

Time's Treasure

by debjunk

What would happen if Severus found out what his life would be like as a Death Eater before he got the Dark Mark? What would happen if Hermione was the one to tell him. AU SSHG A time turner fic.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 46

What would happen if Severus found out what his life would be like as a Death Eater before he got the Dark Mark? What would happen if Hermione was the one to tell him. AU SSHG A time turner fic.

Hermione made her way to Dumbledore's office, her mind deep in thought. When Voldemort had finally been defeated, she thought that her life would be normal. Not that her life in the Wizarding world had ever been normal, but she had hope for the future. Normalcy was not to be, unfortunately. A couple months after everything had smoothed out, when Voldemort had been long buried and his Death Eaters had almost all been gathered up and sent to Azkaban, Lucius Malfoy had decided to become power hungry.

He had once again avoided punishment for his crimes, simply because he and his family had turned at the last moment. In hindsight, Hermione knew it had all been an act, but at the time, his leaving Voldemort's side had seemed genuine.

This, of course, opened the door for Malfoy to make powerful friends in the months that followed the defeat. Suddenly, without anyone realizing it, he had taken over the Ministry in a silent coup. He now sat as Minister of Magic, surrounded by loyal protectors, untouchable by anyone. He basked in his power and made a sweeping law that affected every Muggle-born in their world. He enacted an order to exterminate any Muggle-born witch or wizard on sight.

Hundreds had been slaughtered before they all had disappeared, forced into hiding. Hermione had not left the castle for over a year, staying within the safe walls of the school for protection. She had not even ventured to Hogsmeade in all of that time.

She remembered her last visit there. She had been accompanied by Severus Snape, who had insisted that she needed a chaperone in case something happened. Ultimately, she was thankful for his being there, for she had not been walking the streets for more than ten minutes when four of Malfoy's men had Apparated in front of them. They seemed to have known she was going to be there because all four of them trained their wands on her and began to send spells her way. If Severus hadn't been with her, she would not have been able to fight them off. After that little incident, it had been decided that she would be better off staying put in the castle.

Hiding was not her forte. She was going stir crazy, but she had no recourse. She knew if she stepped foot off of school grounds, she would be killed immediately. She had no doubt they were watching the castle, knowing full well that she had sought sanctuary within its walls. Lucius Malfoy would gloat for an entire week if he managed to kill the 'Mudblood' member of the Golden Trio.

Of course, she had her job. She had taken over as the Arithmancy professor soon after the war had ended. She enjoyed teaching immensely and loved her subject. It was very satisfying; she just wished she had a bit more in her life than the drab stone walls that surrounded her. Harry and Ron would come to visit once a week, filling her in on stories about trying to get at Malfoy. The war never really ended for them; they just kept on fighting.

Harry had married Ginny about a year ago, and Ron was seriously involved with Luna Lovegood. Hermione wouldn't be surprised if they announced wedding plans any day now. She and Ron had tried dating after the final battle, but had decided to give up after one too many heated arguments. Hermione loved Ron dearly, but his intense

jealousy that reared its head every time Hermione even looked at a member of the opposite sex had been too much for her to deal with. Eventually after the breakup, she had realized that they would never be compatible. When they weren't arguing, she was explaining the most mundane thing to him. He was very obtuse sometimes and that ultimately drove Hermione mad. At one time, she had thought it was endearing, but when threatened with having to live with it forever, it somehow had lost its charm.

No, if she were ever to settle down with someone, he would have to have some brains in his head. Her mind turned to Severus. Now there was a man with brains. She could have a decent conversation with him about almost anything. It was too bad he was such a loner. She marveled at the friendship she had with him. It had taken a long time to nurture. His wary ex-spy self had closed himself off for so long, it had taken what seemed like forever for him to even converse with her at the dinner table.

Slowly, their friendship had blossomed into something viable. She even went down to the Potions room once a week and helped him brew supplies for Poppy. Too bad he was so much older than she was. He would definitely be someone she would consider dating. Oh, wait a minute, that would be impossible. We were talking about Severus Snape here. She was lucky she was even allowed to grace his presence, let alone think about dating him.

She smiled as she approached the gargoyle and gave him the password, chocolate truffles. She entered and soon found herself standing in front of Albus Dumbledore's desk. He was smiling at her warmly.

"Ah, Hermione, it was so good of you to see me so quickly. Please have a seat."

Hermione sat in the plush chair that was in front of Dumbledore's desk.

"Lemon drop?" Dumbledore asked.

She shook her head and looked at Dumbledore expectantly.

"Hermione, I have asked you here because I have a job for you to do for me. I know how you hate feeling helpless. This opportunity will give you the chance to do something in this fight."

Hermione looked at him curiously. "What can I do from in here, Headmaster?" she asked.

He smiled at her and his eyes twinkled. "The task I have for you will let you venture anywhere you wish."

"Are you trying to kill me, Headmaster?" she asked dryly.

"No, no, my dear; I am sending you back into the past!" he said with a laugh.

"The past! What am I to do there?"

Dumbledore came forward in his chair and looked at Hermione seriously.

"As you know, Lucius Malfoy has always had a great hatred for Muggle-borns."

"That's an understatement," Hermione said glibly.

"I think that if you go back in time to when Lucius was a student, you may be able to influence his feelings for Muggle-borns."

"Albus, I'm 22 years old; how am I going to influence a student?"

"By teaching him, of course. If you could befriend him as a mentor, he may change his attitude towards Muggle-borns."

"Albus, you've gone completely out of your head. Why would he ever consider me to be a mentor?"

"I will leave that in your capable hands. I am hopeful that if he can see how accomplished a witch you are, he will have second thoughts about all that he believes about Muggle-borns."

"Well, I suppose it's worth a try."

"Hermione, I'm not even sure if this will change anything in the present. I know you have been climbing the walls here. I want you to know that you're appreciated. I know your desire to feel useful. This is definitely the most useful thing you could do. Oh, and while you're there, maybe you can get Severus to be on our side from the beginning."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. She hadn't even considered that Severus would be there, along with Harry's mum and dad.

"I'll do my best, Headmaster."

"It's Albus, you know," he chastised her.

"Yes, Albus."

Albus handed her a rolled parchment tied with a red ribbon. "For my counterpart in the past. Oh," he exclaimed as he fished in the top drawer of his desk. "I don't think you'll be able to go anywhere without this." He handed her a Time-Turner. "This turner is specifically for years. One turn for each year. Partial turns for half years. I think 25 and $\frac{1}{4}$ will get you back to the beginning of Malfoy's and Snape's seventh year."

"You want me to start there? Shouldn't I start earlier?"

"No, you need to be close with Malfoy. The older he is, the more accepting he will be of friendship from a professor."

Hermione nodded her head. "What about a teaching position, Albus?"

"In the letter, I have suggested that you be a teacher's assistant to the current Arithmancy teacher. That way you can blend in as faculty without people wondering why the current teacher has been sacked."

"Albus, how will I return?"

Dumbledore smiled at her. She was always thinking everything through to completion.

"The Time-Turner is a prototype that I have created. If you spin the turner forwards one turn per year, you can return from whence you came."

"Does that mean that I could feasibly travel to the future?" Hermione asked, her eyes wide.

"No, it will only go as far forward as you have gone back. If you were to spin it forward now, nothing would happen."

She looked over the intriguing object. The only difference she noted in this Time-Turner was that the hourglasses were a bit bigger than the one she had used as a student.

"So how long should I stay in the past?"

"As long as is needed. If you feel like nothing is being accomplished, feel free to return. If things are going better than expected, by all means, stay as long as you wish."

Hermione frowned. She liked more direction when it came to tasks she was to accomplish. Dumbledore chuckled at his friend. He knew that bit of information would make her slightly upset.

"Don't worry, Hermione. There's no right or wrong way to do this. Use your best judgment and everything will be fine. Trust yourself. You have incredible instincts that don't come from a book or list of objectives. You are truly a remarkable woman and are perfectly suited for this mission."

Hermione sighed. "If you think so, Headmaster."

She rose from her seat and took the parchment. Placing the time turner necklace around her neck, she pulled out her wand and tapped the turner and watched it spin backwards 25 and ¼ times. Suddenly Dumbledore's office disappeared only to be replaced by the same office with a younger Dumbledore sitting at his desk, looking rather startled.

Hermione stood frozen, holding the Time-Turner as she looked over at Dumbledore. She noticed they weren't alone in his office. There was a young man standing in front of the desk, looking at her oddly. Hermione looked over at him. He was tall and lanky. He had what seemed to be black eyes, and his hair was also black. It fell to his shoulders in straight, lanky tresses. He had a large hooked nose, but it fit well with his face. Hermione gasped.

"Severus!" she exclaimed.

Severus Snape narrowed his eyes at her. "Do I know you?" he asked suspiciously.

Hermione released the Time-Turner from her grasp and extended her hand.

"Sorry, I'm Hermione Granger. You don't know me, but I know you."

"Is that a time turner?" he asked, glaring at the necklace.

She nodded.

"Then you're from the future?" he surmised. "Is that where you know me from?"

Hermione nodded again.

"Mr. Snape, perhaps you should return to your common room. I should find out why Miss Granger is here. Speak to no one of what you saw here tonight. Please keep in mind what I said before, and report for detention with Mr. Filch tonight at seven p.m."

Hermione looked at him curiously. He frowned but nodded a good bye to her and left the office.

"Already getting in trouble?" Hermione mused.

"Yes, and only the second day of school," Dumbledore mumbled as he stared after the young man.

Hermione handed the parchment to Dumbledore. "I think this will explain everything."

Dumbledore unrolled the scroll and read it. She saw his eyes return to the top of the letter as he read it again. Finally he lowered the paper and regarded Hermione over his glasses.

"You are aware of what is written here?"

Hermione nodded.

"Do you think it will work?"

Hermione sighed. "I honestly don't know. It's really the only option we have right now; Malfoy is in total control of the Ministry, and it is impossible to get near him. I have been in hiding at Hogwarts for over a year."

Dumbledore folded his hands in front of him in thought. Finally he looked up at her again.

"Do you know where the guest quarters next to the Arithmancy room is?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"You may room there while you are here. I like my counterpart's idea to have you as a teaching assistant. It will give you the time you need to establish a relationship with Malfoy. Our current teacher is Mallory Rickta. She is very capable, but I'm sure she will appreciate having a helper to grade papers and take classes for her."

Hermione smiled for the first time. "I'm looking forward to working with her."

Dumbledore regarded the young woman in front of him. He motioned to the parchment.

"I have told myself that you are incredibly intelligent and a hard worker. I look forward to working with you, Professor Granger."

"It's Hermione."

"I'll see you at dinner then, Hermione?"

"What about Severus?" she asked. "He knows I'm from the future."

Dumbledore rolled that around in his mind for a minute. "Perhaps you can steer him away from the path I see him following. What is he like in your time?"

"I'm not quite sure I should say, sir."

Dumbledore nodded his head. "He is entrenching himself with Death Eaters, and I fear greatly for his future."

Hermione sighed. "You have reason to be worried, Albus. That's all I'll say about the matter. Your future self asked me to see what I could do about him also."

Dumbledore nodded. He sat deep in thought for a while. Hermione watched him as he concentrated on the problem before him. He was always a man who weighed every option before making a decision. She greatly admired this trait in her boss. Finally Dumbledore looked back up at her.

"He already knows you're from the future. Why don't you be straight with him? If there's something in his future that may deter him from falling in with Voldemort, use it."

Hermione was looking at Dumbledore as if he'd lost his mind.

Albus smiled. "I know, that doesn't sound like me, does it? I probably told you not to divulge anything of the timeline to anyone before you left, but these circumstances are a bit different."

"Albus, you didn't have to warn me about divulging the future. I'm well aware of the possible consequences. If I do tell him of his future, Severus will be privy to information that will change it."

"Well, isn't that what you're trying to do, Hermione? Change the future?"

"Not quite as much as this may, sir. He will know even more than you do about our future. Is that wise? What if he cannot be deterred from joining the Death Eaters?"

"Do you know Severus well, Hermione?"

She nodded. "I consider him my friend."

"Then something must have happened to change his mind about the Death Eaters. He will turn from them eventually, I would hazard to say. I can't see someone like you involving yourself in a friendship with a murderer."

Hermione looked hesitant to deny or confirm his guess. Dumbledore held up his hand, motioning for her not to worry about answering.

"If you know him, you know that he is trustworthy. Even if your plan doesn't change his affiliation, if you ask him to keep all he knows a secret, that is what he will do."

Hermione nodded in agreement. She was happy to know that that part of Severus Snape had been around for a long time. She stood to leave.

"I'll keep an open mind as to what I tell him, sir," she said with a smile.

Dumbledore nodded his head. "Good luck, Professor Granger."

"Good night, Headmaster." Hermione waved as she left the office.

Hermione stood in front of the guest quarters that were to be hers. There was a giant eagle portrait in front of the entry to the room. The eagle was flying towards her. He landed on a branch at the forefront of the painting and eyed her curiously.

"Password," it demanded.

"I'm new. I would like my password to be . . . hope," she told the eagle.

The eagle cried a shrill cry and flapped his wings, and the picture moved to let her in to her room. She looked around. The room hadn't really changed in 25 years. It still had a beautiful blue carpet in the living room. The sofa and lounge chair were black leather. The room was very modern, despite its age. She wandered to the bedroom. There was a four poster bed with a blue comforter on it. The furnishings were a dark mahogany. She smiled. The room was very comfortable. She would feel at home here.

She would need to make a trip to Hogsmeade tomorrow. She had nothing with her. She wondered how she would possibly pay for anything here; she had no money and her account at Gringotts wouldn't exist for another 16 or so years. She would need to beg off some money from the Headmaster. She cringed. She hated having to ask for anything. Oh well, nothing else could be done. She just needed a bit of an advance of her paycheck so she could buy some clothes. Everything else would be amply provided for her at the castle.

She decided to find Professor Rickta and introduce herself. She left her room and went to the Arithmancy classroom. She walked through the class to a door in the back of the room. She knocked on the door and waited.

"Come in," a pleasant voice instructed her.

Plastering a smile on her face, Hermione turned the knob and was in her old rooms once again. These rooms, however, were quite different from what she remembered. Mallory Rickta had an avant garde taste, and the walls were lined with colors. The base color of the room was a royal blue, but not much of it was visible. Over the base, there was a wash of different colors. Lime green, forest green, a splash of orange, yellow stripes, and dark blue circles all ran across the wall in a haphazard pattern. One would think it would be an eyesore, but Hermione found calmness in the chaos. She liked it. It was a bit 70's, but, of course, this was the seventies.

"Excuse me, Professor Rickta. I don't mean to interrupt your evening, but I wanted to introduce myself."

"Hermione Granger, I presume?" Mallory said, grinning at her.

Hermione gave her a curious look.

"I just spoke to Albus by Floo. He informed me of your arrival and that you will be working with me." Mallory rose and extended her hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you," she said enthusiastically.

Hermione smiled and shook the other woman's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Dumbledore said some very nice things about you. I'm eager to work with you."

"Have a seat, Hermione."

Hermione sat in an oversized easy chair. Mallory returned to the couch.

"He said that you are the Arithmancy teacher in your time. He was very closed mouthed about the reason for you being here, but he did mention you're from about 25 years in the future."

Hermione nodded.

"Well, let's discuss our teaching approaches and we'll work out a schedule."

After about an hour of discussing what they wanted in their classes, Mallory decided to have Hermione observe for the next few days. They would eventually divide the classes each day, rotating schedules so the students would all have the opportunity to work with both teachers. She asked Hermione to take over the grading of papers, as it was Mallory's least favorite part of her job. Hermione happily agreed. She loved grading papers. It was an opportunity to teach through correction.

"Our first class tomorrow is the seventh-years. As you can imagine, there are few who continue onto NEWT level Arithmancy, so we just combine everyone. The rest of the day consists of two sixth-year classes, and the last class of the day is a Hufflepuff third-year group."

Hermione smiled at Mallory. She liked the woman, she was very efficient. She knew it would be a pleasure to work with her, and she was excited to get the chance to teach again. In her own time, it was all that she had to keep herself sane for over a year. With nothing else to do, she lived for each teaching day. It had been an opportunity to actually do something valuable.

Hermione rose and bid her new partner good night. She was excited for tomorrow to begin.

A/N: For this story, we will assume that Lucius and Severus are in the same year, as noted above. I hope you all enjoy it. For Hermione's present, everything is as it was in the original stories, except for the fact that Dumbledore is alive, and so is Snape. Review please. It helps me know how you feel about this story.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 46

More of the future revealed.

Chapter 2

Hermione sat at the teachers table and looked over at the students. Dumbledore had just introduced her as the new Arithmancy Teaching Assistant and everyone had clapped absently as she had stood and waved quickly. They were now staring curiously at her as she sat and regarded them with the same curiosity. Glancing over at the Gryffindor table, she gasped. There was Harry staring at her with a broad grin on his face.

She corrected herself. That young man, of course, was not Harry Potter, but James Potter. The resemblance really was uncanny. She almost expected to see Ron shoveling food into his mouth next to him, but the redhead at his side was a woman, not a man. She realized it was Lily Evans. Lily was looking at her also. She was beautiful. Hermione could make out her green eyes from where she was seated, they were so vibrant. She smiled at them and turned her attention elsewhere.

Looking toward the Slytherin table, she noticed Severus was watching her. She gave him a quick smile and continued looking down the table. She saw a man with long white-blond hair. That must be Malfoy, she thought. His head was turned, and he was speaking to a young woman who also had platinum blonde hair. Could that be Narcissa? She was lovely. She didn't have that scrunched up, annoyed look that she had in the future. She actually seemed to be somewhat pleasant. Hermione didn't know if that was because she was speaking with Lucius or whether the roughness of the world hadn't yet jaded her outlook on life.

Hermione bit into her muffin and looked around the room some more. She was eager to meet all of these people and get to know them. She smiled to herself a little later as she rose from the table and headed out of the Great Hall. She wanted to check out the classroom in more detail before the students started filing in.

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Not too much later, Hermione and Mallory got ready for the influx of students that were about to enter the classroom. Hermione sat in a chair next to Mallory. They were both behind the desk today. They both smiled as students started filing in. The seventh years came in grouped in small clusters, chatting to one another. Lily walked in with two girls that Hermione recognized from the Gryffindor table. Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Black came in together. They looked like they had just been snogging. Narcissa's hair was a little unkempt and so was Lucius'. Hermione smiled to herself. Several other students filed in. Severus was the last to enter the classroom. He was alone and sat in the back of the room by himself. Hermione frowned. She hadn't realized he was a loner even in his youth.

She studied him for a minute. He was wearing a scowl and looking down at his desk. His long hair covered his face so she couldn't really get a good look at him. Finally he looked up at her. His black eyes studied her in interest before he lowered them back to his desk. He looked so young. He had none of that careworn look that he had in the future. His eyes shone brightly as if he looked forward to what was to come instead of having been beaten by his past. The contour lines of his face were strong. He was actually quite handsome. She wasn't sure why he was such an outcast now. He seemed like a normal teenager.

Mallory stood and addressed the class.

"Good morning, class! If you made it to breakfast, you will know that I have a new assistant. This is Professor Granger. She is a few months shy of receiving her teaching certificate, so she has opted to be a Teaching Assistant while she acquires the necessary credits to become fully certified. Please treat her with the same respect as you give to me." She eyed Lucius Malfoy briefly before turning the time over to Hermione.

Hermione stood and smiled at the class. "Good morning. I am eager to get to know all of you and to help you with this fascinating subject."

She saw Malfoy and several others roll their eyes. *Why take the class if you weren't interested!* she thought.

"Please don't underestimate me." Hermione continued. "Just because I do not have my accreditation, does not mean that I do not know my subject. I will be very demanding of all of you, but I will be fair also." She sat back down.

"Thank you, Professor Granger," Professor Rickta said in admiration.

She turned to the class and explained that Hermione would be observing for the rest of the week and would begin teaching the next week. She began the lesson. Hermione watched the students' reaction to Mallory's teaching. They seemed to be interested enough. She was happy that they took their NEWTs seriously. This was an important year for all of them.

Hermione found her eyes wandering between Lucius and Severus. Severus took copious notes, while Lucius sat back and just listened to the lecture. They were very different in their approach to studying.

Before Hermione knew it, the class was finished. Mallory disappeared into her room for a quick break, and Hermione watched as the students filed out. Severus seemed to be hanging back, taking an incredibly long time packing away his things. As he finally finished, he looked up at Hermione and headed straight for her.

"I have a question, Professor Granger," he said respectfully.

Hermione smiled at his politeness. Who was this nice young man in front of her? She would not have expected such respect from him, even if she was his professor.

"Is this about our meeting in the Headmaster's office, Mr. Snape?"

He nodded.

Hermione lowered her voice a little.

"This isn't really the place for such a discussion, Mr. Snape. Do you know where the Room of Requirement is located?"

Severus raised an eyebrow, not because he didn't know where the room was located, but that he was surprised that she knew of its existence. He nodded at her.

She looked at him for a minute. "Meet me in front of the room at six tonight. I think we can find the privacy we need for such a conversation up there."

He nodded and turned to go. He turned back, about to ask her something, then decided to wait until later. He left the room. She frowned after him. She knew Albus had given her free reign as to what she could tell him, but she was nervous nonetheless. She hoped she could convince him not to join the Death Eaters. She knew if she could succeed in that, the Severus Snape she returned to would be an entirely different person.

Hermione got up and tapped on Mallory's door. She heard the bid for her to enter, so she did. She found Mallory sitting with a cup of hot chocolate in the same chair she had been in the night before.

Hermione smiled at her. "Taking a little break?" she asked.

"This is my morning ritual. I grab some hot chocolate between classes and gather my thoughts."

"What can you tell me about Severus Snape, Mallory?"

Mallory became serious. "He keeps to himself most of the time."

"Why is that, do you think?"

"He's a Slytherin, which pretty much excludes him from being friends with anyone in the other houses. The Slytherins either shun him, or befriend him for ulterior motives." She shrugged, at a loss for an explanation.

"He looks rather normal. What's the problem?" Hermione asked.

"He's quiet by nature and he's very intelligent. I think most of the students are intimidated by him. He is a bit intolerant of others. He's not one to be accepting of incompetence. Also, his upbringing has been less than stellar. That sets most of the purebloods at odds with him. You know how it is," she said to Hermione in a knowing way. "Unless you have been to all the popular parties and have loads of money, you're just not good enough to be spoken to. It makes me sad; because when you get to know him, you find out he's rather a pleasant sort. He's got a great sense of humor. The problem is no one wants to get to know him. It has turned into a vicious cycle too. Now he goes out of his way to avoid people, or is just plain disagreeable to them."

Hermione nodded her head, reflecting on all that Mallory had said. She suddenly felt an affinity to Severus Snape that she hadn't before. She too had been an outcast because of her intelligence. She had been lucky to be friends with Harry and Ron because for the first several years of her education at Hogwarts, most other students had turned their noses up at her. She answered too many questions and studied too hard for them to want to spend time with her or be her friend. She knew what it was like to have everyone be intimidated by you simply because you worked hard and had a knack for doing well in everything. Even in her later years, many students avoided her altogether, not wanting to associate with a girl who seemed to know everything.

"I'm sorry, I'm being rude," Mallory said, nudging her out of her thoughts. "Would you like some hot chocolate?"

Hermione turned and grinned at her. "I'd love some," she said.

Mallory handed her a cup and Hermione settled herself on the sofa. The two women chatted for quite a while until it was time for the third period class to come in. They both got up and headed back into the classroom for another session with the students.

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Hermione found Severus sitting in front of the wall where the door would appear. She gave him a quick smile as he scurried to a standing position. He only frowned at her. She stood in front of the wall, cradling her chin in her fingers and concentrating. She began to walk back and forth in front of the room.

I need a comfortable place to chat. I need a comfortable place to chat. I need a comfortable place to chat.

