggle armed forces. They were used to fighting in extremely small groups and the sort of wide scale tactics with which Muggle armies conducted themselves were patently useless in a wizard battle. The Order members were brave and many were seasoned fighters but they had no ties to the wizard government and fought as they saw fit.

When Severus appeared, he was already separated from the invisibility cloaked Hermione. Though they had been touching when the Portkeys activated, since they each used their own Portkey, they appeared in slightly different places. Wasting no time in a vain attempt to locate the invisible witch, Severus drew his wand and took a quick visual assessment of his surroundings.

The ground was fairly level but rocky, and in the fading sunlight Severus could see water scattered here and there. The air was crisp and smelled of peat. There were no trees, only a few scattered old stumps. Spotting a ridge of mountains to the southeast, Severus realized he knew where he was; he had been here before. They were in the Highlands in the midst of the desolate Ranoch Moor. It was obvious that Voldemort had not expected a fight when he chose a location with such treacherous footing.

Voldemort had been standing in a circle of perhaps thirty of his followers. The instant the members of the Order began to appear, the Death Eaters circle broke apart as they formed a rough but protective half circle before their Lord. The order would have to fight through this barrier before they could engage Voldemort himself. Severus had other plans.

Under normal conditions, only a very stoic wizard or a very foolish one would Apparate during a fight. For most people, the distraction of battle is far too invasive for a wizard to concentrate enough to Apparate without getting splinched. Not to mention the fact that one may Apparate in order to avoid one curse only to appear in front of another. Severus was not most people. As curses began flying, Severus took a hard look at where the Dark Lord stood and abruptly vanished.

Luckily for Hermione, her Portkey had brought her close to the edge of the action. Walking slightly farther away from where the other wizards were beginning to face off, Hermione took a quick look around. She already knew that the Order had arrived with twenty-two members; it looked like the Death Eaters had close to thirty. The forces of the light were certainly outnumbered, but not too badly. Hopefully, Hermione's projection would help them even the playing field. The abrupt disappearance of Severus distracted her for a moment and when she saw him reappear only a few feet from Voldemort her heart leaped into her throat. Well, that could only aid her with what she planned to project.

Fear. Though Andrene had showed Hermione all too plainly what risks one tempted by projecting fear in a battle, Hermione had never thought of anything more useful to try. After all, she wasn't attempting to stop the fight: Hermione knew that was beyond her fledgling powers. All she had to do in order to make her gift useful was to make the enemy hesitate or grow careless. This would hopefully be enough to give the Order a slight advantage. Finding it impossible to take her eyes off where Severus stood sneering before the Dark Lord, Hermione quieted her mind and began to project. Her fear for Severus' well being as he faced the toughest of foes easily fueled her projection.

A wave of reaction spread though the Death Eater forces. It was not as successful as Hermione had hoped. True, it did make most of them more hesitant and a single cloaked figure fled the field in terror. Moody managed to catch the fleeing Death Eater with a full body bind before he could escape by Apparating. The projection took a bit of the Death Eaters' edge away from them, but it was not enough of an effect to give the Order the advantage. It was all too apparent that the Death Eaters were well accustomed to fear. With no better idea at hand, Hermione intensified the projection as strongly as she could as the light of spell casting lit the twilight moor as bright as day.

To say that the Dark Lord was taken aback by the sudden appearance of a man he thought to be dead was an understatement. When Severus bypassed the Death Eaters to suddenly appear not ten feet from the Dark Lord himself, Voldemort's strange, reptilian eyes narrowed in surprise and he let loose a hiss of displeasure. Standing his ground, Severus returned his former master's regard with an expression of calm disdain. Knowing that it would take a miracle for him to survive this confrontation, he nevertheless expected to be able to hold his own for some time. The Cruciatus he could withstand indefinitely and most other curses he could block.

Indeed, the Avada Kedavra was the only curse he truly feared as there was no way to escape it save dodging. However, Severus knew that Voldemort was unlikely to throw the killing curse at him immediately. All the Unforgivables were very draining to the caster, but none so much as the killing curse. Voldemort was no fool. With the Order fighting and Harry so close to within his grasp, Voldemort would do what he could to ration his magical resources for the final confrontation. That is why Severus had decided to risk so much by seeking out this confrontation. With each hex and curse the Dark Lord wasted on him, Voldemort would be that much weaker when the Order broke through the Death Eater lines and Voldemort was forced to face off with Harry and Albus. The weaker the Dark Lord was at that time, the better off the forces of the light would be. In Severus' mind, it was worth any sacrifice.

"Snake," hissed Voldemort, "I would have thought the Dementors had taken care of you long ago. No matter. I know very well how little it takes to make you crawl." With a casual flick of his wand, Voldemort said, "Crucio!"

The hours of practicing with this curse that Severus and Draco had put in had all been leading up to this moment. The pain of the curse was immediate and strong, yet Severus never flinched and his disdainful regard of his former master never wavered. Affecting an almost bored tone of voice, Severus said, "Well, Tom, it appears that you do not know me as well as you have assumed. How very...disappointing."

Sputtering and hissing in rage, Voldemort reacted just as Severus had hoped. Ignoring the rest of the Order members who fought furiously to break through the Death Eaters' defense, Voldemort gave into his anger and focused completely on Snape. Ending the apparently useless Cruciatius, he began hexing the former Death Eater in earnest, throwing curse after curse toward the young upstart who dared defy him.

A seasoned duelist, Severus blocked everything the Dark Lord threw at him and managed to throw a few curses of his own. Neither wizard managed a hit on the other, but Severus had expected this. He also knew that his powers would exhaust themselves long before those of the madman he fought. His only aim in this seemingly useless display of bravery was to draw Voldemort's fire for as long as he could. If the fates were kind, it would be long enough for the forces of the light to break through the Death Eater line and allow Albus and Harry to face Voldemort before he caught his breath from dueling with Severus. If nothing else, it would keep Voldemort from attacking the rest of the Order while they fought their way through to him. Already feeling his powers beginning to weaken, Severus gritted his teeth and used every ounce of his stubborn will to keep fighting.

Hermione had it relatively easy during the battle. The Death Eaters were too concerned with foes they could see to worry about those they could not. Staying far to the edge of the action, Hermione was not in danger of anyone accidentally running into her. She did, however have to keep an eye on the occasional errant curse which came too close for comfort. Most of Hermione's attention was on the heated duel between Severus and his former master. Hermione found it all too easy to fuel her projection of fear as she watched the vicious and furious duel between the two wizards. Perhaps twenty minutes had passed since she had seen Severus appear before He Who Must Not Be Named, and it was obvious that Severus was beginning to tire.

Hoping that more of the Order would be able to join Severus soon, Hermione's eyes flew over the rest of the battle. It didn't look good. One more member of the Death Eaters had fled, and four more had been incapacitated by members of the Order. The numbers were now more even but it was woefully apparent that the Order was going to be too busy with Voldemort's followers to come to Severus' aid any time soon. Returning her gaze to where Severus fought, Hermione was the sole witness to the dreadful event that happened next.

Severus had been quite correct when he assumed that the Dark Lord would be cautious of weakening his powers prematurely by using the death curse. However, the minds of the mad are unpredictable and never easily understood by the sane. Severus was a logical thinker, but he had not taken into account the pure rage which now drove the man he duelled against. Voldemort had always considered Snape to be a weakling, a man easily led and easily cowed. Surprised to see the traitor not only alive, but also strong and mocking him as they fought, his rage knew no bounds. When Voldemort saw that the traitor was tiring, he threw caution to the winds and attacked with the speed of a striking snake.

"...Avada Kedavra!" he snarled, his wand sweeping down to point at Severus' chest as the green light of a spell launched itself straight toward Severus' heart.

Wide eyed with terror, Hermione heard the incantation clearly. She watched with growing horror as Severus threw himself, violently to the side in an attempt to dodge the lethal spell. He was not fast enough. As he lunged, the green light dealt him a glancing blow to the shoulder. Her eyes filling with sudden tears, Hermione watched the body of the man she loved slump to the ground.

Collapsing to her knees, for a moment it seemed as if the world had stopped turning in homage to the young witch's grief. The sounds of the battle faded from her mind, her tear-filled eyes saw nothing but the lifeless form lying before a wildly cackling Voldemort.

He has no idea what he has done, she thought. What do Death Eaters truly know about love, about loss. They have killed my heart. They have killed me. I will not let them go unpunished. I will not let them ignore what they have destroyed. My fear had little effect on them. Now, let them know my pain!

While Hermione had knelt, her sorrow turning to pain and wrath, she had not been using her Empath powers to project. The limited effect of the fear projection had died and the Death Eaters were fighting with renewed vigor. Voldemort had begun to attack the members of the Order from his position of safety. It seemed that the Death Eaters might drive the Order back. With an unbelievable suddenness, everything changed.