A door appeared, and she went over and opened it. Peering in, she smiled and then laughed out loud. The Gryffindor common room had appeared before her eyes.

"Sorry, Severus, this probably isn't your idea of a comfortable place to have a chat, but that's what the room gave us."

She pushed the door wide and walked in, closely followed by Severus, who was looking around the room. He grimaced at the use of red and gold. He had never been there, but he was willing to bet this was the Gryffindor common room.

Hermione went over to the couch by the fire and sat down. She started up a fire with a flick of her wand and waited for Severus to join her. He studied her as he sat down on the other side of the couch facing her.

"I take it you're a Gryffindor?" he asked blandly.

"Oh, don't be so put out," she chided him.

His eyes grew wide. She spoke to him as if they were friends, joking about his demeanor. He needed to find out about this enigma sitting next to him.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm Hermione Granger, Arithmancy Professor at Hogwarts." She smiled at him. "Granted, I come from 25 years in the future."

Twenty five years! Why would she come from so far in the future? Severus thought.

"Why are you here, and how do we know each other?" he continued with his drilling.

Hermione leaned back and folded her arms. "Before I say anything more, you need to agree that anything we discuss in this room stays here, no matter what happens or who asks you about it in the future. Can you do that?"

Severus nodded his head.

Hermione continued, "We know each other because we are colleagues here at Hogwarts."

"I am a teacher at Hogwarts also?" he said in amazement.

"Yes, you are a Potions master."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "I become a Potions master?" he asked in incredulity.

Hermione nodded.

Severus smiled to himself at the thought. Hermione couldn't help but grin at him.

"What type of relationship do we have? How long have we known each other?" He looked at her suspiciously as he drilled her, rattling off the questions quickly, impatient for answers.

"We have known each other since I entered Hogwarts at age eleven, so eleven years."

"I was your teacher!" he exclaimed.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, and now I'm yours. You had better hope I don't hold a grudge."

"I was not a good teacher?" he asked in shock.

"Oh, you were an excellent teacher, Severus; but you were the most obnoxious, mean git anyone has ever seen. You yelled at everyone and demeaned your students regularly. You once called me an insufferable know-it-all in front of the entire class."

Severus frowned. "That was rude of me." He looked at her again curiously. "I was a mean teacher?"

Hermione thought about how to phrase it. "Let's just say that you were very strict and had no patience for incompetence. Everyone was afraid of you. They would turn and run the other way if they saw you billowing down the halls."

"Billowing?" he snapped.

"Oh, sorry; of course you don't know what I'm talking about. You have this knack of making your robes billow wildly behind you when you walk. It's very intimidating, although I've grown to admire it in recent years."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. "If I'm such a horrible person, why are we friends?" he growled.

Hermione felt her insides turn. She had not meant for him to think he was so awful right off the bat. She leaned forward and looked at Severus seriously.

"Severus, you are not a horrible person. You are actually a very good person; you just don't like many people to know that about you."

Severus looked Hermione up and down, trying to figure her out. "Why would you want to know that about me?" he asked curiously.

Hermione huffed. "Now that you ask, I haven't the foggiest idea," she mused.

Glancing back at Severus, she continued, "Look, Severus, I really don't want to go into too much history today, but suffice it to say that I admire the person you will become and the things that you'll do. I know you don't know anything about me, but I'm a bit of a bookworm. Scratch that, I'm nothing but a book worm. And you, you're just plain brilliant. You're about the only person who I can have a decent conversation with. Everyone else just stares at me blankly half the time, not having the vaguest notion of what I'm talking about. I can honestly say that has never happened between the two of us."

He stared at her blankly, not knowing what she was talking about.

"Until this minute," she said blandly.

Severus cracked a smile. He had been teasing her! Hermione laughed at him. She couldn't believe this young man had let his sense of humor come through so readily. And he had smiled too! The older Snape would have veiled his humor in sarcasm, scowling at her whether she got his joke or not.

"You still haven't said why you are here," he stated while she wiped tears of mirth from her eyes.

"Oh, yeah, that. It's about Lucius Malfoy." She sat back again on the couch.

"Lucius? What do you want with him?" His eyes narrowed at her.

"He is a dangerous person in my time, Severus. Dumbledore thought that if I came here at this time I could help him somehow to not become the monster that he is. You see, he has taken over the Ministry and has an Extermination Order on all Muggle-born witches and wizards."

Severus' eyebrows knit together in anger. "Why would he do such a thing?"

"It's simple pureblood bias. I'm Muggle-born, Severus. I've been in hiding at Hogwarts for over a year now. I've been going crazy. I think I drove Dumbledore crazy too and he wanted to get rid of me." She chuckled. "He wants me to 'mentor' Malfoy, perhaps convince him that Muggle-borns aren't the imbeciles he believes them to be."

Severus frowned. "You will have a hard time convincing him of that."

She nodded. "I know. We're not even sure anything will come of this, but I guess it's worth a try."

"I can help you."

She stared at Severus. She had not expected him to offer her help this quickly, if ever.

"How?" she asked.

"I am his friend. He is probably my only friend, actually. Everyone else I associate with just tolerates me."

Hermione frowned at him. She decided against bringing up Lily at this time. There would be plenty of other opportunities to speak of her.

"Severus, you can consider me a friend if you would like. I'm not sure if you think it would be weird to have a professor for a friend."

Severus stared at her for a long time. He felt a jolt inside of him. This woman who had just appeared out of nowhere was offering to be his friend. She didn't even know him. Well, she did, but not him now, and she was eager to become his friend. Why would she do that?

"So what's in this for you?" he asked caustically.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You are always one to think that everyone has ulterior motives!" Hermione said grumpily. "We were friends before; I would enjoy having you for a friend in this time. That's it. Nothing is in it for me except perhaps having someone to talk to now and again." She was getting angry and fought to keep her calm. "But if you would rather not, I can understand that," she said finally.

Severus looked sheepish. He hadn't meant to upset her. After all, she had offered him her friendship, and he had just thrown it back into her face. He looked down.

"I didn't mean to upset you. I would very much like it if we were friends."

Knowing this was the only apology she would get, she beamed at him.

"Good!"

She checked her watch. It was getting too late to discuss anything else in depth.

"Why don't we meet here again tomorrow at the same time? I'm sure you have lots more questions, but it's getting close to curfew and you must have tons of homework."

Severus nodded as they rose. Hermione glanced around again as they headed for the door.

"You can have the room create the Slytherin common room tomorrow if you'd like."

He smirked at her. "Won't that make you uncomfortable? We are arch enemies after all."

"I think if I can have you as a friend, a little green and silver won't hurt," she said sarcastically.

Severus chuckled, and they left the room behind them.

A/N: Next up: More of the future and an introduction to Lucius.

Thanks for your great reviews and for reading in general. I appreciate all of you, whether you review or not. I'm just extremely happy when I get a review.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 46

Hermione chats with Lucius. Severus and Hermione discuss Lily.

Chapter 3

Good to his word, Severus introduced Lucius to Hermione formally the next day. Lucius smiled lustfully at her.

"Hi there," he said seductively.

Hermione hid a frown.

"Good Morning, Mr. Malfoy. You seem to have a decent understanding of this class. If you feel you're falling behind, please don't hesitate to consult me. I would be glad to help in any way."

Lucius raised an eyebrow flirtatiously. "Perhaps I can help you learn a few things."

Hermione was taken aback. Was he was flirting with her? He had a perfectly fine witch for a girlfriend.

"Mr. Malfoy, did I not see you on the arm of Narcissa Black this morning?"

"Yes," he said innocently.

"Well, she is a lovely lady, and I would expect that she wouldn't want you flirting with me. Please keep your cool, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione said haughtily.

Lucius only smiled at her. "What Cissy doesn't know won't hurt her."

Hermione was furious.

"Well, I would know, Mr. Malfoy. I don't fall all over men who are taken!"

"I could break up with her," he said lustily.

She had had enough. Friendship or not, she would not have this creep making passes at her.

"Well, if you'd like to be seen with a Muggle-born witch, then I suppose maybe I would consider it!" she snapped.

Lucius looked like he had swallowed a glass of vomit. His eyes grew wide and he stared at her.

"Well, um, well, I gotta go," he said and twirled away. He was gone in less than a second.

"He's eloquent when he's gobsmacked, isn't he?" Hermione muttered to Severus.

Severus had been watching the whole exchange in awe. Hermione Granger could hold her own in an argument. He grinned slyly at her.

"You were amazing," he complimented.

She flashed him a smile, but it was gone quickly. "I guess I just blew my chances to be his friend," she sighed.

"He'll get over it. He doesn't give up easily."

Hermione grimaced. "You mean he's going to repeat that performance?"

"Probably when he's done licking his wounds," Severus grunted.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "This is going to be a long assignment," she muttered as Severus smiled at her, told her he'd see her later, and went off to his next class.

oooOOOooo

True to form, the elegance of the green and silver Slytherin common room welcomed them that night. Hermione pulled two miniaturized glasses and a bottle of pumpkin

juice out of her pocket, making them their rightful size with a wave of her wand. She poured the juice and handed a glass to Severus. They both settled on the couch and sipped their drinks.

"I noticed James Potter and his cronies were following you around at lunchtime, saying stupid things. Does that happen a lot?" Hermione asked.

Severus scowled. He was embarrassed that she had caught them teasing him. They had called him the nickname they always called him, Snivellus. Then they had told him how stupid and inadequate he was, and finally, they had sent some hexes his way. He was too fast for them, of course, and had ducked the hexes and then disappeared before they could get anymore nasty.

"Yes," he finally said testily.

"Why don't you hex them back?" she asked.

He couldn't believe his ears. A teacher was telling him to retaliate. After years of the other teachers telling him to just grin and bear it, she was telling him to retaliate. He stifled a chuckle.

"It would do no good. They wouldn't stop anyway. It would just wind up in someone being hurt."

Perhaps that's why the other teachers had told him to walk away. They knew his potential with a wand.

"Well, Harry's father or not, I think he's a git. He should be ashamed of such crass behavior. He's a seventh year for heaven's sake, he should act his age."

Severus stared dumbly at her. She had taken his side. She hadn't laughed at him. At length, the words she had said finally sunk in.

"Potter has a son?"

Hermione nodded. "He's my best friend."

Severus frowned at her. "You're best friends with a Potter?" he spat.

She just nodded.

Severus knew that Lily was involved with Potter now. Could this Harry be her son?

"Who is his mother?" he asked tentatively.

Hermione looked at Severus sadly. "Lily Evans. She and James Potter get married, Severus. I'm sorry."

Severus sucked in his breath. "You know about Lily?" he asked in horror.

Hermione nodded.

"You must not know everything, or you wouldn't be speaking to me now!" he roared.

Hermione looked puzzled. She thought about all she knew about his relationship with Lily Evans. Finally it dawned on her.

"Oh, do you mean about the Mudblood thing?"

Severus reeled back. "How can you say such a word; especially when it is a slander against yourself?"

She shrugged. "I have heard it so much that I have become desensitized. I'll admit that the first time it was hurled at me I was very upset. I still get upset sometimes."

"Then you can understand why Lily doesn't speak to me anymore. I find it hard to believe that you would even want to speak to me."

"Severus, she overreacted. You told me about this incident a while ago and I told you the same thing. You guys were friends. You were in an awkward position. She overreacted."

Severus sat quietly. He couldn't believe this witch was coming to his defense after he had called Lily the worst expletive a person could call someone of her birth. Yet Hermione didn't care. She didn't care that he had used such a horrible term.

"Severus, have you ever used that term since that day?" Hermione asked bluntly.

He looked up at her, startled by her question. "No," he admitted and looked to the ground.

"Then you have repented. Stop blaming yourself. You can't make Lily forgive you, but you can forgive yourself."

Severus fought back tears. He put his head in his hands. He couldn't forgive himself. He had done something unforgivable and lost his best friend because of it. He deserved to hate himself. He felt Hermione's hand on his shoulder. How could she even touch him?

"Severus, you need to forgive yourself. I suspect that remorse about this incident will make you do something in the future that you will regret."

Severus looked up at her. "What do you mean?"

"Severus, do you want to become a Death Eater?"

He looked away. "No," he said.

"Then why do you associate with future Death Eaters?"

"Because they are the only people who will talk to me!" he cried.

Hermione could stand it no more. She pulled Severus to her and hugged him tightly. She couldn't help herself. There was something vulnerable about this Severus Snape. He was not like his future self, hidden behind walls that were impregnable. He let his emotions show. All she wanted to do was sooth him and take away his pain.

"It would be better to associate with no one than to continue along the path you're headed, Severus," she said softly. "It will be nothing but a cause of regret and heartache for you."

"No, they're powerful. I could use that power," he said with a glint in his eye. "I'm worthless now; I would have respect if I were to join them."

"You, Severus Snape, are not worthless! Why would you want that type of respect anyway?" she asked, pulling away and looking into his dark eyes.

He looked confused. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because the only way to earn that respect is to torture and kill people; do you want to spend the rest of your life doing that? Do you want to see fear in people's eyes as you torture them? That's not respect, Severus, surely you know that!"

Severus seemed unsure. "I have been having this argument with myself for the last four months," he admitted. "It is the only reason I haven't taken the Dark Mark already."

Suddenly Hermione looked at his arm. She pulled it toward him and rubbed the place where the Dark Mark stood in the future.

"This is the first time I've ever seen you without it," she murmured as she caressed his arm.

He pulled his arm from her and stared down at it. "You mean I do become a Death Eater?" he asked, slightly horrified.

Hermione looked at him sincerely. "You've never spoken of the reasons why you decided to take the Mark, but yes, you do it."

He grimaced at her. "Somehow, I thought my better side would win out."

She smiled wanly at him. "It's not too late for that to happen, Severus," she said quietly.

"Why would I do it?" he snapped at her.

"Why would you choose to do it now?" Hermione countered.

"Lily. I would do it because of being ashamed about Lily."

"That's why you shouldn't be ashamed anymore."

Severus rose and started to pace. "What does it matter? I can have all of that power. I can be a force to be reckoned with."

"That's empty reasoning."

He whirled around and looked at her crossly. "What do you know of it anyway? You weren't here! Maybe there's a good reason I get the Mark."

She regarded him sadly. "There's never a good reason to get that Mark, Severus."

"Why are you my friend!" he bellowed. "How can you associate with a Death Eater?!"

Hermione closed her eyes. "You're not a Death Eater anymore. You haven't been for years. You're a war hero."

Severus stepped back. He wasn't a Death Eater anymore. He was some sort of hero. He went back to the couch and sat down.

"Explain," he said.

"I will tomorrow. It's too long of a story to go into tonight. Just don't do anything stupid between now and then, okay?" She smiled at him.

"Hermione..."

"No, you've had enough for one night, Severus. Let it be. The story won't change in 24 hours."

He stared at her for a while, wishing she would go on, but she was a stubborn witch. He could tell. He figured that when her mind was made up it would be impossible to change. He finally nodded in agreement.

They rose to leave. Hermione pulled him into another hug before they went out of the room.

"I'm sorry, Severus. I know all of this is upsetting. I wish there were something I could do to make the hearing of it easier."

Severus returned her hug awkwardly, all the while amazed at her show of compassion. No one had ever thought of his feelings in this way. They had just told him unpleasant things and let him sort it out himself. He couldn't believe her arms were around him in comfort. He pulled her close and whispered in her ear.

"Thank you, Hermione, for not making it seem better than it is."

A/N: Next up: a friendly duel, an unwanted kiss, and the future revealed.

I know it seems that Hermione is being awfully forward with Severus, but it's just empathy at this point. She's a bit more demonstrative with him because he's not as jaded as his older self is. She will continue to be supportive of him as a friend in this way. I'm not trying to jump the gun on their romance. It will not show up for a while.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 46

More history and time with Lucius.

Chapter 4

Lucius came up to Hermione after class the next day. He looked a bit self-conscious. Hermione thought this was a good look for him.

"Um, I'm sorry about my reaction the other day," he told her.

Hermione smiled at him, although she would have rather hexed him into the wall.

"It's okay. I know purebloods have a problem with Muggle-borns. I hope I can change your attitude."

He scoffed at her.

She scowled at him.

He caught his breath. "I'm sorry."

"Mr. Malfoy, I appreciate your trying." She smiled genuinely as she said it.

"It's just that, all of my life I have heard of the inferiority of Muggle-borns," he stated.

"Does that statement ring true in Lily Evans?" Hermione asked.

Lucius thought long and hard about that. "She is actually a talented witch. I suppose it doesn't."

"You will find that I also am a talented witch, both with my mind and with a wand."

He scoffed at her. "No one has beaten me in dueling in Defense class, ever!" he cried.

Hermione regarded him thoughtfully. "Is that a challenge, Mr. Malfoy?"

Lucius sneered at her. "If you're brave enough to take it."

She laughed at that remark. "When are you free, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Right now," he responded.

Severus had been in the back of the room, hanging back at Lucius' request. Lucius knew that Hermione and Severus were friendly and wanted someone's help if the witch wasn't going to forgive easily.

"I wouldn't mind seeing that," Severus spoke up.

The other two looked over at him. Hermione stood.

"Come on. We'll go to the Room of Requirement."

She quickly left the classroom, followed by Lucius and Severus. They hurried to the Room of Requirement, and Hermione thought about what she wanted. When she opened the door, a room similar to the one they had used for DA meetings met her gaze.

"Perfect," she said.

They got ready. Knowing Draco, she was prepared for Lucius' early strike. She shielded it and cried, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Lucius' wand flew into her hand.

"That was too easy, Mr. Malfoy. I expected more from a mighty pureblood," she taunted, tossing him his wand back. She heard Severus snigger in the corner.

Lucius was enraged. He snapped his wand at her and threw a curse. Hermione blocked it easily. He was ready for her curse though, and the sparring began in earnest. They fought for a while, no one able to get the upper hand. He fought dirtily. It was no wonder he was undefeated in Defense class. But she was Hermione Granger, war hero and member of not only the Order of the Phoenix, but of the Golden Trio. There would be no defeat for her today. With a loud cry, she sent Lucius crashing into the padded wall. She raced over to him and stuck her wand in his cheek.

"Do you concede that I am a better duelist than you, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yes," he groaned in pain.

"Do you also concede that you may be mistaken about what you know about Mudbloods?" she said pointedly, using his own terminology against him.

Severus winced at her remark, but Lucius narrowed his eyes at her.

"I may be convinced in time that my suppositions are erroneous," he admitted slyly.

"If you're trying to make me feel stupid with your large words," Hermione countered, "you need not bother. I read the dictionary in my spare time. Muggle-born witches and wizards are not dullards."

Severus laughed, earning a scowl from Lucius. Hermione let up and extended her hand to help Lucius up. He stood up proudly and removed his hand from hers.

"Good duel, Mr. Malfoy. You have some nasty tricks up your sleeve. I can see how you would be cocky about your skills. If you ever want to learn how to duel honestly, I'd be happy to instruct you."

Before she knew anything, Lucius had closed the gap between them and his mouth was on hers, kissing her wildly. She pushed him away roughly.

"I thought we discussed this aspect of our *friendship*," she said haughtily.

He just smirked at her and left the room. Hermione wiped her mouth and grimaced.

"Yuck!" she exclaimed. "That was disgusting. I feel like I was just kissed by a drooling hyena."

She glanced over and saw a smirk on Severus face.

"Just what's so funny, Mr. Snape?" she demanded.

"You defeated him on every level. You killed him at the duel, proved that you were just as smart as he is, and then rejected his come on. Professor Granger, you're my hero."

Hermione laughed so hard she cried.

oooOOooo

Hermione walked along the halls, headed back to her classroom after lunch. She was among a throng of students and quietly listened to their conversations, smiling to herself now and again about something someone would say. Some of the younger students were quite clueless about the world around them. She knew that their innocence would disappear eventually. She enjoyed it while she could. She broke from the crowd of students, turning the corner into a mostly deserted hallway, and stopped in her tracks. Anger filled her face.

Severus had been backed against the wall by none other than James Potter and Sirius Black. His wand lay discarded on the ground beside him. They were taunting him, their wands pointed. He looked at them angrily, sneering at them, unable to defend himself.

"Snivellus, you need to learn respect. You shouldn't talk that way to someone so much smarter than you," Sirius Black commented.

James chortled. "Yeah, Snivellus. Learn your place." He lifted his wand to throw a spell at Severus, but Hermione's hand pulled his down.

"Just what do you think you're doing, Mr. Potter?" she exclaimed in anger as she released James' hand.

"Professor Granger, um..." James eloquently said.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Black, you know the rules about magic in this school. It is not to be used against other students unless it is in a classroom environment, under the supervision of a teacher. How old are you two anyway?" she asked furiously.

Sirius and James looked down at the floor and mumbled that they were seventeen.

"You both act more like you were seven. As you know, the minimum age for students in this school is eleven." She let her implication sink in. "Fifty points each from Gryffindor and detention for the next week with Mr. Filch for the both of you. If I ever catch actions like this directed at anyone again, gentlemen, you will be expelled from this school before you can say Dumbledore. Do I make myself clear?"

They nodded.

"Now get out of my sight before I take away more house points!" she demanded.

They turned and scurried away. Hermione turned to Severus, who was staring at the floor, looking extremely embarrassed. Hermione put a hand on his arm.

"Are you alright?" she asked gently.

Severus beat down the desire to yell and just nodded his head.

"They're stupid and jealous of your abilities, Severus. Don't let them bother you."

Severus didn't reply. Hermione squeezed his arm.

"They're idiots, nothing but cowards, having to attack you in groups," she huffed. "They knew if they took you on alone, you'd destroy them. Don't give them any mind."

Severus glanced up at her. "Why do you care?" he asked simply.

Hermione regarded him for a moment. "I care because I hate seeing my friends in pain, that's why."

She released his arm. "I'll see you tonight," she said as she went on her way to her classroom.

She didn't see Severus stare after her, waiting until she disappeared from sight before he picked up his wand and went on his way to his next class. He didn't care if he was late; he couldn't stop watching her. He had thought she had just been humoring him when she had said she was his friend, but her actions today had said much more than that. She truly was his friend, his first real friend in a while. He wasn't sure why that fact made him feel so good inside; he didn't care if he had friends or not. The altercation with Potter and Black fell away from his mind as he made his way down the hall. He thought of his new friend and his steps became lighter.

oooOOOooo

Severus and Hermione sat on the Ravenclaw sofa. Neither of them had been in this particular common room, but they were quite impressed. It was large and had a beautiful statue of Rowena Ravenclaw in the center of it. Hermione remembered Harry telling her about it. She was still admiring the statue when Severus cleared his throat.

She looked over at him. He looked very nervous.

"Have you thought much about what I told you last night?" she asked him.

He sighed. "I've thought about it a great deal, Professor Granger," he said.

Hermione frowned. "Let's just go by first names when we're in this room, okay? After all, we're friends, right?"

Severus nodded pensively. "You said I would regret my decision. What happens?"

Hermione sighed and put her legs up on the sofa. It was long enough that Severus still had plenty of space to stretch out himself if he wanted to. He preferred to sit still as a stone with his arms crossed in front of him facing Hermione. He stared expectantly at her as she gathered her thoughts.

Hermione looked at him evenly. "Not long after you join the ranks of the Death Eaters, you will hear a prophecy being told to Dumbledore. You will immediately go and tell Voldemort about it. The prophecy speaks of a child who is to be born at the end of the seventh month, who will defeat the 'Dark Lord.' Voldemort is worried, of course, and researches all of the women who are pregnant at the time. He finds two women who are due to give birth that coming July. One of them is Lily Potter. Voldemort decides that she must be the one bearing the child of the prophecy."

Severus turned deathly pale. He looked like he was going to be sick right there.

"Realizing that you have put Lily in grave danger, you plead to Voldemort for her life, but you know him and do not believe that he will spare it. You decide to go to Dumbledore. You tell him of Voldemort's plan to kill the Potters and beg him to protect them. He does. In return for the favor you agree to be his spy among the Death Eaters."