Her tear-drenched face lifted to the sky, Hermione began a new projection. With a towering rage which showed no mercy on the followers of the wizard who had killed her love, Hermione's Empathic skills reached new heights as she projected her grief. Rolling waves of sorrow, pain, and hopelessness washed over unprotected Death Eaters with immediate effect.

It was with great shock that the forces of the light watched their adversaries burst into sudden tears. There were a few who tried stubbornly to continue to fight, but their eyesight was impaired, their reactions slowed. The Order quickly incapacitated the few who were still trying to stand against them. The remaining Death Eaters were in no shape to harm anyone. Many had dropped and were now thrashing on the ground, tearing at themselves, tearing out their own hair as they wailed and wept. Several fled screaming out into the moor and Moody sent Remus and Sirius in fast pursuit lest they try to double back and cause trouble. Three of the Death Eaters turned their wands on themselves and were dead before they hit the ground.

In mere moments, all of the Death Eaters were bound and helpless--save one.

The man who had caused so much pain and loss obviously had no understanding of it himself. Hermione's projection had no effect on Voldemort whatsoever. He stood behind Severus' motionless form, gibbering in rage as he ordered his now defunct forces to stand and fight. In the end, his death was anticlimactic. As the Order gathered around the mad wizard, Albus quickly cast a spell to keep Voldemort from Apparating away.

In a fury, Voldemort launched a spell at the wizard he considered to be the true bane of his existence. Harry flinched as he saw the green light streaking towards him, however--as it had happened once before...a brilliant flash of green light appeared around Harry and the spell reflected back towards its master. Voldemort could block an Avada Kedavra no better than any other mortal. With a screech, he fell to the ground close to where Snape lay. When his spirit tried to rise and escape, Harry set his Patronus on it and the shimmering stag tore the dusky shade to bits.

For a moment, there was an unearthly stillness on the moor, broken only by the weeping and moans of the bound Death Eaters. Despite the fierce battle preceding it, Voldemort's death had come so suddenly and with so little fanfare that it took the Order members a moment to truly believe the man who had plagued them for over two decades was really gone. Abruptly, the quiet moor was engulfed in shouts of pure joy. The Order members took a moment to hug their comrades and wipe tears of happiness from weary eyes before they began to organize the clean up.

While most of the Order began seeing to those who were hurt, Shacklebolt Apparated away to the Ministry to alert the Aurors to come and collect the Death Eater prisoners. Tonks went to St. Mungos to ask the immediate aid of the Healers there. In short order both Tonks and Shacklebolt returned, a horde of wizards on their heels. However, as fast as the Aurors and Healers arrived, they Apparated away just as quickly. In the heat and relief of victory, it is little wonder that not even Albus himself realized the trouble. Tonks and Shacklebolt were sent away again and when they returned it was all too apparent what the matter was.

"Where is Hermione?" Tonks said when she returned. "The Healers say that when they arrived they were overwhelmed with grief. That's why they disappeared again so

fast...some of them are still crying and they say we can all bloody well go hang if we don't get that stopped before they try again."

"It's the same with the Aurors," agreed Shackbolt. "They would like nothing better than to come take the Death Eaters into custody, but they won't try again until we get that effect stopped. Where is Miss Granger? Why hasn't she stopped projecting?"

In the relief of the battle being over, no one had yet given a thought to the invisible witch who had been so instrumental to their efforts. Harry and Ron in particular looked heartily ashamed of the fact that they had not yet looked for their friend.

"Where is she?" Harry echoed as searched in vain for sight of her on the darkened moor.

Albus and Moody's eyes snapped to where the young witch still knelt on the soggy ground. As the two men went to her side, they were followed closely by the rest of the group. Removing the invisibility cloak from her still form, Albus knelt by the silent witch's side and spoke to her in gentle tones. "Hermione...Hermione can you hear me my dear? The battle is over and we've won. You may rest now, sweet girl, there is no need to keep at it."

Silence was his only answer. The young woman remained kneeling and motionless, her shoulders bent, her head drooping as silent tears seeped from her closed eyes. Indeed, she never stirred even when Albus gave her a soft shake nor when he tried to revive her with a healing spell. At last, Albus gave up the effort to get through to her. Rising, he regarded the rest of the group with serious eyes.

"What's the matter with her?" Harry practically shouted.