Severus' face registered shock at his sudden turn from the Dark Lord.

Hermione continued, "He makes the Potter house unplottable, and they set up wards to protect the home. Unfortunately, James Potter trusts the wrong person. The man he chooses to be secret keeper eventually rats him out to Voldemort. By this time, Lily has had her baby and he is one year old. Finally, one night, Voldemort strikes, cutting down James Potter first, who has tried to hold him downstairs to give Lily a chance to escape with Harry. He couldn't give her enough time. Voldemort enters the nursery, where Lily stands over Harry, protecting him."

Tears were now running down Severus' face, and Hermione was tearing up as well.

"He kills Lily first, but does not realize that her love for Harry has given the baby magical protection. He sends the killing curse to Harry, but it shoots away from him and hits Voldemort instead. Voldemort disappears. Everyone assumes he is dead, except Dumbledore. He asks you to protect Harry from Voldemort's imminent return, to keep him alive so he can fulfill the prophecy. You agree to do it for Lily, for the guilt you feel at being the one who brought the prophecy to Voldemort."

Severus put his head in his hands and sobbed in grief. Hermione got up and moved next to him, putting an arm comfortingly around his shoulders as his body was wracked with sobs.

"No, no," he murmured over and over again. His deep voice was filled with agony.

Hermione pulled him closer and finished the tale.

"Ten years later, Harry came to Hogwarts. Voldemort had found a way to return in spirit by then, and Harry, unbeknownst to him, was protected by you. You saved his life several times over the years. In his fourth year, Voldemort found a way to reclaim his body. He began to amass his Death Eaters, and you resumed your work officially as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix. You participated in raids and tortured and killed Muggles so you could keep your cover. I have seen you when you returned from those raids, Severus. You were always sullen and haunted, and I know you had terrible nightmares about the things you had to do while following Voldemort.

"The next two years were spent by Harry, our friend Ron, and me hunting for Horcruxes. Voldemort had made seven of them to keep his soul alive. That's how he survived the original attack on Harry. You secretly helped Harry when you could, but by that time you had gone deep undercover in Voldemort's group. Everyone thought you had betrayed the Order, but you hadn't. You just wanted it to look like that so Voldemort would trust you. Finally Harry was able to defeat Voldemort. During that battle you were wounded by Voldemort's giant snake Nagini, who was the last Horcrux. You nearly died, but thanks to my copious supply of dittany that I poured over your wounds when we found you, and Madam Pomfrey and her supply of Phoenix tears, you were healed and survived. The truth came out about your double spy work, and you received an Order of Merlin for your work behind enemy lines. Since then, you have taught at Hogwarts like you always did."

"I'm not really sure what you would have been like had you never become a Death Eater or heard that prophecy, but I can tell you what you were like because of it. You pushed everyone away. You trusted no one. You had to participate in countless tortures and murders, each of which made you a bit more withdrawn. You were that mean teacher I described the other night. You were a loner. Your spy work made you distant from everyone, and many people hated you because they thought you had turned on us. You had to be especially mean to Harry because you couldn't have anyone think that you were helping him in any way.

"On the other hand, you never wavered as a spy. You endured horrid tortures by Voldemort without ever thinking of betraying us. You are by far the bravest man I have ever met, Severus."

Severus' mind was swirling, and his head felt like it was going to explode. He had killed Lily. He had destroyed his life. He was nothing, worth nothing. It was all because of some stupid tattoo that bound him to evil. *How could he have been such a fool?*

"I should just disappear from off the face of the Earth. It doesn't seem like I did anything but ruin people's lives from the time I got that bloody Mark." He pulled at his hair in frustration.

Hermione pulled him in towards her, keeping her arm solidly around him.

"Don't say things like that. You still have a choice Severus. None of this has happened yet. You can change the future. You don't have to take the Mark!"

"I killed her, Hermione, I killed her!"

"Severus, no, you didn't kill her. You made a mistake and told Voldemort about the prophecy; you didn't kill her. Voldemort did."

He gasped, "It's the same thing."

She looked at him, shaking in misery, and just wanted him to be alright. "No, it's very different." She pulled his head up so he was looking at her. "I'm sorry, Severus; I knew this would be awful for you, but I want you to save yourself. Stay away from Voldemort and change your fate, please!" she begged him.

He quieted and looked at her. He couldn't understand her. She brought herself close to him, even though he was a monster.

"Why do you care, Hermione?" he asked for the second time that day.

Hermione frowned. "Because I'm your friend, Severus, that's why. I have seen you in the future when you let your guard down. Deep down, you're the same young man you are now. But your life decisions have destroyed you. They have convinced you that there is no love to be found in this world and have left you bitter and jaded. My greatest hope for you is that when I return to my time, I would find much more of this Severus in the future Severus."

She pulled her arm out from around him and grasped his hands in hers.

"Please, Severus. Think about what I have told you tonight. Don't do it again. Save yourself, maybe even Lily and James, I don't know. Somehow I think Voldemort will kill them anyway, but at least you won't have any part in it. You won't live with that guilt every day of your life until it crushes your identity and makes you feel hollow and alone."

With that she rose and kissed the top of his head. She wasn't quite sure why.

"I'll see you tomorrow night, okay?"

He nodded but didn't look at her. She withdrew and left him to his dark thoughts.

Next up: Severus makes his decision.

Thanks everybody for the interest in this story. I'm glad you like it, and I appreciate any comments you have made already and any you wish to make.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 46

Severus makes a decision.

Disclaimer: These characters belong to J. K. Rowling, not me. I just dabble in their lives and twist their fates.

Chapter 5

Severus didn't emerge from the Room of Requirement that night or the next day. He had mulled over everything Hermione had said. How could he have become such a horrible man? Because of him Lily had died. He had destroyed her and then gone on to destroy his own life. He was disgusted with himself. His work for the Order later did

not make up for the scumbag he had become soon after graduation. He couldn't picture himself like that now. He wondered what had happened to send him to such an extreme. He wondered if it had been because of Lily and James getting married. That would certainly be disturbing. Would it be disturbing enough for him to ruin his life?

Severus thought back over the last year. He had become obsessed with Lily, more so than when they had been friends. He had blamed himself for ruining their friendship. Secretly, he had followed her around, hoping that she would see him and perhaps smile at him, but even when she had seen him, she never smiled.

Right now, though, it seemed that he didn't obsess after her quite as much. It didn't hurt him quite so much to think about her with Potter. Knowing that Potter and she would be together in the future didn't sting quite as badly as he knew it would have several months previously. Perhaps he had the fortitude to not repeat the same mistakes again.

Then there was his nasty disposition. He knew he wasn't the nicest person on the Earth, but he certainly didn't consider himself frightening. He vowed not to be so nasty in the future. But could he really change? Was he destined to be that awful person Hermione had described? There had to be a way to become better, to not fall into the same traps that his future self had fallen into. Obviously, not taking the Mark was the first step in that process. But if he didn't take the Mark, he would never have the power he desired. For so long he dreamed of the abilities he would gain with taking that Mark. The knowledge of Dark Magic that could give him an edge against almost anybody would almost make up for the negative things he would have to do. But in reality would it?

He had debated getting branded for a while now, going back and forth between thinking it was a good idea and that it was the worst idea he had ever had. He had weighed both sides of the decision. He really wanted the power that the Mark would bring, but was he a murderer, for that was what he would become if he took that Mark. Whenever he thought about it before, the idea of killing others had been quite abstract. But when Hermione described what he had done, he could actually picture himself doing those horrid things. He saw himself torturing Muggles, eventually sending the killing curse and watching as their bodies flew into a lifeless heap. Those deaths hadn't seemed so abstract then. He felt incredibly remorseful for things that hadn't even occurred yet.

Trying to snap out of the funk he had settled into, he concentrated on something else. The only good thing he had learned about his future was that he would teach at Hogwarts. The prospect of that actually excited him and gave him something positive to concentrate on. He loved Potions and was eager to become a master and impart his knowledge to others. He could be a better teacher in this future than he had been before. He wouldn't be so overbearing that students would run away from him in the halls.

He sat silently for a while, just staring into space. He had done so much agonizing that he was exhausted. How had his life become so difficult? He was just a student who shouldn't be worrying about death and evil, but here he was, surrounded by it because of his choices. He had been foolish to become friends with the Slytherin Death Eater wannabes. They had slowly filled his head with lies that seemed incredibly attractive, but in the long run, they would ultimately bring misery. The power he sought from becoming a Death Eater would eventually be the thing that would ruin his life. He marveled at how something that seemed to be a perfect answer for him could turn into such a negative thing so quickly. He once again grieved about his future fall to Voldemort, still unable to get over how horrid he would become.

Hermione said he shut everyone out. He did that now too, but it was mostly because no one liked him. He had hoped that after he was finished with school he could find some people who respected his knowledge and saw him as more than a nerd, but that didn't seem to happen in the future. It seemed that he had taken his distancing to the extreme, not trusting anyone. Perhaps it had to do with being a spy. He imagined it would be difficult to be open with anyone when so much had to be hidden. It would take some effort to open himself up; he was not the type to be outgoing or to be friendly to people he didn't feel incredibly secure with. It would definitely be a challenge, but now that he had been warned of the possible negative outcome, he had a great incentive to try and push himself into being more outgoing and positive about life.

He spent the rest of the night berating himself; thinking about all of the negatives that would come in his future, trying to decide what to do to make himself a better person, debating whether he could ever change at all. Finally in the wee hours of the morning, he had drifted off to sleep, but his rest was short lived. He spent most of the next day mulling over his awful future, wondering if he could truly escape it.

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Hermione had noticed Severus wasn't at meals, but she didn't have him in class that day, so she was unaware that he had skipped classes too. She went to the Room of Requirement and was surprised to see that the door was firmly in place. Severus must have arrived ahead of her and gone in to wait. She entered and took one look at Severus and knew he had not left last night. His hair was messy, and it looked like his robes had been slept upon. She wasn't sure that Severus had actually gotten any sleep though, because his eyes were rimmed with dark circles.

"Oh no," she said under her breath.

Severus didn't move. He sat stonily staring at the floor. Hermione went up to him and squatted before him, placing her hands on his knees. She bent low so she could look tentatively into his face.

"You alright?" she asked.

He frowned at her, but said nothing.

"Are you hungry? I could summon a house-elf."

He continued to stare at her but said nothing.

"Would you rather I just left?" she asked finally.

He said nothing.

"I'll see you tomorrow then," she said simply and rose to leave.

"Wait."

She turned to him again. When he didn't continue, she sat down next to him and gently pulled him over to her. He scooted back farther and lay down, resting his head in her lap. She ran her fingers through his hair and sat with him in silence. It wasn't very long before his breathing became regular and she knew he had fallen asleep.

It hurt to see him like this, but she hoped that the outcome would result in a happier Severus in the future. Of course, he could still decide to get the Mark. Hermione's insides tightened at the thought. Granted, she knew what that outcome would be. At least he would be alive in the end. But she so hoped he could have more than that.

Perhaps he could even have a life that would be considered normal. Maybe he could even have friends. She had been a bit surprised with herself for becoming so close to him so quickly. He really was more open in his younger form than he was as she had known him in the future. She chuckled to herself, not even being able to fathom the older Severus resting his head in her lap and falling asleep. She stifled a giggle so she wouldn't wake him; she knew he needed the rest.

She was grateful that he had opened up to her like he had. She had been interacting with his older self for years now, and they still had yet to achieve this level of friendship between the two of them. She didn't even think the future Severus trusted her with mundane thoughts, let alone his deepest fears. Maybe when she returned to the future, they could have a closer friendship. She knew she would like that, she had always wanted to be closer to Severus. He was an incredibly fascinating man, but he was reluctant to let anyone near him, even people he spent time with. She hoped that would now change.

She let him sleep on for a couple of hours, trying not to move or disturb him. Her mind was filled with possibilities and worries for the future while she cradled his head in her lap, absently pulling her fingers through his hair. Glancing at her watch after a long time, she realized it was nearing curfew. Gently she shook him awake.

"Severus, Severus, wake up."

"Huh?" he said groggily.

"You need to go back to your dorm now. It's almost curfew," she told him.

Severus pushed himself up and shook his head to clear it. Realizing where he had fallen asleep, he looked over at her in embarrassment.

"Sorry," he murmured, looking sheepish.

"Don't worry about it," she told him as he straightened himself up.

He looked at her again, this time solemnly. "I won't do it, Hermione. I won't take the Mark. I won't ruin those lives. I won't do it."

Hermione sighed in relief. She once again had hope for the future. She pulled Severus to her and hugged him tightly.

"I'm glad Severus. I know that seems rather trite, but I am."

She pulled back and gave him a quick smile.

"Thank you, Hermione, for being truthful with me. You saved my life, and it would seem that it hasn't been the first time."

She gave him a half smile. "Aw, that was nothing," she tried to make light of it.

They rose and made their way to the exit.

"Nonetheless, I won't forget it, not either time."

Hermione blushed and pushed the door open. They walked in silence until she came to the hall where her room was. She smiled at him and said good night. He murmured a good night back to her, and they separated for the night.

A/N: Next up: Another friendly duel.

Thanks for the reviews everyone. Please keep it up. It helps me to make the story better. There was lots of cerebral stuff in this chapter. We'll lighten up a bit now that Severus has made his choice.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 46

More dueling and the infamously seductive Lucius Malfoy.

Chapter 6

A/N: for this story we will assume that Dumbledore never put Gaunt's ring on before destroying it, therefore, never consigning himself to certain death. Oh, yes, I own nothing, except Mallory Rickta.

Lucius wandered up to Hermione's desk, closely followed by Severus. Hermione noticed Severus rolling his eyes as he followed Lucius and bit her cheek so she wouldn't burst out laughing. She was happy to see Severus acting as his old self again. Lucius sauntered up and winked at Hermione.

"So, Professor Granger, would you like to have another round at dueling?" he asked sultrily.

Hermione frowned, but before she could say anything, Severus beat her to it.

"She already embarrassed you once, Lucius. You surely are a glutton for punishment."

"Oh, I just want another kiss, if I must admit it."

Hermione looked crossly at Lucius, but again Severus beat her to a response. He came around the desk and put his arm lazily around her shoulders.

"I've got some bad news for you, Lucius. After that pathetic attempt at a kiss the other day, Hermione and I decided that we would like to see more of each other. And neither one of us is the type to share."

Hermione's mouth dropped open. She quickly snapped it shut before Lucius noticed. Luckily, he was too busy staring at Severus to even notice Hermione was in the room.

"You . . . and . . . her?" he said incredulously.

Severus stooped down even more so he was level with Hermione. He kept his eyes trained on Malfoy.

"Yep. Sorry to disappoint you," he told his friend.

Lucius straightened himself and pulled his robes down. "Well then, okay. I guess you won this round," he said.

"I'm not some bloody trophy, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione said through clenched teeth.

Finally Lucius looked at her. He noted she was angry and decided that now was a good time to take his leave. He turned, but she called him back.

"Mr. Malfoy!" she said.

Lucius stopped abruptly and turned to look at her.

"I fail to understand why, with such a lovely woman as Miss Black being your girlfriend, you insist on trying to hit on me. If you would just look into your girlfriend's eyes,

you would see her devotion to you, but instead, you ignore her and chase after other women who could care less if you existed on this planet or not. Is it the chase that excites you, Mr. Malfoy? Well I've got news for you. I wouldn't give you a second glance even if you were single. You're not my type! Why don't you enjoy what you have and leave me alone?!" Her eyes were shooting sparks at him. He smirked at her.

"Oh, you'll come around eventually," he countered with a grin.

She resisted the urge to pull him toward her and punch him in the face like she had done to his ferrety son.

"You're excused, Mr. Malfoy."

"Just give me a chance. You'll tire of Severus here. He's too . . . plain."

"You're excused, Mr. Malfoy!" she reiterated angrily. She cringed to herself. She could see the trouble she would be in if she attacked a student.

"Just wait," he said again.

Hermione stood up and looked contemptuously at Lucius.

"I said you're excused, Mr. Malfoy. That will be detention with Mr. Filch for disrespecting a teacher."

Lucius put his arms out wide in surrender. He gave her a heartbroken look and he backed away. Giving her a low bow, he turned and left.

As soon as he had closed the door behind him, Hermione pulled out her wand and pointed it at a desk. Poof, it shattered into a million pieces. She destroyed two more desks in frustration. She cried *Reparo* and the desks came back together again.

"That man is just as infuriating in this time as he is in the future, if not more so!" she cried.

Severus was regarding her proudly. The score was now Hermione-2, Lucius-zip. He suddenly thought of his arm around her. He had just done it to shut Lucius up, but when he touched her, he had felt . . . strange. It had felt comfortable, like his arm belonged around her shoulders. His insides seemed to flip flop as he touched her. He wondered why he had felt that way. He hadn't noticed anything those other times when she had embraced him in the Room of Requirement. Could he be attracted to her? No, he still loved Lily, didn't he? Snapping out of it, he looked over at Hermione, who was still seething.

"I'm sorry I made it look like we were going out." He saw her tense up. "I just wanted him to leave you alone."

She relaxed and turned to him with a smile on her face. "I'll admit that was a good one. I just about lost it when I saw the look on Lucius' face."

Hermione looked at Severus contemplatively. "Do you mind keeping up the pretense when he's around? It might shut him up."

"No, it won't. He'll just go on about how we will never last and I'm too plain and--" Severus stopped in mid sentence as he saw Hermione's face turn furious again.

"You are hardly plain, Severus Snape!" she spat angrily.

He smiled at her. "Thank you," he said simply.

Hermione blushed furiously. She hadn't meant it to sound like she thought he was good looking, although she did. She was, of course, making it worse by blushing so much.

Severus saved her further embarrassment by saying, "If you want to go along with it, I'm game. It'll be fun."

Hermione smiled at him and shooed him off to class. She watched as he left, following his slim build as he exited the door. When he had put his arm around her, she had felt a jolt run through her body. She wanted him to keep it there, but he had not left it there long. She shook her head. She was being ridiculous. She couldn't have feelings for this Severus Snape. He wasn't from her time, it wouldn't be right.

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That evening she made her way to the Room of Requirement. She wasn't sure if he would be there; after all, she had told him everything about the future that she could, and they really had no reason to meet anymore. She was pleased, however, when she saw him sitting there waiting for her. She gave him a big smile and he got up and smiled back at her.

"So what do you want to do tonight?" she asked him. "We're pretty much done with twenty questions."

He looked a little embarrassed but finally asked her, "I wonder if you could teach me how to duel like you did the other day?"

Hermione burst out laughing and then began pacing in front of the room. The DA room appeared as Severus asked her what was so funny.

"You taught me half of those moves I used on Lucius."

He arched an eyebrow at her. She smiled back at him. She loved when he looked at her like that. She moved across the room and pulled out her wand.

"Alright, let's see what you've got, Severus Snape," she taunted.

Severus produced his wand and made a dueling stance. Soon they were sparring and moving around the room. He was really good, but not as good as he would be. She would never be able to best him in his adult form, but she was sparring and diverting his spells with relative ease. She finally cried *Expelliarmus* and disarmed him. Catching his wand, she gave him a smile.

"You're quite good," she told him while tossing back his wand to him, "but I can anticipate your moves. You hesitate slightly before almost everything you throw. Think ahead this time. Come up with five hexes you want to throw at me, and throw them silently, in succession, without pausing."

He nodded at her and they got ready. He cast the five spells quickly. She diverted all of them but the last one, which sent her flying across the room. She landed with a thud. Before she could catch her breath, Severus was at her side, offering a hand to help her up.

"I'm sorry!" he gasped at her.

She looked up at him slyly and smiled. "Now that's the Severus I'm used to dueling!"

She grasped his hand and he pulled her to a standing position. He looked at her sourly.

"I can't believe I used to hex a woman much younger than me across the room repeatedly."

Hermione giggled. "How else would I learn, Severus? If you hadn't been so unrelenting, I wouldn't have survived the final battle with Voldemort. You worked with all of my classmates when you taught Defense against the Dark Arts, and you never let us feel overconfident. You made sure that we were always on top of our game and always aware of our surroundings."

He stared at her silently for a while before asking, "When exactly did I teach Defense?"

"You taught it in my sixth year."

"I didn't keep the position?" he asked.

Hermione sighed. "It was cursed by Voldemort. No one ever lasted in the position for longer than a year until after his death."

"So I just went back to teaching Potions after that?" he asked curiously.

"Not exactly," she said hesitantly.

"Well then, what happened?"

"I told you that you made it look like you betrayed the Order. Well, you did it at the end of that year."

"What exactly did I do?"

She sighed. "You really don't want to know," she said absently.

"Oh, okay then, just forget it," he snapped. "Hermione, what did I do?"

"You tried to kill Dumbledore," she said hesitantly.

Severus' eyes grew wide. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because it's a huge convoluted story, and I didn't want to go into the why's and where's of it."

"I have all night. Tell me what happened," he demanded as he folded his arms in front of him.

Hermione began to pace as she started telling the tale.

"You see, Voldemort demanded that . . ." she hesitated. Should she tell him that Lucius has a son? What would it matter in the long run? Of course Lucius would eventually marry and have children. Continuing, she relayed, "He told Lucius' son to kill Dumbledore. Dumbledore became aware of the plot early on through your spy work. He devised a plan where you would attempt to take his life, thereby saving Malfoy from having to kill him. It would make it look like you had turned back to Voldemort's side and become a traitor to the Order, giving you the opportunity to get even more information than you had been before."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her in distaste.

"One night towards the end of the year, Harry and Dumbledore went in search of a Horcrux, but were unable to find it."

"What's a Horcrux?" Severus asked.

"It's an object that is imbued with a piece of someone's soul. Voldemort created seven of them to ensure that he would 'live forever,'" Hermione explained. "Dumbledore had been injured during their quest for one of the Horcruxes, and they returned to find that the Dark Mark was flying over Hogwarts. Malfoy had picked that night to let the Death Eaters into the castle, and he stood poised to take Dumbledore's life. Fortunately for Dumbledore, Malfoy's heart wasn't in it. You arrived moments later and shot Dumbledore with a spell that you and he had invented. To an onlooker, it would seem that the person had been killed, but it only sent them into a temporary coma. After cursing Dumbledore, you fled the castle. In all of the confusion, someone finally realized that Dumbledore was still alive and he was rushed to the infirmary, where he slowly recuperated. Unbeknownst to you, his injuries from searching for the Horcrux had weakened him considerably, so a curse that should have only taken a couple of hours to reverse itself completely wound up taking a full month.

"There was an all out manhunt for you. The Order was up in arms, thinking that you were a traitor, and most everyone in the Wizarding world hated you for trying to kill Dumbledore. Malfoy's son was hidden away until the end of the war, because he would have been killed for not being able to fulfill his mission, and Voldemort made you his right hand man, because even though you didn't accomplish the task in the end, you had tried and he was very 'grateful.'"

Severus frowned. "What other horrible things haven't you told me, Hermione?"

"Severus, first of all, I don't know half of the things you did as a Death Eater. I'm sure there are lots of unpleasant stories about that. Secondly, it doesn't matter. You have decided not to take the Mark; those things will not happen."

He regarded her for a minute, thinking about what she had said. "Are you sure there's nothing else I need to know?"

"Only that if you ever make fun of my teeth in the future, I will hex you into a wall when I return."

Severus looked from Hermione's eyes down to her perfect teeth and gave her a quizzical look.

"Suffice it to say my teeth weren't always so normal looking," she mused. "And thanks to the aforementioned Malfoy, they became even larger than usual for a short time, leaving the door open for you to make one of your caustic comments."

Severus didn't know whether to look appalled or to laugh. He stood there unsure of himself until Hermione cracked a smile.

"Obviously, I've forgiven you for that," she retorted. "Come on, let's continue our duel."

Severus let himself grin for a moment before walking back to his position and taking his stance.

"Alright," she said. "No more easy stuff."

His eyes grew wide as he realized she had been going lightly with him. She grinned and took advantage of his surprise, sending a hex his way. He barely had time to shield it when another one was coming for him. He fell to the ground and rolled away, pointing backwards and sending his own hex at her.

"Good one!" she cried as she dodged it and sent one directly at his prone body.

He scrambled to get out of the way, but caught the hex anyway. Ignoring it, he shot one at her.

"That's right, ignore what doesn't incapacitate you," she instructed.

Finally, after quite a few hexes and a lot of jumping around the room, Hermione caught him and sent him flying into the wall. He slumped to the floor, half dazed. She rushed over to him and extended her hand to help him up. He looked at her curiously, not knowing where he was for a moment.

"You're beautiful," he murmured as she knelt and looked at him with concern. His eyes looked hazy still. Hermione blushed and fished in her pocket, pulling out a small vial.

"Here, take this," she offered it to him.

He unstopped the bottle and downed it. "Mmm, orangey," he said. "What is it?"

"A strengthening solution. I always carry some with me just in case."

His head seemed to clear instantly. "Why would you carry this around?" he asked her, staring at the empty vial.

She smiled ruefully. "Old war habit," she murmured. "It's an extra spurt of energy if I've been hit by a curse. It's supposed to give me an extra edge."

"Does it work?"

"Don't know. I never used it. I was always too busy ducking and fighting to even think about it. It's more of a ritual than anything."

She helped him to a standing position. "I'm exhausted," she told him.

Severus nodded his head in agreement. Hermione called a house-elf and asked him to bring them something to drink. He appeared in an instant with two tall glasses of iced water.

"Thank you, Nubby," she told the elf. He bowed low and disappeared.

We need a sofa, she thought.

Suddenly one appeared and she made her way to it. They both sat down and sipped their water quietly.

"Hermione?" Severus asked, breaking the companionable silence.

"Mmm?" she said.

"Would you mind if we kept meeting up here? I could do with a little peace and quiet to get my homework done. It's always as loud as a zoo in the common room, and I get tired of going to the library all the time."

Hermione's heart began to beat faster. He wanted to spend time with her.

"Sure, that would be great. I'll bring the mountain of exams Mallory hands to me every day. I swear that woman gives more tests than any other teacher I have ever met!"

Severus sighed. "And I thought it was just me thinking that."

"Don't get me wrong; Professor Rickta is a great teacher, but talk about testing a subject to death! Once a week per class is more than enough, but she insists on a daily quiz and bi-weekly exam. One thing is for sure, none of you will be failing your Arithmancy NEWTs."

Severus got a gleam in his eye. "Do you think we could brew up here?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I suppose," she said.

"Perhaps you could teach me a trick or two," he mused.

Hermione choked on her water.

"What?" Severus asked caustically.

"Severus, you have been more advanced than me in Potions since, oh I don't know, probably since you started here! There's not a thing I could teach you. However, you could probably teach me a thing or two."

"How do you know about my ability in Potions at this age?"

"Harry came across a sixth-year textbook that was owned by the Half Blood Prince." She smiled knowingly at him. "Your additions to the text were incredibly insightful. Even at your age now, you have a flair that few have for that subject."

"Have you ever brewed with me?"

She put her water down. "Actually I have brewed with you often. We would meet weekly to replenish the infirmary stores."

"And you never picked anything up from me in those times."

She scrunched up her face. "Well, yes I did, but . . ."

"So maybe you could teach me something I don't know yet?"

"Perhaps, but I doubt it. You're a genius when it comes to Potions, Severus. They should have just given you your NEWT last year without pretense."

He stared at her. She really respected him. He was five years younger than she, but she fully admitted that he had a talent that she didn't have.

"I thought you said you were a know-it-all."

"Oh, I am, and don't you forget it," she joked. "Believe me, Severus Snape, that's the only subject you'll ever outdo me in." She smiled at him.

"Ouch," he said.

She went on, "I hate to admit it, but you were right when you called me a know-it-all in my third year. I was very upset about it, but after that I tried not to look so snobby. I still answered questions, but I didn't try to answer all of them."

"I'm sorry I was mean to you as a teacher," Severus said quietly.

Hermione looked at Severus in shock. "Did you just apologize to me?" she said incredulously.

He nodded.

"Wow," she said.

He looked at her, wondering why she had said that.

"Thank you," she said finally. "I know apologizing doesn't come easily to you."

He looked at her curiously. "I don't have any problem saying I'm sorry when I need to."

She looked over at him, trying to see if he was serious. He was.

"I'm sorry then. I guess I'm confusing the future Severus with you. He never apologizes. Sometimes he would gruffly say that he 'hadn't meant for something to happen the way it did,'" she mimicked, her voice lowering considerably, "but he never apologized."

Severus scowled at her imitation of his future self and then looked at her meaningfully.

"I'll try to never become that gruff man who can't apologize, Hermione. That's not the man I want to be."

She smiled at him thinly. "I don't think he wanted to be that man either."

A/N: Next up: More Marauder teasing.

Thanks everyone for your reviews. ;)

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 46

Marauding mayhem.

Chapter 7

Lucius approached the desk again. Over the past few weeks this had become a ritual. She didn't mind, as long as he behaved himself. They had developed a friendship of sorts in that time. She was supposed to be his mentor after all.

"Professor Granger," he drawled.

"Mr. Malfoy," she greeted.

Severus stood at Lucius' side. She nodded to him.

"I was wondering if you were going to Hogsmeade this weekend," Lucius asked.

"I'm scheduled to chaperone, yes, I'll be there."

"Would you like to accompany me?" he asked seductively.

"She's going with me," Severus piped in.

Hermione smiled. "That's right, Mr. Malfoy. Mr. Snape will be accompanying me this weekend. Why don't you take your *girlfriend*?" she asked.

"Your loss," he said with a toss of his hair. He quickly left the room.

"It's a wonder they ever get married," she mused after he was gone and immediately her eyes went wide. That was information that need not be shared.

"They get married?" Severus asked.

"Shh! Don't say a word to anyone!"

Severus put his hand over his heart. "Your secret is safe with me, my lady."

She giggled as he bowed and left the room. That man was absolutely charming.

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Severus hurried through the halls after lunch on his way to his next class. He was deep in thought, mulling over the potion they had just brewed in his last class. He had followed the directions exactly, but was now wondering if perhaps he should have cut the flobberworms on the diagonal instead of straight across. It might have given the potion a little extra potency. He was concentrating so intensely, he failed to notice the three students who had appeared behind him. Sirius, James, and Peter stealthily snuck up to Severus. Sirius sent a jelly legs jinx from his wand. It struck Severus and he crashed to the ground, but not before extracting his own wand and sending a jinx behind him at his attackers.

The other three boys grasped their faces in their hands and sunk to the floor. Large welts began to form on each of the boys' faces, and they moaned in pain.

"What's going on here, boys?"

It was Hermione. She had been coming up the hall behind all four of the students and had caught the whole exchange. She was once again enraged at the audacity of Black and his friends. They were out of control.

No one said a word.

"All right then, up with the lot of you and follow me," she demanded.

Without a look back she started down the hallway. She heard some shuffling and knew that the students were following her. Glancing back eventually, she saw them, Severus staggering in the back, still recovering from the jelly legs jinx. Up the stairway and down the hall she went all the way to the Headmaster's Office. She waited for the four boys to catch up with her before saying the password, 'English Toffee.' While the Gargoyle moved aside, she sent her Patronus to get Minerva. She assumed that she would be needed as the Head of House of the three troublemakers. When the Gargoyle had moved aside she haughtily ascended the stairs and knocked on the Headmaster's door.

"Enter," came Dumbledore's voice from inside the room.

Hermione opened the door and let the four boys pass her before going into the room herself.

"Headmaster," she exclaimed. "These four students were caught fighting in the halls."

Dumbledore gave them an appraising look and asked what had happened.

Peter piped up, "We were just minding our own business, when Severus turned around and hexed us."

Hermione said nothing yet, but she fumed at the lie. Dumbledore turned to Severus.

"Is that what happened?"

Severus snarled, "They hit me with a jelly legs jinx first!"

"Nonsense!" cried Peter. The other two boys nodded, going along with the lie.

Albus turned to Hermione. "Professor Granger, did you happen to see what went on?"

Hermione sighed, "Mr. Black shot a jelly legs jinx at Mr. Snape, who was able to jinx the three of them back before falling to the ground."

At that moment Minerva came through the door, looking on at her charges with concern.

"Oh, what happened to your faces?" she cried.

"Nothing they didn't deserve," Hermione mumbled under her breath.

Severus, who was standing closest to her, heard her and his eyes snapped toward her. She ignored him and stared straight ahead at Dumbledore. Albus repeated everything for Minerva, who was staring at the three Gryffindors in disgust.

"I believe," Dumbledore went on, "that a month's worth of detentions would be an appropriate punishment for such an infraction, especially since these boys lied about what really happened. Do you think that is fair, Professor McGonagall?"

She nodded.

"Headmaster," Hermione chimed in. "I think that given their past history of tormenting Mr. Snape, these boys should be expelled."

The three Gryffindors' eyes grew wide at the thought of being thrown out of the school.

Dumbledore regarded Hermione for a minute. "Perhaps they should all be expelled then, Professor Granger, after all, Mr. Snape has been told repeatedly not to hex back at these three students."

Hermione bristled at the comment, upset that Severus was left with no recourse when he was clearly the one always being teased and attacked. She narrowed her eyes at Dumbledore.

"I'm afraid that his actions are partially my fault," she confessed.

Severus whipped his head over and stared at her. Dumbledore regarded her curiously, and Minerva just waited for Hermione to explain her odd statement.

"You see," Hermione explained, "several weeks ago, when I first discovered the teasing that went on from these three and Mr. Lupin, I advised Mr. Snape to stand up for himself and hex them back. It is unfair for him to have to take such abuse without recourse."

"Professor Granger," Dumbledore said kindly, "I know you are new here and not aware of all of our rules but..."

"I am perfectly aware of the rules, Albus, don't talk down to me. There's no reason for Severus to take such abuse from these bullies and let them walk all over him."

"Professor Granger, do you realize the possible outcome that could come of such a duel?" Minerva asked.

Hermione straightened herself up. "I believe we see some of the possible results in front of us, Professor McGonagall."

"Enough!" Albus declared. "There will be no expulsions today. A month's detention for the three of you," he said to Sirius, Peter, and James. He then looked to Severus. "I will overlook your infraction because of Professor Granger's advice to you, but be warned, you will not get off so easily the next time. You are all dismissed. Mr. Black, Mr. Potter, and Mr. Pettigrew, report to the infirmary."

The four boys left the office, but Hermione and Minerva remained. Hermione turned to Albus after the students had gone and the door was closed. She looked at him in anger.

"How long are you going to let this go on, Albus? They have been tormenting him for seven years now while you turn a blind eye." She turned to Minerva, "And you! When was the last time you sat those boys down and told them to act like seventh years instead of babies?"

Minerva bristled at the comment. "I have spoken with them numerous times, Hermione, but I cannot control their actions any more than you can."

"That's why they should be expelled," cried Hermione, "or suspended, or something other than a mountain of detentions. They don't care if they spend the rest of their lives in detention. It's worth it to them to see Severus humiliated."

Minerva sighed and Albus regarded Hermione over his glasses.

"Hermione," he said. "They have done much worse things in the past."

"Are you talking about the incident with Lupin in the Shrieking Shack?" Hermione asked tersely.

Albus nodded. "Severus was nearly killed."

"And what punishment was handed out then, sir? Did any of them even receive a detention?"

"Hermione, it was more important to keep Remus Lupin's secret than to seek punishment for their infractions."

"And if it had been the other way around? If three Slytherins had played a trick on a Gryffindor, what would have been the outcome then?"

"Hermione, I am not an unfair person, the circumstances . . ."

"I don't care about the circumstances! What will have to happen before something more is done about this constant war that is going on between the five of them? Will you

have to have five dead or dying students in the infirmary?"

"This is the last time I will discuss this with you, Professor Granger. The students will stay in school. If they act up again, they will be punished, but this teasing is not an expellable offense. If it were, half of the student body would be sitting in their homes as we speak."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Albus. He would do nothing. Her admiration for him decreased several levels in that moment. She gave him a glaring look and stormed out of the office. Rushing down the stairs in a huff, she was surprised to find James Potter waiting for her by the Gargoyle. His face had puffed up considerably and he would need some help from Poppy soon to avoid skin damage.

"Professor Granger?" James asked tentatively.

Hermione stared at James in anger, but his voice reminded her so much of Harry at that moment that she felt some of her annoyance wash away.

"What is it, Mr. Potter?" she asked in resignation.

"I'm sorry if we got you in trouble in any way."

Hermione stared at James, dumbfounded. "I am not in any trouble, Mr. Potter."

James relaxed somewhat.

"Perhaps you should be apologizing to Mr. Snape instead of me," she instructed.

James made a face.

"What do you have against him anyway?" she asked out of curiosity.

"He's a git."

"Ah, and you are not a git when you curse him when his back is turned?"

To James' credit, he looked embarrassed.

Thoughts of Harry flooded Hermione's mind as she regarded his father. They were almost duplicates of one another, but how different they were in personality. Harry would never go around picking on someone because he thought they were inferior. He wouldn't think anyone was inferior in the first place. He didn't even provoke fights with people he disliked, like Malfoy. They were always the instigators, taunting Harry until he could bear no more and lashed back.

"Can I give you a word of advice, Mr. Potter?"

James looked at her curiously and nodded.

"One day, you will leave these hallowed halls and have a life of your own. I assume you will get married and have a family. I don't think you will feel very proud of your actions toward Severus Snape when you have to explain to your children about how much of a bully you were in school. Grow up, Mr. Potter."

With that she turned and left him staring after her, deep in thought.

She continued down the hall keeping her head down so she wouldn't have to interact with anyone passing her. Thoughts of Harry filled her. She had been gone for many weeks now and hadn't realized how much she missed Ron and him. She felt herself begin to tear up. Interacting with James Potter had opened a gaping hole in her. She ached to see her friends again.

"Professor Granger?" a voice called from behind her.

She debated ignoring Severus' call to her, but she didn't. She wiped her eyes covertly before turning to him.

He caught up with her and looked at her tentatively.

"Are you upset with me?" he asked her.

She regarded him curiously. Why would she be upset with him?

"Come with me, Mr. Snape," she ordered as she turned and made her way in between students toward an empty classroom. When they were both within its walls, she closed the door and turned to Severus.

"Why would you think I was upset with you? You weren't at fault in any of this."

"Didn't you get in trouble for defending me?"

She looked at him curiously. "Why would I get in trouble for that?"

He shrugged. "Well, you took the blame for my hexing those prats."

She raised an eyebrow at his use of the term 'prats'. "I did not get into any trouble."

Severus studied her for a minute, noticing her angered state and teary eyed expression.

"Why are you so upset then?"

Hermione folded her arms in front of her and tapped her foot, unsure whether she should open up to Severus about her feeling homesick. She decided to go ahead. He was her friend after all.

"Several things, really; I'm upset about the conversation that went on after you left, which I will not go into. Then when I came down from the office, James Potter was waiting for me. He actually apologized for his actions. In that moment, he seemed so much like Harry that I realized just how much I missed him."

Severus frowned. "You miss James' son?"

"Of course, he's my best friend. We spent practically every waking moment together for years. He's someone I enjoy talking to and spending time with. Not a week went by this last year when he and Ron weren't at Hogwarts visiting me, making sure I was okay."

"I'm your friend too," Severus said quietly.

Hermione looked quickly at him. "Severus, I didn't mean to belittle our friendship. Please don't be upset with me. I just . . . I just miss him. We fought Voldemort together, side by side. We worked together to figure out what Harry had to do to defeat him. We relied on one another when there was literally no one else to rely on. We formed a special bond and I miss that bond and I miss him. Can you understand what I'm saying?"

Severus looked at her for a long while. "You love him, don't you?"

Hermione shot a glance at Severus and burst out laughing. "Love Harry Potter? Well, not in the way you're getting on about. It's never been like that. He's like the brother I never had. He's always been there for me when I've been upset; he teases me when I'm sad so I will perk up. So yes, I love Harry Potter, but only as a friend. He's married anyway." She smiled thinking of Harry and Ginny. "They're perfect for each other, really. I don't think I know of a couple that loves each other more."

Severus relaxed a little. He had secretly been afraid that she was in love with this Harry person. He was glad to hear that wasn't the case.

"You will see him again soon," he soothed her.

Hermione looked at the floor. "I know; I just wish he was here."

"I'm here," Severus said softly.

Hermione looked up at Severus and caught something in his eyes. It was only there for an instant. She wondered at it. She smiled at him gratefully.

"I know you are, and I appreciate that," she told him finally.

oooOOOooo

That evening they were both absorbed in their own activities. Severus was reading a large Potions tome, and Hermione was carefully correcting papers. She made huge red marks on one paper, sighed and put it on one pile. She then extracted a new exam from the other pile and began to correct it.

Severus was watching her over his book. He studied her as she bit her lower lip while she concentrated on grading. It was very cute. He liked the way she narrowed her eyes when one of the students had given an answer that was so far out of bounds it was silly. She was really beautiful. She had an inner beauty for one thing. Even if she had been awful to look at, her inner beauty would have overshadowed that. But she wasn't awful to look at. Her curly hair framed her face nicely, and her bone structure was delicate and exceedingly pleasing to the eye. All in all, Hermione Granger was a lovely package, one he wished he could possess.

He had practically forgotten about Lily in the past few weeks. His friendship with Hermione had grown, and as it had, he found himself thinking less and less of Lily. That was a really good thing, for Potter and she displayed their feelings for each other everywhere. They walked arm in arm in the hallways, stealing kisses when they thought no one was looking. The whole thing was rather disgusting, but he found that he didn't long for Lily to notice him anymore. He didn't wish that she would see how much he loved her because to tell the truth, he didn't any more. He wished they could still be friends, but he no longer loved her. In a way, he was happy that he was finally able to move away from her and go on with his life.

"So," he said suddenly, "are we going to Hogsmeade together then?"

She looked over at him. "We probably should. It's best to keep up appearances. We don't want Lucius to think we broke up."

He nodded.

"Maybe we could have a butterbeer with Narcissa and him," she said absently.

He nodded again.

She frowned and went back to her grading, but was absorbed with other thoughts. She wished this were really a date, not a pretense of one. Over the past few weeks her friendship with Severus had grown to something more on her part. She loved spending time with him and had grown incredibly fond of him. She found that she secretly was attracted to him. She loved the deep conversations they would have on just about any subject. She found her mind turning to him often throughout each day, and after the intense look he had given her in the empty classroom earlier, she had been unable to keep him out of her mind. The look in his eyes had captivated her. Part of her wanted to see him look at her like that all the time, but another part of her was scared by what she had seen. He was brilliant and handsome, but ultimately unattainable. Even though she wanted to get involved with him, it was a really bad idea. The timeline and all would be in an upheaval at that and she feared what would happen when she returned to her present. Better to leave it alone than face uncertain consequences in the future.

A/N: Next up: The good, the bad, and the ugly Narcissa Black.

Do you think Hermione is being stupid or smart about her relationship with Severus? Let your opinion be known! Leave a review. Thank you all for reading.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 46

The Hogsmeade trip

Chapter 8

The four of them sat at a table in the Three Broomsticks. Severus, Hermione, Lucius, and Narcissa nursed some butterbeers and laughed at random things. Hermione studied Narcissa. She seemed shy. Perhaps that was why Lucius felt he needed to hit on Hermione. Hermione was anything but shy. She caught Narcissa looking at her across the table. She looked over at the bathroom and flicked her head toward it. She then excused herself and went to the loo. Narcissa made the same excuse and followed suit. Lucius made some crack about women going to the bathroom in gaggles. Severus gave a low chuckle.

Hermione turned to Narcissa after they had entered the bathroom.

"Miss Black," she began. "I know it's none of my business, but are you serious about Mr. Malfoy?"

Narcissa looked at her irately. "He is my boyfriend and I will not give him up. Do not even think to try and steal him away!"

"Miss Black, you don't understand. I'm not trying to steal him from you." She tried to ease Narcissa's mind, but Narcissa was still glaring at her.

"I don't know what is wrong with Mr. Malfoy, but he seems to be unable to keep from flirting with me. I find it incredibly annoying, and have told him so numerous times, but

he keeps doing it. I just wanted you to know. I don't think it is fair that he is flirting behind your back." She didn't say it to upset her, but she saw Narcissa bristle at her comments.

"I don't need the opinions of a Mudblood like you!" Narcissa bellowed at her. "He only looks at you to make me jealous! Don't you think I see him eyeing you in class?" Narcissa's face was twisted into an ugly snarl. "I know he would never truly have feelings for someone from your filthy background."

Hermione seethed at Narcissa's comments.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you with it then," she replied coldly.

Hermione stalked out of the bathroom and went past their table. She ignored Lucius and Severus and stormed out of the bar. Severus looked after her worriedly. Excusing himself, he ran after her. She was quick in her anger and was almost half way down the block when he finally caught up with her.

"Why the sudden departure?" he asked in annoyance.

"That woman is the most insufferable person I have ever met." She turned and pointed her finger into Severus' chest. "You know what? They deserve each other! I have never seen two people better suited because of sheer annoyance factor than those two."

Severus took her by the hand and led her to a bench. They sat down, and he looked at her with concern.

"What did she do?" he asked.

"I just wanted her to know that Lucius was flirting with me and that I didn't think it was nice. Before I knew it, she was telling me she didn't need advice from a *Mudblood*." Hermione felt tears threatening to fall. "Why does it always have to be about that?" she said quietly, looking down in her lap.

Severus pulled her into a hug. "Narcissa is a horrid woman. She looks down her nose at everybody. Don't take it personally."

Hermione tried to covertly wipe her eyes before straightening up and pulling away from Severus. "I suppose you're right," she admitted. "She really doesn't change much in the future, she gets worse."

"Hermione," Severus said quietly, "it's not always about your birth line. Anyone with half a brain can see how wonderful you are."

She gave him a sidelong glance. "But there will always be some who look at me as an outsider. Sometimes I feel like I don't belong anywhere. I was a misfit as a child in the Muggle world because of magic, and now I'm an outcast in the Magical world because of my bloodline. I've been going over that in my mind for the last year. None of my other friends had to hide, just me, because I am the one who is different." She looked back down into her lap in resignation.

Severus watched her proud form as she spoke. She was incredibly strong to have to deal with such prejudice, yet still be the caring individual she was. He knew if it had been him in that situation, he would probably lash out at everyone.

"I can understand how you feel," he told her. "I know I'm not Muggle-born, but I have felt like an outcast for as long as I can remember. The children in my neighborhood would make fun of me for the way I dressed; here I'm just made fun of for being weird."

Forgetting her own frustration, she looked over at Severus. She flashed him a smile.

"You're not weird," she told him, "you're just unique. There's nothing wrong with unique"

He looked back at her gratefully, "Just like there's nothing wrong with being the child of Muggles."

She smiled openly and stood up. "Come on; let's enjoy our day instead of sulking on a bench."

Severus gave her a shy smile and rose. They walked down the street, looking into shop windows. Suddenly Hermione stopped and gave a gasp; in front of them stood an old book shop.

"That isn't here in the future!" she whispered.

Severus regarded her with a smile. "Only you could get excited about a book store, Hermione."

She narrowed her eyes at him, and stood on tiptoe to get even with his face. "Don't tell me the thought of going in there and poking around in the stacks doesn't make your heart flutter, Severus Snape. You and I are not so different in that regard."

She left him gaping after her and hurried into the shop. He composed himself and followed her in. She had been right of course. No trip to Hogsmeade for him had been complete without a visit to this particular shop. He would usually find a book he longed for and then go home and dream about owning it. His financial circumstances didn't leave him room for splurging on unnecessary books.