"I'm afraid I do not know, my boy," Albus said with a tired sigh. "Hermione is still projecting. Indeed, so intently is she projecting that I cannot get her attention. I doubt she realizes the battle is over." Turning to Shackbolt, Albus continued, "We must get the Healers here, there are wounded that cannot afford to wait. Is there none of the blocking potion left?"

"No," Kingsley said shortly. "I sent Severus all of the Yppotryll tusk that was available. It was scarcely enough to brew what we used today...there is no reserve."

"Then I am afraid we will have to move Miss Granger. Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, would you be good enough to take Hermione back to Hogwarts. Severus' study is still warded; perhaps the safety of that buffered room will revive her as it did when she first received her gift. I know you'll want to stay with her, but please keep an eye on how you are feeling. The blocking potion we all took will be wearing off soon; it will not be comfortable for you to stay with her for long."

Supported by her two closest friends, Hermione was taken back to Hogwarts, back to the study where she had spent so many happy hours. Though she could not stop projecting, Hermione was vaguely aware of where she was. The study could offer her no comfort. Indeed, it seemed now little more than a bitter reminder of all that she had lost. Harry and Ron laid her gently on the sofa and spoke quiet words of love and hope before they reluctantly left her. Hermione did not really hear them. Alone in the study, the silent keen of Hermione's grief spiraled on and on.

Back on the moor, the prisoners were taken away by the Aurors, the few dead removed, and the wounded sent to either St. Mungos or back to Hogwarts, depending on the seriousness of their injuries. Eventually the weary Order members went home. Once back at Hogwarts, a small group of students and teachers gathered outside the door to Severus' study while Albus tried to reach Hermione. It was no use; the blocking potion had worn off and even Albus could not stay long in the room with Hermione's sadness buffeting at his sanity. With a heavy heart, he gave up the attempt and retreated back into the corridor.

"I'm afraid the warded room has not had the effect I had hoped it would," he said simply.

"Surely there is something we can do?" whispered Harry.

"I can think of only one course of action that has any hope of success. Off to bed, all of you. We'll speak again in the morning."

"What will we do, Headmaster?" Minerva asked, her worry easily apparent.

"You lot will get your weary selves to bed," Albus said in a tone of voice that brooked no argument. "As for me, I will go up to my study and floo the Firewalker."

Faces which glowed with newfound hope slowly turned from the study door as they crept off to bed. They were too weary to note that no hope was visible in the Headmaster's unusually serious eyes.

From the Ashes

Chapter 27 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

It took Albus what little remained of that night to reach Andrene Christie. The Firewalker had been away from home dealing with another emergency. Tired as she was, Andrene took one look into the worried face that hovered in her hearth and promised to come through immediately. When Albus and Andrene reached the corridor outside the Potion master's study, they were greeted by the weary faces of Harry, Ron, and Minerva who stood, hovering, near the open door.

"I thought I told you all to get some sleep," Albus said, giving them a pointed look.

"I did catch a few hours," Minerva groused, "and so did the boys, but you can't blame us for being worried, Headmaster."

"I suppose not...I suppose not," he said, shaking his head. "Now, let us clear out of the way and let Madam Christie see what the matter is."

The young men scrambled away from the door as Minerva stepped gracefully to the side. Staying outside the wards for the moment, Andrene looked inside. At some point during the night, Hermione had flung herself off the sofa. She knelt on the floor, motionless, her eyes open and staring at the hearthrug.

Turning to Albus, Andrene said softly, "What happened to her?"

"We don't know exactly, Madam Christy. As you can imagine, things happened in the battle very quickly. I do know that she planned to use fear as her projection. It was only marginally successful. At some point she must have decided to change horses because she switched to sadness. That emotion had great effect on our enemy and allowed us to win the day. However, when it was all over, Miss Granger seemed to be stuck in her projection. I had hoped that placing her here in this familiar and warded room might help her return to us, but it has had no effect."

With a heavy sigh, Andrene looked at the hopeful faces that regarded her. "I will do my best, that is for certain, but I cannot be making you nary a promise. I have only seen one Empath in such a state and dat one did never recover." That said, Andrene turned from the worried faces of Hermione's friends and stepped into the room.

Even with her protective wall at full power, Andrene staggered as she was hit with the force of Hermione's projection. Hermione's sorrow had spiraled into a whirlwind of bare emotion. Like a ravaging beast, it tore into Andrene's protections as if they were tissue paper. Barely able to remain on her feet, Andrene searched under the sadness, hunting for the underlying cause of her student's distress. There it was...whispering under the maelstrom...grief, pain, loss.

"The poor girl..." Andrene muttered, "she's lost her winjy man for certain. So hard a ting it is for an Empath to love so strong..."

Stumbling, blinded by her own tears, Andrene retreated from the study and leaned heavily against the corridor wall while she tried to get her emotions back under control. After a moment, she turned wet eyes toward the Headmaster.

"It is too late...I can do nothing for her. Cha! It's fuckery! Pure fuckery for certain! The girl loves a duppy an' you bubus lock her in a bone yard! I thought you were a ranking man, but this is a dread position you put the girl in!"

Taking her firmly by the shoulders, Albus gave Andrene a gentle shake. "Andrene! I don't understand you...speak plainly!"

Taking a deep breath, Andrene calmed herself enough to use her 'tourist English'. "She grieves for her man. Her man is dead and you locked her in her dead mate's room."

"Severus?" Albus said, his eyebrows rising in surprise. "But Andrene, Severus isn't dead."

"Are you for certain? Miss Hermione is convinced he is...only his loss could affect her so."

"I'm very certain. I checked him myself right after our enemy fell. Something had knocked him unconscious, but he isn't even very hurt. In fact, he's upstairs in the infirmary with the other people who needed little more than rest."

A reluctant hope lit the Firewalker's eyes. "You'd best take me to him."

He woke slowly, dragged into consciousness by a hand that shook his shoulder, a voice that called his name. Opening his eyes reluctantly, it took him a blinking moment to realize that it was Albus Dumbledore's face which stared into his own. When he spoke, he said the first thing that came to mind.

"Albus...are you dead too?"

"It seems, Severus, that rumors of your death have been widely exaggerated. Why is it, my boy, that you think you should be dead?"

"Avada Kedavra," Severus mumbled, "he hit me with an Avada Kedavra."

"Surely not! You wouldn't be here if he had. I assure you, dear boy, you are very much alive."

Sitting up with some difficulty, Severus unbuttoned the front of his crumpled linen shirt far enough to bare his left shoulder. The jagged cut of a curse scar was clearly visible against his bare skin. Staring at it for an astonished moment, Severus then looked back to Albus and said quite clearly, "Yppotryll tusk!"

"As you have often reminded me, I am not a Potions master. In English, my boy, if you please..."

"We used Yppotryll tusk in the blocking potion...it has some strong curse blocking abilities...not normally strong enough to block an Unforgivable..." Severus' voice trailed off.

"But combined with the fact that the curse just clipped you, I suppose it was enough," Albus concluded.

"Either that or the blocking potion strengthened it somehow..."

Albus could practically see the wheels start to turn in his Potion master's head. "Think about it later, we've got a problem."

At last fully awake, Severus made a quick survey of the sea of faces before him. He sat straight up in the bed as he demanded, "Where is Hermione?"

Stepping forward, Andrene took one of Severus' hands in both of her own as she sat on the edge of his bed. "Calm down an' listen to me, there is nuh much time. Your girl thought she saw you die. She used her grief to attack your downpressors but now it eats at her. That grief be all she knows, an' if you can't manage to get through to her she will be lost to us for certain."

"Can you not help her, Madam Christie?" Severus whispered.

"Would that I could...but even my protection be no match for your girl's pain. She be in your study, I didn't last two minutes before her grief drove me out. Dumbledore said you had a potion but it's all used up. How long does it take to make?"

"Too long...too blasted long," Severus said. With that, he closed his eyes and leaned back against the headboard.

When a few moments had passed with no reaction from his Potions master, Albus feared the boy had given up. Hesitantly, he began to address him, "Severus, my boy..."

"Silence!" Severus spat, practically shouting in the quiet infirmary.

Andrene, Minerva, and the boys seemed both shocked and puzzled by Severus' outburst. Albus realized that Severus was far from giving up; he was obviously thinking furiously. A hopeful gleam sprang to life in the Headmaster's eyes.

As suddenly as his silence had begun, it abruptly ended. Sitting up again, Severus opened his eyes. His expression had changed from one of worry to a look of fierce determination. "Turpin!"

A here before unnoticed lump under the coverlet at the foot of Severus' cot squirmed into sudden movement. Tunneling out into the light, Richard "Dick" Turpin sprang onto Severus' lap with a gleeful shout of "Syphilis!" Resting his front paws against Severus' chest so that he could briefly touch his master's chin with a whiskery nose, he said "I told you that you were too mean to die, you bloody wanker!"