He saw Hermione headed for his favorite area of the shop: *The Ancient and Out of Print* section. He hurried to join her. They spent at least half an hour there, perusing the titles and occasionally picking a book off of the shelf to flip through it.

"Look at this, Severus," Hermione finally called to him.

She showed him a book entitled *Lost and Forgotten Spells*. She flipped through the book carefully, and they saw spells for growing back limbs, freezing people (somewhat like the *Petrificus Totalus* spell), a flying spell, and one for changing hair color.

"I think I want this book," Hermione mused.

"You have a desire to turn your hair green?" Severus asked drolly.

"I was thinking more along the lines of bleached blonde, but green might be a nice change," Hermione mused as she thoughtfully tapped her finger on her chin.

Severus made a face. "Your hair is fine the way it is," he said quickly.

Hermione sent a smile his way as she snapped the book shut and decided to buy it.

Turning to Severus, she asked, "Are you ready to go? We've been holed up here for quite a while, and I am supposed to be visible in case a student needs me."

He replaced the book he was reading back onto the shelf and nodded to her.

"Aren't you going to buy that?" she asked him. "You've had your nose in it almost the whole time we've been here."

He gave her a quick grin. "Maybe next time."

Remembering Severus didn't have much money; she pulled the book from the shelf and headed to the checkout.

"What are you doing?" he snapped at her.

"I'm buying some books," she told him.

"I don't need you to buy that for me," he tersely whispered.

She looked over at him as she put the books on the counter and pulled some money from her pocket.

"I'm not buying it *for* you; I'm buying it as a *gift* for you."

"Hermione," he growled.

She paid for the books and left the store. Severus followed, looking at her sternly. When they had exited the shop, she handed the book to him and shrunk her book, placing it in her pocket.

Severus took the book, but looked at her crossly. "I can't accept this. I will pay you back when I can."

Annoyance flashed in Hermione's eyes. "Can't I buy you a gift, Severus?" she asked in a brusque tone.

"There is no reason for you to get me any such gift," he snapped.

She turned toward him. "I just wanted to thank you in some way." She trailed off looking at him pleadingly, hoping he would understand. "You have made me feel comfortable in a time that is not my own, you have been my friend, and have stuck up for me when Lucius and Narcissa have been intolerable. I just wanted to show you that I appreciate your friendship. Can't you accept a simple gift from me?"

Severus softened considerably. "Thank you, then," he said quietly. "I'm sorry I made a big deal out of it."

Hermione beamed at him. He shrunk the book and it disappeared into his robes. They began walking down the street again.

"I have wanted that book for almost seven years now," he told her quietly.

If it were possible, Hermione's smile got wider. "Well, I'm glad that I found something you would treasure."

Severus stopped walking and looked at her seriously. She turned and gave him a quizzical look.

"I treasure you," he said softly before he slowly covered her lips with his and kissed her.

Hermione's heart leapt. She had never felt such love directed at her. She became lost in him as his arms surrounded her and pulled her to him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him with all of the pent up passion that had been mounting within her over the past few weeks. They stood there enraptured with one another for a minute before Hermione came to her senses and broke the moment by pushing Severus away from her.

"No, Severus, we can't do this."

"Why not?" he asked as he searched her face.

"I don't belong here! This isn't my time. This isn't supposed to happen."

"Who cares what's supposed to happen?" he said sultrily.

"I can't, Severus. There's no future in this. I can't do it. Please, respect my wishes about this!"

He gazed at her sadly and let her escape his embrace. He had thought she might care for him as more than a friend, but perhaps he had misread her devotion as more than just friendship. He wanted to make sure he hadn't spoiled that friendship.

Looking at her solemnly, he said, "Alright, I'll respect your wishes, but you will not break off our friendship because of a little slip of the tongue."

Hermione giggled at his pun. She continued to walk down the street and he followed her, looking a bit concerned.

"I just told you before that I value our friendship, Severus. I wouldn't throw it away so easily."

His shoulders sagged in relief, and he relaxed considerably, smiling shyly at her. They continued to walk in silence until they reached the end of the street. There was a huge field that met the street here. Hermione recognized it as somewhere Harry, Ron, and she would have snowball fights in winter. But there was something different about it now, other than the lack of snow. There was a giant Willow tree in the center of the field. It was the most beautiful tree she had ever seen.

She wandered up to it and touched the trunk. "I wonder what happened to you," she mused.

"Who are you talking to?" Severus asked.

She looked at him, a bit startled to have said what she did out loud.

"This tree," she said, then looked at him slyly, "And no, I don't make a habit of talking to inanimate objects." Turning back to the tree and moving slowly around its trunk, she continued. "This isn't here in the future. I wonder who would cut down such a beautiful tree."

Severus looked over the tree he had never really noticed before. Hermione had a way of seeing things differently than he, in always a more positive light, even. He admired her ability to get excited over a simple tree.

She looked back to him and shook her head. "I know, I'm being silly, gushing about a tree. It's just so beautiful."

Severus wanted to compliment her beauty, but he didn't dare after the fiasco that had happened a few minutes before. He looked back up at the tree.

"It is filled out rather nicely."

"Very diplomatic answer," she joked.

His eyes grew wide as he looked at her, not sure what to say next to not have her make fun of him more.

"Come on, let's go." She said finally. It's getting late."

They turned to leave and were headed across the field when four large pops sounded, and they were surrounded by four Death Eaters. Severus and Hermione whipped their wands out and stood back to back, ready for a fight.

A/N: Next up: Death Eater Attack.

So I figure you'll either all hate or love me for this chapter. Thanks to everyone for the lovely reviews.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 46

What would happen if Severus found out what his life would be like as a Death Eater before he got the Dark Mark?
What would happen if Hermione was the one to tell him. AU SSHG A time turner fic.

Chapter 9

"Come on, let's go." Hermione said finally. It's getting late."

They turned to leave and were headed across the field when four large pops sounded and they were surrounded by four Death Eaters. Severus and Hermione whipped their wands out and stood back to back, ready for a fight.

"Voldemort has a warning for you, Mudblood!" one of the Death Eaters snarled.

Without waiting, Hermione blasted the man. At exactly the same time, Severus blasted one of the others and watched him fly backwards with a satisfying thud. The other two were prepared by now and started throwing spells at Severus and Hermione. The two kept their backs to one another and threw spells at their attackers. Severus sent another one of them flying, but he was replaced by the man Hermione had knocked out. Hermione shot a hex at one of the Death Eaters but barely noticed a spell coming for her. She barely had time to cast a Protego Charm to shield herself. Severus sent spell after spell at the Death Eaters, but nothing seemed to faze them. All four of the Death Eaters had now regained their feet and were shooting spells so quickly, Hermione and Severus were having a hard time keeping up. Hermione sent a flock of birds soaring toward the two Death Eaters facing her. The two men stooped low and started waving about, trying to shoo away the attacking birds.

"Nice one," Severus encouraged her.

"It works well on stupid boyfriends too," Hermione divulged as she cast a Stupefy hex at another Death Eater.

"Stupid boyfriends?" Severus inquired.

"The ones that go snogging other girls to make you jealous," Hermione said quickly as she shot more spells at the Death Eaters and ducked their own onslaught.

Severus grinned as he fought, but his grin soon disappeared as the two Death Eaters who weren't fighting off the birds turned and destroyed all of the attacking blight. The crouching Death Eaters rose with evil grins on their faces.

Soon, all four of them were sending hexes almost simultaneously at Hermione and Severus. Before the two could do anything more, strong ropes surrounded them and they stood helplessly in the middle of the attackers.

Hermione struggled with her bonds and growled at the Death Eaters. "Let him go; he's just a student. I'm the one you want."

"Hermione!" Severus growled.

"He's been seen with a Mudblood; he deserves what he gets!" came a voice to their left.

The first Death Eater came up to Hermione and put his masked face up to hers.

"The Dark Lord wants you to know he is not without compassion, even for someone as lowly as yourself. Leave your position at Hogwarts and discontinue your sullying of the purebloods that attend that school. If you do not leave, the next time we find you it will be your death."

Hermione snarled at him. "You think you're tough tying up a woman and a student?" She struggled to get at the Death Eater. "Does that make you feel like a man? Tell your stupid Dark Lord this: I will never give in to his demands. He will never make me cower in fright. He does not intimidate me in the least; he is nothing but a little man with little ideas."

Severus closed his eyes. He knew the Death Eaters would not take kindly to her blatant disregard for Voldemort's powers. As brave as she was, she was being incredibly stupid.

The Death Eater backed away and snarled, "How dare you speak against our Lord!"

He raised his wand and shouted some spells. The ropes fell away from them, and Severus was knocked to the ground, unable to stand. He heard Hermione scream and fall beside him. She continued to scream in agony as the Death Eaters disappeared and Severus struggled to get to a sitting position. He wasn't in pain; he just was incapable of moving and bearing weight on his legs. Finally, he managed to sit up and looked over at Hermione. She was unconscious. He had to get her back to Hogwarts.

He struggled to stand and picked Hermione up. He fell back to the ground and began again, this time able to support himself and Hermione on his wobbly legs. Turning on the spot, he Apparated back to the gates. He fell to his knees as he appeared in front of the wrought iron gates. Thankful he hadn't splinched either of them. He struggled to stand with her again and pushed the gates open, hurrying up the walk. Within a couple of minutes, and with much stumbling, he had entered the infirmary and placed Hermione on a bed. Severus sunk to the floor in relief and exhaustion. Madam Pomfrey rushed over and asked what happened as she waved her wand over the unconscious woman.

Severus told her quickly and she exclaimed, "Her insides are like they've been set on fire. She's got burns all over her organs!"

Madam Pomfrey waved her wand over Hermione once again.

"*Augamenti interno*," she chanted to stop the spell's progress. She then set to work repairing Hermione's internal injuries.

Severus pulled himself up and collapsed on the bed next to her. He had barely made it to the infirmary, he was so weak. Finally, Poppy had finished with Hermione. She

turned her attention to Severus and waved her wand over him. He immediately felt better. She went over to her supplies and procured a potion, which she had him drink.

"If you had brought her in five minutes later, Mr. Snape, I don't think she would have survived," she told him as she watched him down the potion. "She owes you her life," Poppy continued. "Now, you need to rest here tonight. You can go in the morning. Professor Granger, however, will probably be here for a few days." She rose and left the room.

Severus looked over at Hermione. She was still unconscious. He thanked Merlin that he had gotten her here in time. He wouldn't have been able to forgive himself if she had perished. Scooting his bed a little closer to hers, he continued to watch her, hoping she would regain consciousness soon. If she could just open her eyes and speak to him, he would know that she would be alright.

He sighed in relief a little while later when Hermione's eyes slowly opened. She looked over at Severus.

"Are you alright?" she asked him in a weak voice.

He smiled at her. "You're the one who almost died."

She grimaced. "I knew I was in too much pain to be dead."

"Madam Pomfrey said you would be fine in a couple of days."

"What about you?" she asked.

"I'm just a bit weak. I can leave in the morning."

Hermione reached her hand out to Severus. He reached over and took it.

Looking at him with tears in her eyes, she whispered, "Thank you for saving my life."

He gave her a tentative smile. "What else are knights in shining armor for?"

Hermione smiled back at him. She took her hand back and looked up at the ceiling. Her mind went over the events that had gotten her to the infirmary. She berated herself for being taken by surprise. With the relative nothing going on in this time frame, she had seriously let her guard slip. The whole incident made her recall Mad-Eye Moody's favorite saying, 'Constant Vigilance.' She had really dropped the ball this time, and it had almost cost her life and Severus' as well.

"I'm sorry I endangered you, Severus," she told him. "I was caught by surprise. I should have been ready for an attack. I wasn't."

"Hermione, they popped out of nowhere. Even if you had been prepared, there were too many of them. They would have subdued us eventually."

Hermione sighed. "I suppose you're right. I'm still sorry."

"Don't apologize. I would have felt terrible if you had been alone."

She smiled ruefully. "That's funny, I would have felt better."

"So you think that being dead would have made you feel better?"

"Okay, you're right, it's better to be alive, even if every part of my body feels like it's on fire. I just wish you weren't caught up in all of this."

"You'll recuperate and I'm fine."

"How did they find us, anyway?"

Severus looked at her for a moment. "I would assume one of my housemates told their parents that you were to chaperone today. The parents must have gotten back to You-Know-Who and he gave the order to his men."

Hermione nodded, deep in thought.

"Are you going to go back to your own time then?" Severus asked tentatively.

She huffed at him. "Hardly! I'm not nearly finished with Malfoy, and I won't be intimidated by that despot."

"Hermione, he won't stop until he's killed you."

Hermione looked at Severus in determination. "He'll have to catch me first."

Severus regarded her in exasperation. He didn't know whether to admire her bravado or think she was foolish for not returning to her own time and to safety.

Noticing his expression, she gave him a caustic look. "And what kind of message will I be sending if I just pack up and disappear? There are enough people in our world that turn a blind eye or hide themselves in the face of danger. I have never been one of them, and I'm not about to start now!"

He knew Hermione had been a war hero, but he had not realized just how brave she truly was. Here she was, willing to risk her life, just so she could make a better future for everyone. Could he ever do such a thing? He didn't know. He was quite fond of his life and did not know if he would be so magnanimous as to risk it for others, especially those he didn't even know. Of course his future self had done just that, hadn't he? Perhaps he did have that kind of bravery within himself.

"You're incredibly brave, Hermione," he said finally.

She scoffed at him. "I have always just done what I had to do. Bravery never had much to do with it."

He looked at her skeptically, but decided to drop the matter. They lapsed into a companionable silence, each filled with their own thoughts. Severus continued to marvel at Hermione's lack of fear. She might make light of her bravery, but he knew it took an incredibly strong person to stand up to You-know-Who like she had. He truly admired her. She always spoke her mind, no matter the consequences. Her sharp tongue had been something he had appreciated about her from the beginning of their relationship. He did hope, however, that she could learn to keep it in check when faced with danger in the future. He sincerely doubted it though.

Hermione, however, gave no thought to her supposed bravery. She was thinking of the incident that preceded their attack. The memory of his kiss seared into her mind. She had never felt like she had when he had kissed her. He had sent shivers throughout her entire body. Whenever she had kissed Ron, or Viktor for that matter, it had just been pleasant. This kiss had been all consuming. She realized that she wanted him to kiss her like that all the time. But that couldn't happen, could it?

Hermione felt a pang of guilt for pushing him off. She knew he was probably hurt and confused, but he had not shown any of that. She couldn't do it. She couldn't fall in love with him; it would be too hard. He would be left alone when she needed to return to her time. She had seen what the absence of Lily had done to him. Vowing she would not be the source of him pushing everyone away or of him pining away for a woman who was unattainable, she concluded that any relationship with him would be impossible. Hermione turned away from Severus and tried to sleep. Before she knew it, she had drifted off, dreaming of his lips on hers and his arms encircling her.

A/N: Next up: Dumbledore's wicked proposal.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter. As you might be able to tell, even though Hermione has sworn off Severus, she can't keep her feelings for him from growing. Thanks everyone, for your support, for reading, and especially for those who review. I really enjoy reading your comments.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 46

Dumbledore requests something from Severus.

Chapter 10

Hermione walked to her classroom. She had finally been set free from the infirmary the previous night and was anxious to get back to her normal routine. She entered the classroom and greeted several students who were already there. Mallory looked up from the desk, her black curls bobbing as she did, and smiled broadly at Hermione.

"It's about time you got back! I have had to correct hundreds of papers while you took your little vacation, young lady."

Hermione smiled at her. Mallory was a huge tease, but she was very caring. She had become a good friend.

They were team teaching today, and they quickly began the lesson to the seventh years. Mallory took the first half of the lesson while Hermione wandered around the classroom, checking on the students work. She stopped by Peter Jones' desk and helped him figure out something that had been stumping him.

She liked Peter, he was a good student. He always tried very hard, but he had a hard time with this subject. She had felt an affinity to him because he was Muggle-born also. She had seen him trying his hardest to compensate for the prejudices he received from some of his classmates. The truth was, he could best most of them in a duel, and he was very good at everything he set his mind to, except for Arithmancy, of course.

She wandered over and looked at Lucius' paper. He wasn't doing that well in the class either. He was probably too busy staring at her to learn anything. She gave him a suggestion as to how to finish the problem and then kept roaming the room. She gave Severus a quick smile as she passed. He never needed any help. She glanced at Lily Evans' paper. She too was doing fine. As she continued to roam, a plan formed in her mind that could help in her mission. It definitely would help her two struggling students, if nothing else.

She went to the front of the class and began her half of the lesson. Before long the time was done.

"Mr. Jones and Mr. Malfoy, may I see you both for a minute, please?" she asked as everyone got up and started to file out.

The two young men waited until the room was empty, save for Severus, who was waiting for Lucius. They approached Hermione's desk.

Hermione looked at both students. "I think you both would benefit from some tutoring sessions. I will meet you here tonight at six o'clock. We will work for an hour each week."

The students nodded their heads at her and turned to leave. She could tell Lucius was not looking forward to spending an hour with two Muggle-borns. He would learn to adjust, she was sure. She also hoped it gave him a different view of Muggle-borns in general.

Severus had hung back still and now he came up to her desk.

She looked at him and said, "Can we reschedule for seven on Thursday nights?"

He visibly relaxed. He had been supposing she was going to tell him she didn't want to keep spending her evenings with him. He was afraid she wouldn't want to be alone in a room with him after his actions at Hogsmeade, but she only wanted to meet later on her tutoring nights.

"Can I come and help you tutor?"

"Oh you are such a kiss up!" she taunted him. He growled at her.

Hermione smiled back. "Yes, if you'd like, I could use a hand. We can work one on one with them and then combine for the last fifteen minutes or so."

"Great!" he said. "Are you feeling better?"

"I'm not exactly feeling normal, but I am doing much better, thank you."

Severus nodded. "I'll see you tonight then."

oooOOOooo

Mallory walked up to her after the last class.

"So, you were in Hogsmeade with Severus Snape?" she asked innocently.

Hermione looked up at her from the desk.

"Yes, and it's a good thing too, he saved my life."

"I've noticed you two are pretty friendly. What's going on?" Mallory asked.

Hermione shrugged. "We're just friends, Mallory. He's a smart guy. I like chatting with him."

Mallory smiled at her and leaned over the desk so she could look into Hermione's eyes.

"I see the way you smile at him. You like that boy."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Mallory, I don't know what you're talking about."

"I just want you to know that I think it's great," Mallory said without missing a beat. "Severus is a loner. It's nice to see him hanging out with someone other than himself or the crowd he takes up with usually."

"Really," Hermione stammered, "there's nothing going on. . . ."

"Don't tell me you don't like him, Hermione, and I can tell he likes you."

Hermione looked down. "I know he likes me," she said ruefully.

"And you're upset by that because . . . ?" Mallory insisted.

"It's just not right."

"Because you're his teacher?"

"No, I'm just a teaching assistant, and besides, he's of age. It's because I'm from the future, Mallory, you know that. To be honest with you, I know Severus in the future, and I can't see anything coming of a relationship with him now except for heartbreak."

Mallory contemplated that for a moment. "I'm not sure of what you mean. You don't know that things won't work out for you two."

Hermione gave her an exasperated look. "Mallory, if we do get together and stay together until I return to my real time, there will be a twenty-five year gap between the time he tells me good-bye and the time he sees me again. That's just not fair."

Mallory smiled at Hermione. "I think it's romantic!" she gushed.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yes, on paper it's incredibly romantic. Love sick fool waits for true love for twenty-five years. It's a romance novel waiting to happen, but this is real life. I have no right to put him through something like that! It will just lead to heartbreak."

"I think you should go for it. You two are really cute together."

"Mallory!" Hermione said and gave her a caustic look. "Drop it already!"

"All right, but when you two get together, I want to be the first to know."

"You'll have a long wait, my dear," Hermione told her as Mallory left the room laughing.

oooOOooo

The tutoring session went well. Hermione worked with Lucius and Severus worked with Peter. For the last part of the session, they grouped together. Hermione was impressed to see Peter explain something to Lucius. He had evidently grasped onto what Severus had taught him and was now helping the other student. Looking to Lucius, she saw he was a bit astonished to be receiving good ideas from a Muggle-born. Smiling to herself, she was glad that the two seemed to be getting along, and perhaps even finding some things they had in common. Hopefully this plan would work, and Lucius would become a changed man.

The tutoring session was now finished. The two students seemed to both have a better grasp of the subject when they had left. She and Severus were now heading up to the seventh floor.

"I was surprised I only had to tell Malfoy to keep his hands off me once," Hermione mused. "If it weren't so annoying it would be comical."

Severus didn't say anything.

They got to their room and settled themselves in for their usual evening. Hermione had loads to correct. Even though Mallory had said she had graded papers, she had left most of them for Hermione. Her mountain of work was three times the size it usually was. She began grading and soon lost track of time and her surroundings. After a long while, she realized that it had been eerily silent. Severus hadn't said a word all evening.

"You're being unusually quiet," she remarked to him.

He looked over at her with a worried look. "There's something I need to tell you, and I'm not quite sure how to go about it."

Hermione put down her quill and looked at him. "How about just saying it outright?" she suggested.

Severus sighed. "Dumbledore called me into his office the other day. Since the attack at Hogsmeade, he feels he would like to have some advanced warning to Voldemort's doings. He asked me to join the Death Eaters and be a spy for him."

Hermione's mouth dropped open. She got up and raced to the couch.

"You told him no, right?" she asked as she settled in next to him.

He gave her a plaintive look.

Hermione felt hot tears brimming in her eyes. She grasped Severus' hand.

"You can't, Severus."

"Hermione, it will be different this time. I'm going in as a spy already. Perhaps I can do just as much good as I did before without all of the guilt and shame."

She hung her head. He was right of course; it would be different. But she couldn't bear to see him live the way he had before. Coming back from meetings having had the Cruciatus curse cast upon him so much that he could hardly walk.

"You should have told him no," she whispered.

"What would you have done, Hermione? Would you have told him no?" he asked angrily.

She looked up at him. "No, I wouldn't have either," she said in a resigned tone. "It's just that Dumbledore, he uses people. He cares for them, I know, but he uses them nonetheless. He used you before, and he's going to do it again."

"But if I can help defeat You-Know-Who, it will be worth it, don't you think?"

She considered his words. "I'm not sure the end justifies the means all the time." She turned back to him. "Severus, you will be risking your life every day. Can't you just tell him to find someone else?"

"There is no one else. I'm the only one who has been involved with them but not joined them. All of the others who would make believable spies are already loyal to Voldemort."

"Voldemort will hurt you. What if he kills you?"

Severus thought about the conversation he had with Dumbledore.

"Now, my boy," Dumbledore said, "I know if you accept this assignment, there will be times when you will be tortured. Your life will be in jeopardy every time you meet with Voldemort."

Severus looked down and nodded. "It doesn't seem that I have a choice."

Dumbledore looked at him sharply. "Of course you have a choice, but you must realize that we need someone like you on the other side. Think of the things we could find out about the Death Eater organization with you in the middle of it."

"Do you think that I'll be able to fool him for long?"

"Have you heard of the art of Occlumency?"

Severus shook his head no.

Dumbledore explained, "It is the ability to shield your mind from others. We will work together so you can learn this art. It will keep Voldemort from knowing your secrets."

"When do we start?" Severus asked, finally making his decision to become the spy Dumbledore wanted him to be.

"Immediately, you need to be able to shield yourself when you take the Mark."

"And you think this Occlumency will keep him from torturing me too? Perhaps keep him from killing me?"

Dumbledore gave him a fatherly look. "I can only hope, my boy. I can only hope."

Severus came back to the present and looked into Hermione's eyes seriously. "He won't kill me. I will shield my thoughts from him, so he won't know I'm a spy."

"So you already know Occlumency?" Hermione asked.

Severus' eyes widened. He kept forgetting she knew so much about the future.