"Indeed you did, Turpin. Indeed you did. Want to come help me rescue a damsel in distress?"

"We're going to save the vixen?"

"Yes, we're going to save the vixen," Severus said with a conviction that could not be denied.

It later mortified Severus that his body did not yet have the strength of his convictions. He was forced to accept the aid of both Ron and Harry in order to make it down to the dungeons. In later years, they teased him about this unmercifully, but only after they had graduated and only when Hermione was around to stay the furious man's wand arm. Severus didn't waste time explaining what he intended to do; he needed to save his breath for the stairs. Noting this, Albus brushed off any attempt of the others to get the wheezing Snape to speak. When the group reached the open door of the study, Severus spoke haltingly to Turpin as he tried to catch his breath.

"Near the hearth. Crate of phials. Some are empty. Grab any of the full ones. Bring it to me."

Rushing as fast as his short legs would carry him, Turpin ran into the study. The animal was obviously unaffected by Hermione's projection. In a thrice he returned, a stoppered phial held carefully in his teeth.

"The Balm of Gilead," Severus muttered as he studied the phial. "You did well Turpin." Turning to Albus, Severus took a short time to explain. "It's one of our failed trials...it will give me thirty minutes before it wears off...that should be long enough..."

"What do you mean to do, Severus?" Minerva asked, her voice thick with both worry and hope.

Unstopping the phial, Severus drained it in one swallow. As he waited for it to take effect, he answered Minerva's question. "We based the blocking potion on the the Redactum Maeror; the potion St. Mungo's uses to dampen grief. I still have a full measure in my potions cabinet." Stepping resolutely into the study, Severus turned back to say one last thing. "This may take some time and I will not have us gawked at. Albus, I trust you'll see that this door remains closed until I open it myself." With that, he shut the door on their muffled protests.

The sight of his Hermione kneeling so pale and unmoving distracted Severus for a moment. Resolutely making his way toward his personal potions cabinet, Severus was frustrated by the weakness of his body. Certainly he was alive, and the exhaustion he was experiencing was a small price to pay. However, if he did not manage to break Hermione out of her emotional prison, he may as well not live at all. Hermione was his heart, and the man who once thought he had no heart had decided he would never try to exist without one again. Reaching the cabinet, Severus quickly found the phial of the precious Redactum Maeror. Cradling it carefully, he stumbled over to Hermione and knelt beside her. It took some careful work to get Hermione's mouth open, to pour the fluid in, and to insure that she swallowed it. The seconds he waited to let it take effect seemed like an eternity. At last, Severus noticed some softening in her expression. The brows which had been drawn together smoothed a fraction; the lips which had been tightly pressed together began to relax. Taking a firm hold on her upper arms, Severus shook her gently.

"Hermione!" he called. "I'm here, love. I'm here. I haven't left you...I will never leave you. I'm here, Hermione. I'm fine. I'm here. Come back to me, vixen. Don't you dare leave me alone...do you hear me? Don't you leave me!" His voice broke at the last, wavering with a fear greater than he had ever known. But what was this? Did she stir?

Sunk deeply in pain and despair, at first Hermione resisted the almost angry voice which broke into her solitude. Yet there was something in that demanding tone, something familiar, something longed for. Abruptly, Hermione began to fight to regain her senses. That voice! That growling, insistent, beloved voice! Brown eyes snapped open in shock.

"Severus!" she practically shrieked. Her hands flew to his neck, his hair, his face. They busied themselves with the familiar feel of his flesh, as if by touch alone she could prove that he was real. It wasn't enough. A primal urge overtook her, demanding proof of life, proof of love. Hermione threw herself at him, and--in his weakened state--she knocked him flat on his back and came to rest atop him. Far from complaining at her rough treatment of his person, Severus wound his hands happily in her riot of hair and dragged her mouth to meet his own. They murmured words to each other that they later could not recall, but it mattered not. They were alive. Love was alive.

Eventually caresses were not enough. Impatient--and half mad with relief and desire--Hermione pulled away long enough to unbutton Severus' trousers and release his hard length. Pulling up the skirt of the school uniform she still wore, Hermione simply dragged her knickers to one side before sliding down on his shaft. This was life! This was undeniable proof that neither her body, her heart, nor her mind could ignore. Her man was very much alive and he loved her!

Their coupling was fast and furious, because of it. She rode him hard while she called his name over and over. It wasn't long before she could feel him pulsing deep within her and her joy at that twitching response sent her into her own release. Collapsing over him, it took Hermione some time to catch her breath. When she at last rose a bit to look at Severus, she was shocked to see his eyes closed, his face unresponsive.

"Severus? Oh my god...you were alive and I've killed you!"

In due course Hermione realized that her love still breathed, his heart still pounded in time to her own, he was simply unconscious. Assuming that while he wasn't dead, he probably should be taken to the infirmary, Hermione carefully disengaged herself from a man who lay dead to the world, yet with the slightest of smiles gracing his face.

When Hermione pulled away and went to tuck Severus back into his trousers--*He'll never forgive me if I let anyone see him like this!*..she noticed the obvious proof of what they'd been up to. Indeed, the front of Severus' trousers had a wet stain that was already drying slightly white around the edges. Hermione wasn't truly worried about this until she reached for a wand that was not in its usual place. When she realized that Severus was also without his wand, she knew there was nothing for it. If anyone was crass enough to mention the tell-tale stain, she would look them square in the eye and say she didn't know what they were talking about. But first she had to get him to the infirmary.

Opening the door that led to the corridor, Hermione's search for help was cut abruptly short when she came face to face with the group waiting for word. Though all were glad to see her once more herself, Harry and Ron refused to meet her eye, Professor McGonagall was blushing furiously, and Andrene was outright chuckling with glee. Only the face of Albus held any composure whatsoever, so Hermione turned to him and stammered out a plea to get Professor Snape to the Hospital Wing.

"Certainly, my dear, certainly," said the Headmaster, nodding sagely. "I expect our Professor Snape wasn't quite up to the strain of...helping you, having just left the infirmary himself. Leave him to me, my dear. You go on up to the Hospital Wing and I'll bring him up to you."

Turning away from the clear amusement in her Headmaster's eyes, Hermione fled the dungeons and hurried to the infirmary. When Dumbledore soon followed, a levitated Severus Snape in his wake, Hermione was relieved to see the front of Severus' trousers had been returned to a more suitable state. However, she wasn't sure how she would be able to look her Headmaster in the eye ever again.

After Madam Pomfrey had examined both Severus and Hermione and announced that all either of them needed was some rest and quiet, Hermione waited until all the visitors had left the infirmary before she snuck into Severus' bed and wrapped him in her arms.

He woke briefly, murmuring, "...Hermione?"

"Hush, love. I'm here. Rest now...I'll be here when you wake."

Severus Snape slipped back into sleep, a pleased smile curling his lips.

Peaceful Shores

Chapter 28 of 28

Hermione has an encounter with a mysterious creature. Has it cursed her or has it set her on journey of adventure and love?

The sun was warm, the sand soft under the blanket, and the sound of the surf as comforting as the pounding of a mother's heartbeat heard from the womb. Hermione sprawled in lazy abandon underneath a huge beach umbrella; it was a concession to the pale complexion of the man who lay close by her side, the fingers of one hand tangled loosely in her own. She was in no hurry to go anywhere else, despite the draw of the surf surging against the shoreline.

A few months had passed since Voldemort's fall and Hermione's night of complete despair, when she had thought her Severus gone forever. Yet Hermione still had an almost unconscious need to touch Severus constantly. It was as if the proof before her eyes was not quite enough to satisfy her of his continued existence. For the most part, the touches were more casual than needy; a hand on his knee or arm, the brush of her fingers as she tucked his untidy hair away from his face, and the almost necessary feeling of her fingers twined with his whenever they were side-by-side.

Inexplicably, her once distant professor seemed perfectly at ease with all of this touching. Perhaps Severus, too, felt some need to remind himself that he was alive—that he was loved. Indeed, the only time he had brought her to task for her gentle and near constant assault on his person was when he returned to teaching Potions after Voldemort's death and Hermione was once again a student in his class. Severus had patiently taken Hermione aside to discuss the matter. While he couldn't be arsed if she touched him anywhere else—the Great Hall, the corridors, even before the entire Board of Governors for the school—she simply had to try to stop pawing him in class.

Hermione had been mortified. She'd no idea that she had been touching him during class time. Once Severus had pointed it out, Hermione had found herself literally having to sit on her hands to keep from winding her fingers in his robes as he swept past her worktable during Potions class.