"Dumbledore is teaching me. It seems to be going well so far."

"Your ability as an Occlumens is legend among the Order, Severus. You still need to be careful."

"I will be," he assured her.

"When will you take the Mark?"

"Tomorrow night."

"I'll wait for you here. From what I understand, it is very painful."

"You don't need to wait for me. It will probably take a while. Lucius said to be prepared to be gone all night."

"I'll wait."

He studied her determined expression. Why did she care about him so much? It made his heart race to think about it. She may not love him, but she cared about him. No one, except his Mother and maybe Lily had ever cared about his welfare. Nobody cared and he hadn't felt deserving of caring. But she cared and it made him feel special. It made him feel loved, whether she felt that she loved him or not.

He smiled shyly at her. "I should get going," he said. "It's getting late."

"Be careful tomorrow, Severus," she warned him.

He got up and then stooped down and kissed her forehead. She smiled up at him as he turned and left. As he closed the door behind him, her smile faded from her lips and she put her head in her hands. Thoughts of Severus returning from being tortured flooded her mind. Over and over she relived the two times she had personally found him when he had returned from such torture sessions. She knew that these were hardly the only times he had endured such horrors.

The first time had been in the summer before her fifth year. She had been staying at Grimmauld Place and had been up late reading in the library. She had jumped when the door had opened and Severus had stumbled in, collapsing on the floor. Having rushed over to him, she had dragged him to the sofa, settled him in, and found Molly Weasley to help him. After having rushed back to him with Molly, she had stood back and had watched Molly bustle around Severus, giving him potions, waving her wand, and chanting spells to sooth him in his misery. He had groaned and writhed for a good part of her ministrations, but he'd finally relaxed and fallen asleep, looking somewhat peaceful after the agony he had endured.

The second time she had found him passed out in the hall at Hogwarts during her sixth year. It had been close to curfew, and the halls had been mostly deserted. She had been returning to her room from the library when she had come across a crumpled figure only feet away from the entrance to the infirmary. She had rushed to the body and had found it was Severus Snape, unconscious on the floor. He had looked as if he had been beaten to within an inch of his life. She had run to the infirmary and gotten Madam Pomfrey, who had rushed out and levitated him to a hospital bed. She had been shooed away after a quick thanks from Poppy and had not seen Severus for several days until he had resumed teaching class. He had never mentioned the incident to her and she had never had the nerve to bring it up to him.

Hermione's heart clenched within her as she thought of the night of the Final battle, when Severus had almost died. She had been secreted in the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack with Harry and Ron when Voldemort had let his evil snake loose on Severus. After the evil wizard had disappeared, Ron, Harry, and she had emerged from their hiding place, startling an almost completely paralyzed Snape. Hermione had stared sadly at Severus as he had tried to convey to Harry that he was to take the memories that had been pouring out of his body. She had quickly conjured up a vial for Harry to secure the memories and had handed it to him. Having turned back to Severus, she had looked at him regretfully. At the time she had thought he had attempted to murder Albus, but she had still felt a pang of sadness as she had seen the life slowly ebbing out of the man.

Suddenly she had felt an intense urge to help him. Hermione had quickly rifled through her bag as Harry had scooped up the last bits of memory. Grabbing the vial of Dittany, she had poured the entire contents onto his gaping neck wound. She'd seen it smoke and close up somewhat. It had seemed that the strength of the Dittany had made Severus pass out. Either that or he had died, she hadn't been sure. Harry had stoppered up the vial with Severus' memories in it and had motioned for them to go. Hermione had followed the two boys out, but she had not forgotten that Severus lay unconscious or dead on the floor of the Shrieking Shack.

When the battle had finally ended, she had quickly sought out Madam Pomfrey and had told her about Severus, probably lying dead in the Shrieking Shack. Madam

Pomfrey had insisted that they go to him immediately, in case the Dittany had helped to preserve his life for any length of time. Poppy had quickly run to the infirmary and had grabbed some potions, and soon she and Hermione had been heading for the Shack again.

On her return to the Shack, she had noticed something that she had blocked out the first time. Severus had been lying in a large pool of his own blood. It had been everywhere. His lifeless hands had lain in it and it had surrounded him. Hermione had felt her heart constrict. There was no way anyone could have survived losing so much blood. Severus hadn't moved since her departure. His eyes had been closed, his head had lain limp against the pool of blood on the floor, and his body had been eerily still. However, when they had come close to him and Hermione had touched him, she had felt his body was still warm. Could he have possibly still been alive?

Poppy had set to work. She had unstopped a vial and asked Hermione to support Severus' neck as she had prepared to pour the liquid onto his wound. Hermione had lifted Severus' head slightly and had placed her hands between it and the blood on the floor. She had held his neck and waited. Madam Pomfrey had poured the entire vial onto the gashes in Severus' neck. The parts that had not been closed by the Dittany immediately had closed over and Severus' neck had begun to look the way it had been before being mauled. Poppy had Hermione turn Severus' head, and then she had poured a Blood-Replenishing Potion gently into his mouth and had helped him swallow it by massaging his throat.

"What was that you put on the wound?" Hermione had asked curiously.

"Phoenix tears. They're not as potent as when they're fresh, but they're the only hope he has."

"Will he live?" Hermione had asked fearfully.

Poppy had nodded yes. She had stood up. "There's nothing else we can do. The phoenix tears need to go through his body. They should be able to rid his body of the venom, but it will take a bit of time since he has been here for so long without treatment."

Poppy had conjured up a stretcher and had levitated Severus' body onto it. She and Hermione had made their way slowly back to the Great Hall, where Severus had taken his place among the wounded, his true role in the war having been revealed by Harry. After many hours, Poppy had decided to move him to somewhere more private. She had placed him in a hidden recovery room in the back of the infirmary and had settled him into it. He had lain there unconscious for four days before he had finally stirred. It had been several weeks after that before he'd had the strength to leave the bed. He hadn't fully recovered for six months.

Hermione balled up her fists in frustration at the possibility that he would have to relive that and every other torture he had undergone again. What was Dumbledore doing? First he tells her to get Severus to change his ways, and then he tells him to become a spy anyway. She angrily rose. She needed to speak with Albus.

A/N: Next up: Hermione confronts Albus and Severus gets the brand.

Thanks to everyone for the great interest in this story and your wonderful reviews. Let me know if you agree with Severus becoming a Death Eater. For me, much of his appeal is wrapped up in his bravery and dedication to the light, even though he was entrenched in the dark. I just couldn't see Severus being Severus without being involved as a spy. Some of you have commented on that previously, so I hope that you are happy with the developments. Well, maybe happy is not the right word . . .

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 46

Albus gets a warning, and so do the Marauders.

Chapter 11

Hermione gave the gargoyle the password and ascended the stairs to Dumbledore's office. She rapped on the door and waited for admittance. After a few minutes, Albus opened the door and looked at Hermione. A large smile crossed his face as he opened the door wide to admit her. She stormed past him and flung herself into the chair in front of his desk.

"Albus, how could you ask Severus to spy like that?" she demanded without preamble.

He smiled at her benevolently. "Hermione, after your attack I realized it would be beneficial to keep tabs on Voldemort from within his organization. Severus is perfect for that job."

"Do you have any idea what can happen to him?"

"Of course I do."

"But you'll let him risk his life day in and day out anyway?"

"Hermione, it seems that you have a great affection for our Severus," Dumbledore said kindly.

Hermione huffed. "That's beside the point, Albus. You haven't seen him coming back from Death Eater meetings barely able to stand, having been tortured beyond most people's ability to bear. You didn't see him lying on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, nearly dead, gushing blood from the attack of a giant snake! You can't do this to him!"

She was standing now, pleading for Severus Snape, trying to spare him the world of hurt that he had endured before.

"Hermione," he said softly, "I understand the risks and so does Severus. He has agreed to do this for the good of our world. Don't deny him the ability to serve."

"So why did I bother telling him anything about the future? You've consigned him to the same fate as before."

"Hermione, do you really think Severus is the same person as he was when you came here?"

Hermione regarded Albus for a minute. "Of course not, Albus; but it all seems rather pointless when you are making him become a spy anyway."

"I am not making him become anything. The choice was his. He is fully aware of the possible consequences, and he is willing to risk his life to help the Order's cause."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "Do you really care about anybody, Albus? Or is this all just a game to you?"

"I assure you, Hermione, I take these assignments very seriously. I thought long and hard before asking Severus to do this. It is the only way."

Hermione leaned forward on the desk until she was eye to eye with Dumbledore.

"I swear, Headmaster, if he dies, I will seek revenge on you, no matter what year it is." Hermione straightened up and stalked out of the room. She didn't sleep at all that night.

oooOOooo

Lack of sleep and her trepidation about Severus proved to make Hermione a nasty person the next day. She had deducted hundreds of points and given five detentions during the day. For someone who gave detention perhaps once a month, she had really gone overboard. She stormed toward the Great Hall and dinner, a great cloud of frustration hanging over her. She looked around crossly, feeling much like the Severus Snape of the future, glowering at students as they passed by. The few who looked up at her quickly gave her a wide berth as she looked at them crossly, daring them to do something stupid so she could deduct points from their houses. She turned the corner and was knocked flat on her back by a student running in the hall.

Hermione sat up, looking livid. "What in Merlin's name do you think you're doing running in the halls?" she screamed before noticing the student who had knocked her down was Severus.

"I'm sorry, Professor!" he stammered as he helped her to a standing position. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine," she commented as her gaze went past him.

Her eyes narrowed as she noticed her least favorite trouble makers, the Marauders, all standing in a group with their wands extended, panting as if they had just run a marathon. She stormed over to the four Gryffindors.

"What is the meaning of this? Why are you running in the halls with your wands extended?"

The boys put their wands away quickly and stared at the floor, looking as if they had been caught stealing.

"Mr. Lupin, would you mind explaining your behavior?" Hermione demanded lividly.

"Pro . . . Professor Granger . . . we . . . we were just . . ."

"Mr. Black, perhaps you can be a bit more eloquent than Mr. Lupin?"

Sirius flashed a brilliant smile at her. "We were just getting a little exercise, that's all."

"By playing hex the Slytherin, I presume?" Hermione grunted haughtily as she folded her arms.

"No, no, you misunderstand. Severus here was running of his own accord. He had nothing to do with us running. We were just playing a game amongst ourselves, to see who could get to the Great Hall the fastest."

Severus stood to the side, glowering at them as Sirius gave his 'explanation.'

Hermione's eyes narrowed at him. "Mr. Potter," she spat, "if this was just a game, why were your wands extended?"

James thought furiously for a minute. "It was for a . . . a cushioning charm! In case we ran into somebody, like Snape there did to you."

Hermione held back the desire to hex them all against a wall and watch them slowly slide down it.

She looked down at the floor. "Mr. Snape, what happened here?"

Severus scowled at the four young men as he began his tale. "I was out on the lawn studying when I heard these four laughing as they approached me. I quickly packed my things and stood to leave the area when Pettigrew urged Black to cast a jinx on me. Being warned by the Headmaster about defending myself, I chose to make a run for it before they had a chance to send the jinx at me. The four of them pursued me across the lawn and into the building. I was looking behind me when you came around the corner, and I did not see you. I am sorry to have knocked you down, Professor."

Hermione had been staring at the floor the entire time that Severus had been talking. She now looked up with a murderous glare at Potter, Black, Pettigrew, and Lupin.

Her voice became dangerously soft. "Do you four boys have anything to add to your story?"

Sirius gave her another winning smile. He knew there were few women who could resist his tempting grin. Unfortunately for him, Hermione was one of them. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, daring him to say something stupid. Sirius decided to keep his mouth shut.

"None of you have anything to add?"

The young men were silent.

"Fine. Mr. Potter, Mr. Black, Mr. Pettigrew, and Mr. Lupin, as it seems that none of you know how to tell the truth, I will expect a two foot parchment from each of you about being truthful and on the consequences of lying. I expect them on my desk tomorrow morning. Fifty points from Gryffindor for each of you. You are all banned from Hogsmeade weekends for the remainder of the year, and you all have detentions for the next month. Keep it up boys and you'll never have another free evening to yourselves."

Peter Pettigrew decided to make a remark then. Pointing at Severus, he said, "Well what about him? He knocked you to the floor. Aren't you going to take points away from him?"

Hermione closed the gap between herself and Pettigrew. She narrowed her eyes at him, wishing to wipe that rat like smirk off his face.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor for talking back to a teacher, Mr. Pettigrew." Without breaking her stare at Peter, she continued, "Twenty points to Slytherin, Mr. Snape, for not starting World War Three."

Peter's eyes widened as Hermione stepped back and regarded the four Marauders. "You will come with me to the Defense classroom now. Mr. Snape, you will accompany us."

"But it's dinner time!" James exclaimed.

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before you decided to torment Mr. Snape. You will have sufficient time to eat your dinner, Mr. Potter. Follow me please."

They quickly made their way to the Defense classroom. Hermione entered, closely followed by the five students. She turned and looked with fury on the four Gryffindors.

"Seeing as you all have an insatiable desire to duel, I am giving you a chance to get it out of your system. You will each have a turn at Mr. Snape, to do with him as you wish, but be warned, he will not go lightly with any of you either. Mr. Black, you first."

They all stared at Hermione incredulously. Had she just ordered them to duel each other? She must have gone mad!

"No low blows or dark magic from either of you," she instructed as she backed away to give them room to duel. Severus pulled his wand out and started to circle Sirius. Sirius did the same. Severus was the first to cast a spell, which Sirius was just able to block in time. Sending a *Stupify* hex of his own, he had Severus ducking before shooting one back. Sirius wasn't quick enough and the hex shot him backwards and into the wall. Severus sneered in delight as he saw Black's body crumple in a heap on the floor.

"Well," Hermione mused after a moment, "Mr. Black, where's all your macho bravado now? Why aren't you teaching Mr. Snape a lesson for hexing you into the wall?"

Sirius didn't look at her; he just got up and dusted himself off as he returned to his friends' side, looking sheepish for being defeated so quickly.

Mr. Pettigrew, you're up," Hermione ordered.

Peter looked scared to death as he raised his wand, ready to battle. It quivered as he stood poised to duel. He sent his spell early, but Severus was ready for him anyway. He protected himself and then sent his hex flying toward Pettigrew. Another of the Marauders slammed against the wall.

"Mr. Snape, a word on your technique," Hermione said as she moved next to him. "When you send your hex out, you should extend your arm straight like this."

She took his hand in hers and shot another spell with him, stretching out his arm fully, pretending to better his flawless technique. The hex left his wand and slammed into Peter Pettigrew, who was still on the floor from the first hex.

"Whoops! Sorry about that, Mr. Pettigrew," she cried, pretending that it had been a mistake. Finally the rat wasn't smiling, and he deserved what he got for leading Voldemort to the Potters in the future.

"So it's more like that," she continued to instruct Severus as she stretched his arm out again, sending another hex at Pettigrew.

Looking up into Severus' eyes, she winked at him as she released his hand. He was looking at her in shock.

"Mr. Lupin, why don't you take a shot at Mr. Snape?"

Remus looked determined as he set up his stance. They sparred for several minutes. Remus was actually a very good duelist. He shot a hex at Severus and knocked him to the floor, but not before Severus had the chance to send one of his own. Both men wound up on the floor, covered in scratches from their altercation.

"We'll call that a tie," Hermione broke in before either one could get up to resume fighting. "Nice job, Mr. Lupin," she added.

"Mr. Potter, you're the last one up," she ordered.

James looked from Hermione to Severus as he got ready. They quickly bowed to one another. Severus looked at Potter grimly as he shot his first attack. James was quick. He blocked the hex and had one shooting at Severus almost in one motion. They fought furiously. Both young men had quick reflexes, and their hexes shot out with blinding speed. They circled each other and ducked each other's spells for quite a while. James shot a hex directly at Severus' head. He fell to the ground to avoid it, and shot one of his own at James. James was caught off guard and was sent flying into the wall. Hermione smirked at him as he stood up.

She realized that her horrid mood had lifted some. She no longer had the urge to punch each of the Marauders in the face. She walked to the center of the room and glanced over at Severus.

"Nicely done, Mr. Snape," she congratulated. "Now for the rest of you gentlemen, if you continue to act like little boys, you shall be treated as such. If I catch you tormenting Mr. Snape again, you will be marched right back here for more of the same treatment. Is that clear?"

The four looked at the ground and nodded.

"Good, now get out of here, before I have you all duel him again."

She watched as the four boys turned and left. Pettigrew virtually ran out the door, but the other three kept their dignity and walked out with their heads held high.

After they had left, Hermione doubled over and began to laugh.

"Hermione, have you gone mad?" Severus asked her.

"I don't think so, Severus, why?"

"Aren't you going to get in trouble for all of this?"

She straightened up and looked at him, her eyes dancing in mirth. "No, it was simply a little dueling practice, monitored by a teacher. I think I followed the rules pretty strictly, don't you? Well, except for that unfortunate incident with Pettigrew." She doubled over and guffawed some more.

Severus stared at Hermione for a while. He was always surprised at the lengths she would go to defend him. He had never met anyone quite as protective as she was. Normally such behavior would anger him to no end, but he found her righteous indignation at his treatment to be refreshing. At least someone cared for his well being and was not afraid to stand up for him. He had found little of that in the treatment he received from others. It was a nice change to have that type of respect from someone.

"Thank you for letting me do that," Severus said gratefully. "It was incredibly satisfying."

Hermione straightened up but continued to laugh a bit. She nodded her head at Severus to acknowledge his comment. She wiped some tears from her eyes and realized that they weren't mirthful tears, but that she had started to cry while laughing. Boy was she tired.

"Hermione, are you alright?" Severus asked her with concern.

"No, I'm not," Hermione blurted out. "I didn't sleep at all last night, I've been a total bear all day, and I'm worried sick about you."

Severus closed the distance between them and put his hands on her arms. "Don't worry, Hermione, everything will be fine."

Hermione sniffled. "Of course it will, Severus. Everything will be just peachy."

He smiled at her impudence and wiped the tears from her face.

"I will not be found out. Voldemort will not know the truth about me."

Hermione gazed into his eyes. She didn't see a bit of fear in them. He was determined to do this and he felt no fear. He was remarkably brave.

"Please, just be careful," she told him finally.

"Always," he remarked.

She finally cracked a smile at him.

"I have to go," Severus said regretfully. "Lucius said we needed to leave around now."

Hermione's eyes drifted to his mouth before she snapped them back up to his eyes, where they belonged.

"Hang on a minute."

She took out her wand and healed the scratches and cuts he had received from the duels. He smiled his thanks to her.

"I'll wait for you like I said," she assured him.

"Okay. Don't worry, everything will be fine."

She nodded to him and he turned and left the room. Tears ran down her face once again as she struggled to get a hold of herself. She prayed that everything would go as planned and that Voldemort wouldn't find out about his duplicity. She hoped that inflicting the Mark was enough torture for Voldemort. Hopefully, he wouldn't be tempted to throw a few Cruciatus curses along for the fun of it.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and was finally able to control her racing emotions. Realizing she wasn't hungry in the slightest, she decided to skip dinner altogether and just go wait in the Room of Requirement. She stopped by her room and grabbed her papers that needed marking along with some potions that could help Severus when he returned and headed for her destination. She settled in and began to grade. Her mind was so far away that she had to read the students answers three and four times before she could determine whether they were correct or not, but she slowly made her way through the pile of parchments. She checked her watch frequently and studied the door. No one ever disturbed her.

oooOOooo

Hermione woke with a start. Somehow, she had fallen asleep while grading. Her head had lolled forward as she slept. When she awoke, she found her neck was aching from the angle it had been in for so long. She curiously checked her watch. What was taking so long? They had been gone for almost three hours now. Hopefully Severus wasn't lying unconscious somewhere, left alone in the cold. Perhaps she should search for him. She decided against it. Even in her overexcited state, she knew a bad idea when she heard one. She went back to grading.

Some time later, the door flew open and Severus staggered in holding his arm gingerly. Hermione flew off the couch and was by his side within seconds, supporting his limp figure. She guided him to the couch and laid him down on it. Pulling a vial off the table, she told him to drink it. He downed it in a gulp and closed his eyes, letting the potion work. After a few minutes, he opened them again and thanked her.

He cradled his left arm in his other hand. Looking at him, she gingerly took his arm and rolled his sleeve up, exposing the Mark. It was still red from being tattooed on. Hermione grabbed a jar of salve and opened it. She smeared the Mark with the healing salve, and Severus closed his eyes in relief as its coolness soothed the angry red tattoo. When she was done, she looked up at him.

"What else can I do?" she asked.

He shook his head. "You've already done enough." He could barely make eye contact with her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked tentatively.

"It is what it is. Voldemort was happy to get another follower. I was happy he wasn't suspicious."

He was still looking away from her. He was also shielding his arm, so she couldn't see his Mark.

"Severus, look at me," she demanded.

He wouldn't turn to look at her. She could tell he was embarrassed by what he had done.

"Are you ashamed to look at me?" she asked quietly.

"I have degraded myself, Hermione. I have marked myself with a sign of evil."

"You have bravely walked into the lion's den and come out unscathed. I know this Mark usually signifies evil, Severus, but you should not be ashamed of it. It represents the opportunity to destroy that evil as long as it graces your arm."

He closed his eyes. "Don't make it into what it's not," he berated her.

"I'm only telling you what it is."

He finally turned to her and searched her eyes. There was no pity, no lies there. He reached out and pulled her close, placing a kiss softly on her lips.

"Thank you, Hermione," he whispered.

Hermione looked at him nervously and pulled away.

"I know you don't feel the same way I do, Hermione, I just wanted to thank you."

She smiled tentatively at him. She reached out and took another vial off the table.

"This is a dreamless sleep draught. I thought you might appreciate a night without any nightmares. Just stay here tonight. I'll see you tomorrow in class, okay?"

He nodded to her and she left the potion in his hand. She got up and stared at him. Without thinking too much about it, a tall order for her, she quickly leaned down and brushed her lips against his in a quick kiss. She turned and raced from the room yelling good night over her shoulder, leaving a shocked Severus Snape staring after her.

Hermione slammed the door and leaned against it, closing her eyes and putting her head in her hands. She had let her guard down and had kissed him. How could she have done that? It was all his fault! Why had he kissed her so wonderfully? Why had her stomach dropped to the floor when his lips touched hers? Then he had said she didn't feel the same way he did. Oh how wrong he was! She thought about him day and night. She couldn't get him out of her head. She loved him. She *loved* him. She mulled over those three little words. How they had changed her life. When she was with Severus, she was happier than she could ever remember, even when they weren't doing anything.

But what would be the cost of their love? How would things work out? She knew how they would work out. She would leave him and return to her time. He would resent her for it, and when she appeared in the future, he would have nothing to do with her. Then she would be crushed. It was all so obvious. She needed to box up her heart and keep her emotions hidden away; they would just cause heartbreak. She pushed everything away from her. She was Hermione Granger, Assistant Professor at Hogwarts. She wasn't in love with anybody and would never be during this time period. She would return to her real time and live her life happily without Severus Snape. Perhaps she could find some spell or something to keep her from thinking about him. She would have to do some research. She headed back to her room with the intention of doing just that, however she never cracked a book open.

Instead she sat on her chair with her legs pulled up to her chest, hugging them with her arms. She didn't want to stop thinking about him. She enjoyed thinking about him. Thinking about him made her happy. Being with him made her happy. Everything about him made her happy. She couldn't believe she had fallen in love with Severus Snape.

A/N: Next up: Lucius has a problem.

Thank you for all of your lovely reviews! Well, that chapter had a lot going on! Now I guess the big question is this: What will Hermione do with her realization that she is in love?

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 46

Lucius confides in Hermione about a problem he's having.

Chapter 12

Severus hurried toward the Owlery, a letter in his hand. It was a letter to his mother. He wrote her every week. He knew if he didn't he would receive a howler exclaiming that she thought he was dead and why hadn't he written her. Every week, Severus dutifully wrote a short note, proclaiming he was still alive and telling her a little about school. Every week she wrote back saying that she hoped he was eating well and not studying too much. It had become a ritual between the two of them. He did enjoy hearing from her, and he knew that she loved receiving letters from him.

Severus quickly ascended the stairs and entered the small, circular room housing the Hogwarts owls. He stopped short when he saw who was there also. Lily turned and gave him a strained smile.

"Sev," she said.

"Lily," Severus greeted back with the same lack of enthusiasm.

They had not spoken all year. Whenever the two of them had passed in the hall, Severus had looked at her, but Lily had always averted her eyes. Severus knew that she wanted nothing to do with him. That was alright. If she were going to be involved with Potter, he really didn't want anything to do with her either. Ignoring Lily, Severus went over to an owl and began to fasten his letter to its foot.

"James told me you beat him in a duel?" Lily asked curiously.

Severus only nodded.

"He wouldn't say why the two of you were dueling. He passed it off as a class thing, but I know you don't share any classes together."

Severus pursed his lips. Should he even get into this with Lily? Obviously Potter did not want her to know that he had been caught in a fight. Severus scowled. If Potter couldn't be truthful with his girlfriend, then he deserved whatever consequences came of that.

"He and his three friends were chasing me and I inadvertently knocked over Professor

Granger. She took us to the DADA room to duel it out."

Lily looked at him in puzzlement. "I thought James didn't bother you anymore."

Severus spared a glance at her, giving her a pathetic look. "Is that what he told you?"

"Well, yes."

"I wonder Lily, if he can't be truthful in that, what else does he hide from you?"

Lily looked at him angrily. "At least he doesn't march around with Death Eaters while my back is turned!"

Severus turned to her in anger, his fists clenched. He looked into her eyes and saw her as he once had, as his love. Then he saw when he had called her 'Mudblood' and the horrified look that had crossed her face. He beat his anger down and turned back to the owl. Making sure that the letter was secure, he sent it flying out the window, telling it where it needed to go. Finally he turned back to Lily, his temper calmed.

"Perhaps I was out of line," he said quietly, "but I assure you, he has not stopped bothering me, no matter what he has told you."

Lily looked as if she was about to say something else when Severus bid her goodbye and stormed out of the Owlery. Lily stared after him in shock. James had lied to her. Suddenly she felt angry. She needed to clear this up with James.

Several minutes later she entered the Gryffindor common room. She was relieved to see James sitting there with Sirius, joking around as he usually did. She marched up to the two of them and looked at James angrily.

"Can I have a word with you, James," she asked him, "in private?"

James looked up at Lily and smiled at her, but his smile quickly disappeared when he noticed that she wasn't smiling back. In fact, she was glowering at him. He stood and motioned to the exit of the common room. They both went out and found a secluded place in the hall to talk.

Lily folded her arms. "I just had a little chat with Severus," she said tersely.

"Did he call you another horrid name?" James asked.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "No, he told me the reason you two dueled the other day."

James looked down.

"I thought you said," Lily went on without preamble, "that you weren't bothering him anymore. Now I find out that wasn't the truth. How am I supposed to trust you, James, when you can't even tell me the truth about something as simple as that?"

James didn't know what to say. How could he tell her that he couldn't help himself? What would she say when she found out that whenever he passed Snivellus, he had this sudden urge to curse him into the wall? She would never understand that. He needed her to love him. He needed her to forgive him. Ultimately, he knew he needed to stop what he was doing to Snivellus so she could trust him, but he wasn't sure if he could control himself. The git was just too easy to torment. And Sirius certainly wasn't any help at all. He was the worst of them all when it came to Snivellus.

James heaved a great sigh. "I can't seem to help myself, Lily. Sirius goads me and I can't help myself. When I told you I wouldn't bother him anymore, I fully intended not to bother him anymore. I swear I wasn't trying to lie to you."

Lily gave him an exasperated look. "Why is it so tempting for you to constantly tease him? I thought you were better than that, James. I thought you had grown out of that childish behavior."

"I swear, Lily, this is the last time it will happen."

She rolled her eyes at him. "That's what you said the last time we discussed this. How am I supposed to believe you?"

He smirked at her. "Because I love you."

Lily scoffed. "That's not a reason at all!"

He encircled her waist with his arms. "Of course it is. It won't happen again because I love you too much to upset you again."

Lily's demeanor softened considerably. "All right," she said, "just don't lie to me anymore."

"I won't," he said as his lips came down on hers, conveniently stopping any more of their argument from going forward.

oooOOOooo

At dinner that night, James kept an eye on Severus at the Slytherin table. He needed to straighten out Snivellus' thinking. When Severus was finished and had risen to leave, James excused himself and followed him out. He raced to catch up with him as he descended the stairs to the dungeons.

"Snivellus!" he called after him.

Severus ignored James, but James caught up with him and grabbed his arm. Severus turned and narrowed his eyes at James.

"Keep your mouth shut with Lily, alright?" James said.

"Are your lies coming back to haunt you, Potter?" Severus said snidely.

"Just stay away from her. She's happier without you."

Severus sneered at him. "I don't doubt it," he shot back and pulled his arm from James' grasp.

Without another word, Severus descended the stairs, not giving James another glance. He fumed as he ran down the stairs. The nerve of that cretin! He should take care of his own business, and then he wouldn't need to make excuses to Lily for his behavior. Why did Lily believe him? She never had before. Had Severus' actions two years ago driven her into Potter's arms? If they had, then he was even sorer than he had been before. Lily, of course, could make her own decisions, but she deserved much better than Potter.

Potter's words ran through Severus' mind again.

"She's happier without you."

Severus grimaced. Of course she was happier without him. Everyone was happier without him. He was nothing but trouble. Now he was involved with something dangerous too.

His mind went to Hermione. She would be happier without him also. He knew that she understood that deep down. That was probably why she didn't want to have any kind of relationship with him other than friendship. Who would want to be involved with him when his life had become so complicated?

"She's happier without you."

Undoubtedly, Hermione would be too.

oooOOOooo

Severus, Hermione, Lucius, and Peter all sat in the Arithmancy classroom. Severus and Peter were sharing a table. They were bent over a book and Severus was explaining something to Peter. Hermione sat across from Lucius at the next table. She was watching Lucius work through a problem on his own. The tutoring session was going well, except for the fact that Lucius was extremely quiet. One could say he was even sulky. They finished up, and Hermione asked him to stay behind while Severus and Peter made an exit. Hermione went over and sat at her desk, looking over at Lucius, who had settled into the chair across from her. He was sullen and staring at the floor. Something was up. It was as if someone else was sitting in front of her.

"What's wrong, Mr. Malfoy? You've been extremely quiet tonight."

"It's nothing," he said sullenly.

Hermione frowned. "Lucius, you can tell me what's bothering you. I won't tell a soul."

Lucius studied her for a while and then decided to tell her what was wrong.

"It's my father," he said simply.

Abraxas Malfoy was a stern father. He had a strong sense of propriety and, being pureblood, hated everything about Muggles and their society. Word had gotten back to Abraxas that Hermione Granger, new teaching assistant at Hogwarts, was Muggle-born. His father had exploded upon learning this bit of information.

Hermione raised her eyebrows, signaling for Lucius to continue.

"He found out that you're Muggle-born. He wants me to withdraw from your class. If he knew I was participating in tutoring sessions, he probably would withdraw me from the entire school."

Hermione looked at Lucius with concern. She sat back and folded her arms in front of her.

"So how does that make you feel?"

"I'm angry. How dare he tell me what to study! And what a stupid reason to give up a class! You're one of the best teachers in this school."

Hermione beamed at his compliment. She really did take pride in her teaching.

"What are you going to do then?" she asked after a moment.

"Do I have a choice?" he spat.

Lucius' father was stubborn, indeed. If he wanted to pull his son out of Hogwarts, that would be exactly what he would do, and no one would stop him. He was a very proud man, though. The thought of his son leaving Hogwarts might just be too much scandal for the proud Malfoy name. But Lucius didn't take his father's threat lightly.

Lucius was backed into a corner. He truly wanted to stay in Professor Granger's class, but his father would definitely make that impossible. Lucius was surprised that his father hadn't appealed to the governors to fire Professor Granger instantly. He hoped that she wouldn't ultimately be sacked. Maybe just withdrawing from the class would keep his father quiet, and she could keep teaching.

"Well," Hermione replied thoughtfully. "It seems to me you always have a choice, but are you willing to live with what consequences come with that choice?"

"What do you mean?"

"What would be the consequences of you dropping my class?"

"I wouldn't get an Arithmancy N.E.W.T., I would miss out on your amazing teaching techniques," he paused and smiled at her, "and I may lose out on some job opportunities because I lack the experience necessary."

"Are any of your current job choices wanting an Arithmancy N.E.W.T.?"

He shook his head.

"Then don't count that one. Anything else?"

He shook his head again.

"What would be the consequences of staying in my most amazing class?"

He smiled at her ruefully as he thought. "My father would be mad at me."

"Take that thought to its farthest extent," Hermione said with a movement of her hand away from her. "What will your father do if you disobey him?"

Lucius leaned back in his seat and crossed his legs. "He could do many things. Ground me when I'm home, but that's unlikely. He could pull me from the school, but that would probably embarrass our family more than me studying under a Muggle-born witch. I guess ultimately he could disown me as an embarrassment."

"Is that a likely consequence?"

He thought about it. "No, I can't see him doing that in this circumstance. I am an adult after all. He would be very angry with me though. He might not speak to me for a while."

Hermione nodded and told him to go on.

"Well, I would get my N.E.W.T.; that would be a good thing."

Hermione nodded again. "Anything else?"

Lucius thought and thought. He couldn't think of anything else. Finally he looked up at her and told her no.

"Okay, you now have a list of consequences for each of the choices that you have to decide between. Which list is easier for you to handle. In other words, what can you live with?"

"I suppose, ultimately I could live with either of those circumstances."

"Which would you rather live with?" Hermione asked frankly.

Lucius thought. "I would rather have my N.E.W.T. in Arithmancy," he finally said.

"You're willing to deal with the wrath and possible silence of your father to receive your N.E.W.T.?"

He nodded.

"It seems to me, Mr. Malfoy, that you have an owl to send." She smiled at him.

"Thank you, Professor. That was an easier decision than I thought it would be."

"Lucius, I hope you understand your father's point of view. I'm sure he grew up with the same notions you have, that all Muggle-borns are inferior in every way. I've tried to show you that Muggle-born witches and wizards are just like everyone else, but your father has never had the opportunity to see that for himself. I believe that your father would react better to a letter written keeping that in mind."

"I'll remember that, Professor." Lucius stood to leave. "Thank you, Professor. Not just for this, but for showing me that you Muggle-borns aren't that bad. Even Peter's not that bad," he remarked as he turned to leave.

Hermione smiled after him. "You're welcome, Mr. Malfoy," she said as he left the room.

She was surprised to see him pop his head back into the room. "Are you going to the Halloween ball tomorrow night?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm chaperoning. I believe all of the teachers will be there."

He grinned at her. "Did you want to go with me?"

She grinned back at him. "No, Mr. Malfoy, I believe we've already broached this subject before."

"Well, you'll save me a dance, right?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I'll think about it."

He nodded to her and disappeared. She gathered up her things and headed out the door herself. That man was incorrigible. At least his flirting had turned into mostly an occasional thing like this. She had finally figured out he was the biggest tease on the entire Earth.

A few minutes later she was in the Room of Requirement. Severus had gone on ahead of her. He looked up as she entered and put her things on the table.

"What did the giant flirt want?"

Hermione laughed as she blushed. "I told him I wouldn't discuss it with anyone. He did ask me to the dance tomorrow."

Severus rolled his eyes. "You didn't punch him, did you?" he asked, hoping beyond hope that she had.

She smiled, thinking of another Malfoy whom she had punched. "No, I'm used to his ridiculous flirting. I just joked along with him. He did commit me to a dance though." She frowned, realizing what she had promised.

Severus raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well, I guess I told him I'd think about it. That's really not a commitment, is it?"

"To Lucius Malfoy, you just told him you'd marry him with that statement."

"Severus, you're terrible."

He nodded and went back to his Potions text.

"You were a bit quiet tonight during the session. Is something wrong?" Hermione asked.

Severus looked into his book crossly. "I was accosted by Potter after dinner."

"What happened?"

Severus sighed. "I suppose I should start at the beginning."

He quickly told Hermione about his encounter with Lily in the Owlery and then James' words after dinner. Hermione pondered what he said.

"It sounds like Lily wasn't too pleased with James."

Severus smiled at that.

Hermione shook her head at Severus and stifled a giggle. He was so predictable sometimes. Then there were other times . . . well, she ought not to think about that!

"The thing that upset me the most," Severus continued, "was when Potter said that Lily was happier without me. I'm sure she is, but it still bothers me."

"Severus, I highly doubt that she's happier without you."

Severus scoffed. "Of course she is. She looks happy as a clam with Potter."

"Well, that may be, but that doesn't mean she doesn't miss your friendship! Severus, quit being so down on yourself. You realize James was just saying that to upset you, don't you?"

"Yes, and he accomplished his goal," he said bitterly. "I don't know what she sees in him!"

Hermione thought about it. "Well, he's good looking, witty, smart, a talented wizard..."

"Don't!"

Hermione looked at Severus in surprise.

"Do not enumerate the good qualities of Potter to me!" he seethed.

Hermione looked duly chastised. "Sorry," she said pathetically. "I wasn't saying that I liked him or anything." She frowned, cradling her head on her hand. "As a matter of fact, I don't like him at all. He's annoying as all get out. It's hard for me to get around the fact that he's Harry's father. Harry is nothing like him."

"So Harry is ugly, dumb, a terrible wizard, and a total killjoy?"

Hermione laughed. "No, he's all of those other things I said before too. I just mean... he cares about people. I don't see that trait in James Potter. James Potter cares about himself and how he appears to others."

Severus pondered that, and he nodded his head to Hermione.

"I don't know, Severus. I just can't see Harry running around throwing hexes at people he doesn't like the way that James does. I certainly wouldn't be friends with him if he did." Hermione was quiet for a minute. "Anyway, we weren't talking about Harry, now were we? Lily seems to be the type of person who values her friendships, Severus. I'm sure some part of her misses the closeness the two of you had."

Severus was quiet for a long while. He missed his relationship with Lily, but after all he had done, he found it hard to believe that Lily could ever miss him. He looked back up at Hermione and realized that she was giving him one of her knowing looks.

"Must you look at me like that?" he said tersely.

She blushed. "Yes, when I can see you berating yourself as you sit there."

"Do I have to use Occlumency when I am in your presence from now on?"

"Severus," Hermione laughed, "I am no Legilimens! It's not my fault that you're easy to read."

"I am not easy to read!"

"So you weren't just thinking that Lily would never miss you because of the way you treated her?"

"I... I... never mind." Severus was blushing now too.

Hermione got up and looked at his face. "Are you blushing?" she asked incredulously.

"No!" Severus said indignantly.

"I never thought I would see the day that I would make you blush! I think this is the greatest day of my entire life!" Hermione gushed, playing it up as she sat down next to him on the couch.

"Hermione," he growled, looking at her moodily.

"What?"

"Do not make fun of me."

"Oh, I would never make fun of you, Severus!" she exclaimed as she put her hand to her chest. "You're too serious to make fun of. I wouldn't want to spoil your sullen, self-berating disposition."

"I do not have a sullen, self-berating disposition."

"Then you shouldn't be beating yourself up over Lily."

Severus knew she had gotten him, but he was not amused. Well, not very amused.

"Very clever, witch," he said finally.

"I have work to do, if you'll excuse me," Hermione said as she went back over to her chair and picked up a quiz to grade.

"You mean that's it? No more clever words or teasing comments?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Severus."

"Uh huh," he said as he nodded at her distrustfully.

Hermione went to work on the quizzes she had to correct, smiling to herself. She finished them quickly and told Severus she was ready. They had planned to brew tonight.

"Are you sure you're capable of brewing seriously?" Severus asked her.

"I always brew seriously," she replied with a grin. "I studied under you."

"Are you making fun of my future teaching techniques now?" Severus asked.

Hermione became serious. "Severus," she said to him, "I have always admired your teaching abilities and brewing abilities. I would never make fun of them. Honestly."

Severus only stared at her. Once again she had confessed her respect for him. Finally he nodded his head to her. She smiled back at him and they headed for the cauldron. It was situated on a large table on the other side of the room. Hermione put a bag on the table and started getting out the things they would need for the potion. Severus had requested the Draught of Peace. She had eagerly agreed and gotten everything they would need. She pulled the ingredients out, along with a small silver knife, a stirrer, and a mortar and pestle.

Severus set out crushing the moonstone while Hermione prepared the cauldron. His voice startled her as he asked a question.

"I was wondering if it would be better to mash the moonstone into power instead of leaving it in crushed form. It might make the draught more potent."

She looked up at him. He was holding the pestle above the mortar hesitantly. Hermione smiled.

"Go ahead and try it. You shouldn't second guess your ideas, Severus. They're always spot on."

She had forgotten how she loved brewing with him. His older self always had some tidbit of information to share. He had divulged only recently that the secret to Draught of Peace was to make the moonstone into powder. He was brilliant in any time, it would seem.

He placed the now powdered moonstone next to the cauldron and picked up the bottle of Syrup of Hellebore. He added fifteen drops to the liquid that was in the cauldron and began to stir it. He stirred twenty times clockwise with two turns counterclockwise. He was poised over the cauldron in much the same pose as she was used to seeing from him in his older form. He hunched over it slightly with one hand carefully guiding the stirrer in its circular pattern. His other arm was elevated and cautiously hung over the cauldron, as if ready to cast a spell over it at any moment. He concentrated as he stirred, and his brows furrowed as he stared into the cauldron. Hermione sat back and watched him work. He was an artist even at this age. She was enjoying herself immensely.

After ten minutes of stirring he added the moonstone. The liquid turned blue and thickened considerably. He gave it five more stirs and set the stirrer down. Only then did he realize Hermione had been staring at him the whole time.

Hermione blushed. "Sorry, I just can't help watching you work. It's completely entrancing."

Severus turned red and looked away. She smiled at him, choosing not to call him on blushing again, and helped him bottle up the potion.

"Madam Pomfrey will be happy we decided to brew tonight. I think her stores of Peace Draught were getting a little low," Hermione remarked.

He nodded and finished filling the last bottle. They packed them into a carton, and Hermione shrunk it to be more manageable.

"So I'll see you tomorrow at the dance then?" Severus asked.

"Yep."

"What are you going as?"

Her eyes twinkled. "You'll see," she said, smiling.

He arched an eyebrow at her as they headed for the door.

A/N: Next up: The Halloween Ball.

Thank you again for reading and all of your lovely reviews! I'm glad you're all enjoying this story so far. The next two chapters will comprise Ball night. You all know that anything can happen at a Ball.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 46

Severus and Hermione admire each other at the ball.

Chapter 13

Hermione stood looking in the mirror at her costume. She had decided to be a fairy for the dance. She wore a long, form-fitting silver dress that went down to the floor. It had sleeves that clung to her arms and fell just above her elbows. The dress shimmered in the light and appeared to be made up of a million colors. Her hair was left down, and it flowed around her in soft curls.

Hermione paused and looked at the book that was open on her dresser. It was the one she had purchased in Hogsmeade several weeks ago: *Lost and Forgotten Spells*. The book lay open to the hair color spell. She stared into the mirror and wondered which color would be the best for her. She decided on a platinum blonde that almost appeared white, it was so bleached. She chanted the specific spell for that color, *Cambio huerita*, and waved her wand over her head. Immediately her light brown curls turned the platinum color.

Hermione took a wreath made of small purple roses and placed it on top of her head, crowning her new golden locks and adding color to the ensemble. Her face had some glimmering purple eye shadow and glimmering blush on it so she literally sparkled. She smiled at her reflection in the mirror. It had taken her a bit of time to get the look perfect, but she was happy with the result. The whole outfit was topped off with a pair of wings that were soft and lacy. They covered her back, extending out to her shoulders. The wings fell flush against her and shimmered with the light. The whole look was rather spectacular, she had to admit. She truly felt beautiful. Touching up her light purple lipstick one last time, she turned and headed for the door.

She entered the Great Hall and looked around. Enchanted paper bats flew high above the guests' heads. There were jack-o-lanterns on a table in the corner, singing spooky songs. Hermione grinned at them. Tables lined the edge of the hall, each bedecked with a black table cloth and a small candelabra of black candles in the center. The dance floor had been decorated with a black cat motif. The painted cats were scattered all about the floor. They all had hunched backs, and they hissed when they were stepped on. Hermione carefully crossed the floor without stepping on them. She had to admit, the Hall looked great.

It seemed that every eye was on her as she entered. She smiled to herself and made her way to the other teachers, who were crowding around the drinks table. There would be no spiking of the punch this year.

Albus turned to her and said, "Hermione, you look completely ravishing tonight!"

Minerva McGonagall, who was standing next to him and attired like a black cat, added her compliments.

"Thank you, Minerva. Very creative costume you have there," she said jokingly, thinking of Minerva's Animagus form. Minerva smiled thinly at her.

"Albus, what are you supposed to be?"

"I am a lemon drop."

Hermione glanced at his costume again. Sure enough the man had dressed up as a lemon drop. He wore a bright yellow robe that went straight to the floor and gathered together at the bottom. Yellow patent leather shoes with yellow socks adorned his feet, and he had a little yellow cap on his head to finish off the 'costume.'

"Very amusing, Albus," Hermione said in between giggles. Getting serious, she lowered her voice so only he could hear her.

"I wanted to apologize for my outburst in your office a couple of weeks ago. You had every right to fire me on the spot. I thank you for not doing so. I was disrespectful, and I really didn't mean any of it."

Albus placed his hand on her shoulder. "It is fine, Hermione; I understood you were upset and didn't take anything you said to heart, especially the part about hunting me down and killing me."

Hermione felt her cheeks turn red.

"I'll probably be dead by then anyway," he joked and regarded her over his glasses.

She chuckled as he handed her a glass of punch. She slowly sipped it and glanced around the room. Her eyes fell on the young man entering the Hall, and she nearly dropped her drink. Severus was coming through the door, and he was simply gorgeous. His hair was slicked back and tied behind his neck. He wore a white dress shirt with a red cummerbund and bow tie. Black form fitting pants finished the outfit. He had a long black cape over the entire ensemble, and...she couldn't believe it...it billowed behind him as he walked. He caught sight of her and his eyes lit up. He changed direction so he could meet up with her.

He came up to her and smiled, showing some pointy teeth. Hermione laughed into her glass, making Severus frown.

"You don't like my outfit?"

Hermione giggled and pulled him away from everyone else so she could tell him what was so funny. She turned to him and laughed again.

"Umm," she said eloquently. "You see... umm"

"Spit it out, woman!"

"No, I shouldn't say. Really, it's nothing. You look fine."

"Hermione!"

She opened her mouth and closed it again. She started chuckling again, unable to control herself. Severus began to growl at her. She finally got up the courage to say it.

"Your future students think you're a vampire and call you the bat of the dungeons," she said rather quickly.

Severus looked at her in horror. Then he got a huge grin on his face, showing off his pointy teeth once again. "I can see where that would be an advantage."

Hermione just shook her head. "Severus, you look amazing, really. I just couldn't help but think of that whole bat of the dungeons thing. I swear I've never seen you dressed as a vampire before, and I'm sure that's the reason."

"What do I usually come as when I go to these things?"

"You don't usually attend, and when you do, you come as yourself. Spooky, huh?" her voice lowered and she arched an eyebrow at him.

He frowned at her. "Am I to be the butt of your jokes all night?" he asked in a whiny voice.

Hermione became very serious. "No, Severus, I will only tease you once an hour."

"You've already teased me twice, so I better not hear anything for another two hours." He narrowed his eyes at her threateningly.