When the war had ended, and classes had resumed, the remaining few months of Hermione's last year of school had been decidedly odd. Neither she nor Severus had made any attempt to hide the fact that they cared for one another from the rest of the school. Certainly there had been no snogging in the corridors, but they were often to be seen walking arm in arm, sharing quiet discussions, laughing, smiling. The mere sight of the dreaded Potion master smiling caused quite a stir among the students. Generally, they treated him warily, as if he'd gone barking mad.

Perhaps he had, at that. In class, Severus Snape was just as exacting in his standards as he had ever been. However, Severus did behave differently, seeming almost manic at times. An exploded cauldron which caused any harm to the class room or the other students would result in the usual shouting and detentions. But if the accident caused no harm, Severus was as likely to dissolve into riotous laughter as he was to take points.

The students who witnessed this tended to gape at him in shock and mutter to each other that the stresses of the war must have driven him insane. Rather than attempting to take advantage of their Potions Professor's better humor, his mercurial moods made the students more wary of him than ever before, and they were even more quiet and studious in his classroom than they had been before the end of the war.

That hadn't been the only change. After Severus had been released from the infirmary, Hermione had returned to classes. At the end of her first day back, she had skipped dinner to go up to Gryffindor Tower and pack all of her belongings. With her arms full of Crookshanks and her trunk floating obediently before her, Hermione had then marched straight down to the dungeons and into Severus' study.

All this she had done without even really thinking about it. Indeed, Hermione had not even considered Severus' reaction to her arriving in his rooms with everything she possessed. Wide eyed, she regarded him with trepidation as he sat blinking at her in surprise. He never said a word about it; he simply walked into his bedroom and calmly charmed his wardrobe and dresser larger so that she would have room for her things. Then he had tossed Crookshanks unceremoniously out of the bedroom and taken her to bed.

In the morning, Hermione had gotten up early to begin putting her things away. While she unpacked, Severus had sat, naked on the bed, thumbing through one of her books.

"Hermione?" he'd said, his voice deceptively mild.

Here it comes, Hermione thought, almost panicking, *"the big discussion..."*

"I believe that if we are going to cohabitate while you are still a student," he said, in an almost off-hand manner, "we really ought to file a statement of formal betrothal with the Ministry."

Severus hadn't even looked at Hermione; in fact, he was still lazily thumbing through her book as he waited for her to speak. After a moment, Hermione had simply said, "All right."

Then he had looked at her, his eyes flashing with fire. He then proceeded to drag Hermione back to bed where he made her dreadfully late to her Transfiguration class.

Later that same day, Severus had produced the necessary Ministry form and it had obediently magicked itself away after they had both signed it. That was it. They were officially betrothed.

The last weeks of school had proceeded uneventfully. Both Severus and Hermione spoke casually about getting married, but they had made no concrete plans or set a date. To be honest, though both of them had once been driven and exacting personalities, in the wake of the war, they both felt in no hurry to do anything. True, they spent time discussing magical theories that they wished to someday explore together, and they did brew potions occasionally, but for the most part, they were content to share each other's company and enjoy their newfound freedom.

This was how they found themselves on a beach in Jamaica. In no hurry to set about deciding what to do for the rest of their lives, when Andrene had invited them to her home for the summer break, the pair had quickly accepted. For the most part, Andrene had left the two lovebirds to their own devices, which suited Severus and Hermione just fine.

Every evening, Andrene demanded their company and dragged them out to a new restaurant, where Severus enjoyed Hermione's discomfort as well as the food. While Hermione was slowly learning to enjoy more spicy food than she had been used to, she felt she would never learn to like the sorts of dishes which Andrene and Severus ate with relish. Severus assured the young witch that her blandness at table was more than compensated by her spiciness in the bedroom. In any event, it was easily apparent to all who saw the couple that neither found anything lacking in their partner.

Soon, they would head back to Hogwarts. Having decided to teach for one more year so that he and Hermione had time to decide what they wanted to do next, Severus had warned Albus that Hogwarts would need a new Potions Professor the following year. Severus had already privately expressed to Hermione an interest in going into commercial brewing.

That employment would be much more lucrative than teaching. It would give him more free time for research, more time with Hermione, and he could brew anywhere, so the couple could live close to wherever Hermione decided to work. Having received a deluge of job offers, Hermione intended to spend Severus' last year at Hogwarts exploring her options. At present, the offer to work as an arbiter for Gringott's seemed the most intriguing, but she was in no hurry to decide.

Her fingers wrapped a little tighter around the hand of the man sprawled lazily at her side. No, there was no hurry at all.