She laughed at him.

"You mean to tell me I'm not intimidating at all in this getup?"

She looked him up and down officially, secretly admiring every inch of him. "I can't say that you are," she said blandly.

"That's three. You're nearing your limit, woman." He pointed his finger in her face. "There will be severe repercussions if your teasing goes past those three comments this evening."

She saluted him. "Yes, sir."

The band began to play, and the dance floor was soon populated with gyrating teens. Severus extended his hand to her.

"Would you care to dance?" he asked.

"I'd love to," she gushed. She put her glass down and followed Severus out onto the dance floor. They gyrated with everyone else to the lively beat. Hermione glanced around and noticed a few teachers other than her dancing to the fast beat. Mallory was dancing nearby. She was dressed as a princess. Her pink, flowing gown swirled around her as she danced with a seventh-year Hufflepuff. A silver tiara graced the black curls atop her head. She looked over at Hermione and Severus and got a huge grin on her face. She winked at Hermione and brought her attention back to the student she was dancing with. Hermione rolled her eyes and finally looked back at Severus. She noticed his eyes were locked onto her. She smiled at him and continued to dance.

She noticed James Potter and Lily Evans in a tight embrace. They were dressed as a Healer and Mediwitch. Even with the fast beat of the dance, they were still glued to each other. It seemed that whatever annoyance Lily had felt towards James had disappeared. Hermione really couldn't understand Lily. She had broken up a friendship with Severus over a simple word, yet she still kept going out with James, even when he had evidently lied to her. Oh well, there was nothing she could do about it, and, after all, it wasn't her relationship.

Hermione turned her attention from them to some of the others on the dance floor. She noticed two of her seventh-year students dancing with Marauders. Remus Lupin, dressed as King Arthur, was dancing with a Ravenclaw gypsy, Debra Garron. Her costume made Hermione think of the Disney movie *Esmeralda*. Of course, that movie hadn't been created yet, and even if it had, few in this room would be aware of it.

Sirius Black, who was decked out as a hippie, his outfit splattered with purple paisleys and a giant peace sign necklace hanging around his neck, was dancing with Nat Kensington. She had lengthened her dark blonde hair considerably, and it went down to her waist. Every time she moved, her hair would swing around her. She had a lime green headband around her head which matched with the swirls in the pattern of her outfit. Hermione chuckled at her. Nat was totally getting into character by forming v's with her fingers and waving them past her eyes as she danced.

Sirius was smiling wickedly at the young lady. Hermione had seen him following Miss Kensington around lately. He must have a crush on her. She hoped he would be a gentleman this evening as she watched him get closer and closer to Nat, putting his arms on her waist as they danced to the beat. Hermione rolled her eyes at his attempt at being a ladies' man. She turned her attention back to Severus. She hadn't noticed that he had been staring at her the entire time, watching her take in the other dancers.

The song ended after a minute or two, and a slow song began to play. She turned to leave the dance floor but was surprised to feel Severus grasp her and pull her close. Soon they were arm in arm, swaying to the music. Hermione caught her breath as she felt him so close. Her heart began to race within her. She looked up at Severus. He was looking directly into her eyes. Their gazes locked and he didn't look away. She stared into his deep pools of black as they looked at her and through her. She felt utterly exposed. Hermione felt electricity shooting between the two of them.

She noticed Severus' head getting closer and closer to hers. He was going to kiss her; she knew it and welcomed it. Why was he taking so long to reach her lips? She thought she would help him along by yanking his head down, but that would be unladylike. *Who really cared if it was unladylike?* She took her hand and placed it on the back of his neck, getting ready to pull him towards her.

Suddenly the mood was completely shattered by a tapping on their shoulders. Both of their heads snapped around and stared at Lucius Malfoy, who was dressed as Robin Hood and was smiling at them like the Cheshire cat.

"I believe you promised me a dance. May I cut in?" he asked sultrily.

They both looked at him crossly, but Hermione took his hand and began to dance with him. Severus stared after them and headed toward the sidelines. He watched them for a few minutes. Finally, he scowled. Turning quickly, he left the dance.

Hermione twirled with Lucius and caught a glimpse of a bat glaring at her. She finally realized it was Narcissa.

"Lucius, why is Narcissa looking at me as if she is about to hex me into the wall?"

He shrugged innocently and then said, "It may be because I haven't danced with her yet."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Lucius, you go dance with your girlfriend this instant!"

"I will, when our dance is over. I wanted to dance with the most beautiful woman here before turning my attention to Narcissa."

Hermione looked taken aback. "Thank you, I think," she said hesitantly. "You still should pay more attention to your date, Mr. Malfoy."

"She will have my attention for the rest of the night," he stated blandly.

Hermione looked crossly at Lucius.

"Please lighten up, Professor Granger, after all, you did promise me a dance."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him. "I did not promise it, Mr. Malfoy, at the cost of your relationship to Miss Black."

"Narcissa can be a jealous cow. She'll get over it as soon as I return to her side. Besides, I wanted to dance with you before all of the other gentlemen swarmed you. You really do look stunning."

Hermione blushed and smiled at him. "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy. I know I give you a hard time, but I do appreciate your compliments."

"Then perhaps I should give you more of them?"

"Don't press your luck, Mr. Malfoy."

He grinned at her. "You don't realize how incredibly fun it is to tease you."

"I have an inkling, as it seems to be one of your favorite pastimes."

"I just like to get a rise out of you, Professor. Can you blame a guy for that?"

She tilted her head and regarded him curiously. "If I had known ignoring you would have stopped you weeks ago, I would have done it."

"But you can't ignore me, Professor Granger. My stunning good looks are impossible to resist."

Hermione burst out laughing, and Lucius pretended to look hurt. "You are far too cocky for your own good, Mr. Malfoy!"

"It's not being cocky if it's the truth," he remarked.

Hermione smiled and shook her head. "Truth or not, perhaps you should let others make that comment about you instead of proclaiming it yourself."

"Perhaps, but where would the fun be in that?"

Hermione could only grin. This young man was truly exasperating at times.

The dance finally finished, but before Hermione had the chance to turn and walk away, she found Lucius' lips on hers in a passionate kiss. She pushed away from him and looked at him incredulously.

"Mr. Malfoy, what do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"I was just having a little fun, Professor," he said slyly.

Hermione's eyes narrowed at Lucius. "That will be detention tomorrow night Mr. Malfoy, for... for... kissing a teacher!"

With that she stalked off. Lucius shrugged and smiled, setting out to find his true date.

Hermione went back to her place on the side, fuming. She looked for Severus, but he wasn't there. Well, they hadn't agreed to go with one another; he must be mingling. She looked around for him, but she couldn't find him. Mallory wandered over to her with a wide grin on her face.

"It seems like you have all of the boys after you tonight!" she quipped.

"I don't know where Malfoy gets the nerve," Hermione huffed.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind if he decided to kiss me!"

"Mallory! He's got a girlfriend."

"I was just kidding, Hermione. Handsome or not, he's too young for me."

"You can't be much older than I am, Mallory," Hermione stated. They had never spoken of their ages.

"How old are you again, Hermione?"

"I'm twenty-two," Hermione told her.

"I'm forty," Mallory confessed.

Hermione stared at her with wide eyes. She took in her smooth skin and beautiful figure. The woman looked no older than twenty-eight.

"Wow, I would have never guessed!"

"Evidently," Mallory chuckled.

Hermione smiled at her.

"I saw you and Severus looking cozy during that last dance," she remarked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Please, Mallory, it was just a dance!" She laughed at the absurdity, but she didn't even convince herself about the simplicity of the matter.

"Sure it was, Hermione, and I'm well versed in Muggle literature. He almost kissed you!"

Hermione gazed at her thoughtfully. "Yes, until we were rudely interrupted," she said regretfully. "It's probably for the best that he didn't anyway."

Mallory looked at her in exasperation. "Why do you insist on pushing him away, Hermione? He's obviously crazy about you."

"I've already told you why, Mallory."

"I think you are lying to yourself, Hermione. You wanted him to kiss you just as much as he wanted to, I could see it. Stop teasing him, and either tell him of your feelings or leave him alone."

Hermione stared at Mallory in shock. Her words hit her like a ton of bricks. For the first time, Hermione realized how cruel she was being. She was being so utterly selfish! She had been stringing him along. *But she loved him. How could she separate herself from him?* She needed to make up her mind about what she wanted. *But hadn't she done that already? She didn't want a relationship with him.* Of course, if that was the case, Mallory was right; she was taking advantage of him. Hermione looked at Mallory with a grimace.

"Oh, I've been awful, haven't I? What am I going to do?" she asked Mallory.

"You're going to tell him how you feel, of course. The other option is ridiculous and will only make the two of you miserable."

Hermione frowned at her. "I'm not sure if I can do that, Mallory. I'm too much of a coward."

Mallory laughed. "You can stand up to four Death Eaters trying to kill you, but you can't confess a little crush to a young man?"

"It's not that easy." Hermione looked down in embarrassment. "It's not just a crush, either."

"I knew it!" Mallory cried, as she pointed her finger at the younger witch. "You have to tell him Hermione! You'd be foolish not to."

Hermione hesitated again. "I'll think about it." she said.

Mallory was grabbed by Sirius Black. She turned back to Hermione as she was pulled onto the dance floor.

"Just tell him!" she yelled after Hermione.

A/N: Next up: Will Hermione tell Severus of her feelings? And why did he disappear anyway?

Thank you all for reading and reviewing. I really enjoy your comments. Don't be too mad at me for teasing you with an almost kiss. You did get a kiss from Malfoy at least. Ow, don't throw things at me, that hurts!

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 of 46

The dance continues and Hermione gets smart.

Chapter 14

Severus stared over the edge of the Astronomy Tower. He looked down at the ground, but saw nothing. His mind was filled with thoughts of Hermione Granger. His heart had nearly stopped when he had caught a glimpse of her in the Great Hall tonight. She had looked like an angel. Her hair had been transformed into spun silk, and her dress had accented her form perfectly. It had sparkled and shimmered in different colors as the light hit it. She had been utterly beautiful.

She had laughed when she had seen him, which had made his heart both leap to hear it and cringe to think that she did not find him attractive. Her ensuing explanation had eased his mind somewhat, but then she had continued to poke jibes at him. In truth, he loved when she was like this. Her teasing, coming from anyone else, would have sent him into a tirade, but he had known there was no malice behind her words. He had enjoyed the sparring that they did immensely.

Severus couldn't understand her. Sometimes he felt as if she cared for him as much as he cared for her, but over and over again he had been proven wrong. He had felt her respond to him when they had kissed before, but ultimately she had pushed him away. She hadn't cared for him like that and never would.

Of course, how could she? Look at what he had become. He had aligned himself with the Dark Lord and had become a symbol of evil. No one could look past that and see him for who he really was. Lily couldn't. She had balked at his choice of friends from the beginning. It had been the thing that had made her distance herself from him, that and his derogatory comment to her.

No, no one would ever care for him now that he had become something so evil. Hermione Granger could never care for him because of it. She stood for everything good and right in the world. She could never align herself with him romantically. She was probably repulsed just thinking of it.

She also knew his future self, and he had been terrible to her. Probably when he had kissed her, all she could think of was the horrid professor who berated her at every turn; the git who loved no one. He was surprised she hadn't run screaming from him.

No, there was no possibility that she would come to care for him like that. She had already made up her mind that he was not the one for her. She was incredibly stubborn. She would never change her mind. He usually found her tenacity to be meritable, but there were the times like this, when it would blind her from the truth, that frustrated him to no end.

Why was he torturing himself so? He clung to her side, even though he knew there could be nothing more than friendship between them. It was destroying him. He treasured every moment with her, but it caused him nothing but heartache. He was being foolish. He needed to stop this indulgence before he was hurt irreparably.

The only thing he could do was break off their friendship. Perhaps with distance he could somehow forget her. Somehow he could move on. She would move on. She would return to her time and live her life as before. He needed to move on too. He felt his heart freeze within him as he resolved to end his relationship with Hermione Granger. It was all for the better in the long run. His heart would mend in time. It would have no choice.

oooOOOooo

Mallory was right, Hermione thought. This had gone on too long as it was. She needed to be truthful to Severus. Before she had a chance to search for him, Horace Slughorn asked her for a dance. After him, two consecutive sixth-year students...an American cowboy, and a giant grape...caught her and danced with her. Then James Potter asked for a dance before she had a chance to retreat to the sidelines. Hermione tried to be friendly to James, but his treatment of Severus had soured her view of the young man. She was happy when that dance was over. Finally she staggered over to Dumbledore.

"Whew, that wore me out!" she cried.

Albus smiled at her.

"Did you see where Severus went to?" she asked him as she scanned the room for the young man.

"He left during the second song," Albus told her.

Hermione looked worried for a minute. Something was wrong. He wouldn't just leave without saying anything.

"Do you mind if I go look for him, Headmaster?"

Albus looked around. "I think we have plenty of policemen here, Hermione. Take your time."

She headed for the exit and went outside. He wasn't there. She turned back to the castle and reentered through the doors. She went down to the dungeons and the Slytherin common room. She asked the picture if Severus was in there, but was told no. She climbed all the stairs up to the Room of Requirement, but he wasn't there either. She stood outside the door and mulled over where she would look next. She got an idea.

I need to find Severus Snape, I need to find Severus Snape, I need to find Severus Snape she repeated as she passed the door three times.

She opened the door and was surprised to see the roof of the Astronomy tower.

"Thank you," she said as she closed the door and headed for the tower.

She had raced up the stairs so fast, she had to stop at the top and catch her breath. She took in a few deep gulps of air and calmed her breathing. Then she quietly opened the door. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she was able to make out the stone wall that served as a border for the roof.

There he was, leaning against the stone, looking over the side. She could see his profile as he looked down. Merlin, he was handsome. He seemed deep in thought. She wandered silently over to him and stood behind him for a few seconds. He didn't notice her. She came up behind him and placed her hand on his arm. He looked over at her, scowled, and looked away.

Hermione was at a loss about his reaction.

"Are you alright, Severus? You disappeared without a word."

"I'm fine," he said blandly.

She drew up beside him and looked down. She could see every detail of the grounds from here. The grass looked grey in the moonlight, and far off in the distance, the lake shimmered. The view was as breathtaking as ever.

"Do you come here a lot?"

"Only when I want to think," he snapped.

She sighed. "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," he stated.

"Sounds productive," she bantered, trying to lift his mood.

Silence.

"That was four," she said, referring to the number of times she had teased him. She leaned in towards him conspiratorially. "What are you going to do about it?"

He looked at her solemnly. There was a great sadness in his eyes. Hermione's heart clenched within her chest.

"I can't do this anymore, Hermione."

"Can't do what?" she asked as she searched his face for a clue as to what he was speaking of.

He looked away again. "I can't keep pretending we're just friends. I can't keep spending time with you, but never being able to really be with you. I know you don't care for me that way, but I care for you, and I can't stop thinking about you. I need to stop seeing you in the evenings. It's hard enough seeing you in class."

Hermione stared at him for a long time. She was doing exactly what she had been afraid of. She was hurting him. But her fear had been for the future. She was hurting him in the here and now. It didn't matter that she would leave this time and return to her own, eventually leaving him alone; he was in agony now. Why had she pushed him away for so long? She was denying the both of them happiness. What a fool she had been.

Hermione took her hand and caressed Severus' cheek. He closed his eyes at her touch.

"No," she said flatly, placing her hand on his shoulder.

He turned and looked at her. "You would torture me so? I'm sorry, Hermione, I cannot do this anymore. I can't play at just being your friend any longer."

With that he turned and started for the door. Hermione rushed up behind him and tugged at his arm.

"Wait, Severus, no! I'm sorry! I've been so foolish. You're wrong about me. I do care for you that way." She hesitated for a few seconds, looking at his stiff back. "Severus, I love you," she confessed in a whisper.

He whipped around and looked at her in amazement.

"I've been afraid of what the future would bring," Hermione confided as she wrung her hands, "I thought we would just wind up hurting each other. I knew I would have to go back to my time. I couldn't see anything good coming from us being separated for so long." She looked at him worriedly. "I didn't want to hurt you in the future, but I didn't realize I was already hurting you. I'm sorry, please! It doesn't matter about the future; it will happen no matter what we do about it. I don't care anymore. I just want you. I don't want to be without you for another minute."

Severus stood silently in shock for a moment. "You mean you don't find me repulsive?" he asked tentatively.

She studied him intently. "Why would I ever think that?"

"Because of how horrid I was in your past; because I am a Death Eater."

"Severus," she whispered, putting her hand on his arm. "I know who you are now, and I love that person. You must stop berating yourself for your choice to spy for the Order. You are not a bad man; you are an incredibly brave man. You're caring and wonderful, and I find you incredibly attractive. I could never find you repulsive. I love you."

Severus searched her face, looking for deception. He found nothing but immense love in her eyes. His arms went around her, and he pulled her close. His lips descended upon hers, and she was filled with the sweetness of his loving kiss. She entwined her arms around his neck and pulled him even closer, kissing him over and over. She couldn't get enough of him now that she had confessed her love for him. He was her everything.

Severus, in turn, couldn't believe his fortune. He had been heartbroken at the thought of not being able to see her anymore. He had thought their friendship was at an end, but their relationship was just beginning. He fell into her kisses and lost himself completely. She was his everything.

"Don't stop," Hermione sighed in between kisses. "Don't ever stop."

He smiled and pulled her even closer. "I won't, because I love you too," he whispered as his lips once again descended on hers.

Her heart leapt at his words. She knew he cared for her, but had never dared to think that he could possibly love her already. But he did. Her heart soared as he kissed her passionately. She would never get enough of him and his all-consuming kisses. They sent shivers down her spine, filling her with a love that could not be expressed in words. His lips on hers and his loving embrace made her feel complete.

Finally they broke apart, and he held her close as they caught their breath.

"I've been so stupid," Hermione confessed, "keeping away from you. I thought it would be for the best, but it just brought us both torment."

"Foolish woman, don't you know that you are the best thing for me?"

"I do now," she murmured.

Hermione tightened her embrace, trying to bring him even closer to her than he already was. Severus looked down at her, smiling at her desire to be so close.

"Did I tell you that you look beautiful tonight?" he asked her.

"I think I was too busy making fun of your costume for you to get a word in edgewise," she murmured.

He lifted her chin so she could look into his eyes.

"You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

She smiled up at him. "I must admit," she said, "you took my breath away when you entered the Hall tonight, you looked so gorgeous."

He smiled at her before kissing her again. How could he be so lucky as to have her love him? She was beautiful, intelligent, witty, and his equal in every way. He knew he could search the whole world over and never find someone as amazing as she was. His heart swelled with love for Hermione as his lips found hers, and he kissed her fervently. He lost himself again in her passionate kisses.

After a while they returned to the dance hand in hand. Albus looked at them and gave them a huge smile, his eyes twinkling furiously. Mallory glanced up from her current dance partner and gave Hermione a thumbs up. Hermione only smiled back at her. Severus glanced down at her quizzically.

"I'll tell you about it later," she explained.

There was a slow dance playing again, and they resumed the dance that Lucius had so rudely interrupted. Hermione laid her head on Severus chest as they swayed together. She couldn't imagine a better place to be than right here in his arms.

The students had murmured before when Professor Granger had been seen dancing with Snape, but now the chatter was constant.

Professor Granger has her head on Snape's shoulder. Do you think he Imperiused her? What's wrong with her; is she blind? Does she really like that grease ball? How could she get near him?

"It looks like Snivellus has found himself a girl," Sirius remarked to James as they stood on the sidelines. "No wonder she always gets so irate when she catches us having fun with him."

James frowned as he watched Professor Granger and Snape dance. "It's absolutely revolting that someone could get that close to him! She must be insane!" he said in disgust.

Severus and Hermione wandered too near the two gossiping Marauders, and Severus caught what they were saying. His body went rigid. Hermione pulled her head up and looked at him.

"What is it?" she asked with concern.

"Potter and Black are talking about us. They think you've lost your mind," Severus spat.

"Oh, they're right," Hermione said as she put her head down again. "I've lost my mind and heart to you."

He relaxed a little. "You don't mind that everyone's probably speaking badly about you?"

She shrugged. "I couldn't care less. They're just a bunch of jealous teenagers."

He pulled her closer to him. "Are you worried about what the faculty will say?"

She looked up at him again. "You are of age aren't you?" she asked slyly.

He nodded, "You know I am."

"Then there's nothing to worry about." She returned her head to his chest.

"I will give those students a month of detentions if I hear them speaking badly of you again," she said loudly enough for the closest gossipers to hear her.

Nat Kensington and Debra Garron had been nose to nose, exclaiming how horrid it was that Professor Granger was dancing with such a creep. Of course, they were just jealous of her. They actually wanted to dance with him themselves, but could never admit it to anyone because he was such an outcast. Their eyes went wide as they heard Hermione's threat, and they scurried away.

"Hermione, you're amazing," Severus said with a huge grin on his face.

Hermione looked up at him lovingly as he watched the gossiping girls tell the rest of the room about Hermione's detention threat. Severus didn't care who saw them or what they said anymore. He bent low and kissed her tenderly as an audible gasp came from the crowd around them.

Lucius Malfoy looked on with interest, wondering why Severus didn't earn himself a detention with that kiss the same way he had.

A/N: Next up: Lucius has another problem.

Well, Hermione almost blew it, but she came to her senses in the end. So, what do you think? Did that make up for leaving all of you hanging in the last chapter? I hope so; you're all so great I hate to make you frustrated. :) Thanks again for reading and reviewing. Reviews are always appreciated and answered quickly.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 46

Lucius has another heart to heart with Hermione.

Disclaimer: All hail J.K. Rowling! I own nothing. I just play and manipulate to my liking.

A/N: Fluff alert. The next two chapters are dripping with fluff, some plot, and then more fluff. Consider yourself warned.

Chapter 15

Hermione sat grading papers, and Severus was reading. It had been two months since they had finally confessed their love for one another. Hermione had never been so happy. *Almost too happy*, she had thought. She wasn't used to things working out for her. She marveled at how naturally Severus and she got along. This younger Severus was much more willing to show his feelings than his counterpart. He was always saying he loved her, which made her feel open enough to tell him the same as often as she could. She was enjoying every minute of their relationship, but she knew that it couldn't last. She would eventually have to go back to her time, and she feared that Severus would eventually come to resent her for leaving him.

She felt his arms around her and looked over to see him sitting behind her on the floor, embracing her. She leaned back into him and put her quill down.

"Don't you think you've been at that long enough for one night?" he asked her.

"I'm not finished until the pile is gone," she said ruefully. "But I'm more than ready for a break."

She turned sideways and hugged him, placing her head on his chest. He rubbed her back as he enjoyed her closeness.

"Hermione, do you know when you're going back to your time?" he asked tentatively.

Hermione stiffened a little. Obviously he had been worrying about the same thing. She pulled back and looked at him.

"I'm not sure. Whenever I feel I've done all that I can with Malfoy, I guess."

"Are you sure you just can't stay here with me?"

"I want to, but I can't. Eventually there would be two of me around for a long time. I don't think that can happen. I would need to go into hiding or leave the country. It's quite impossible. I've been giving it a lot of thought lately."

"I've no doubt that you have," he murmured. "Have you spoken to Dumbledore about it?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Of course. He thinks it would be enchanting...his word, not mine...if I stayed, but told me it's completely impossible. First off, if anyone were to see me and my future self together, Dumbledore thinks that it might seriously affect the future. Secondly, if I spend too much time here, when I return, I will appear older than I did when I left, opening the door for questions I won't be able to answer."

"What do you think about what he said?"

"Personally, I don't care about questions I can't answer, but I've messed with the future enough already. I'm not sure I want to risk having it implode in my face if I were to never return to my present."

Severus caressed her cheek and pulled her close, kissing her gently.

"I wish you didn't have to go," he whispered to her when they finally pulled apart.

"Severus?"

"Yes," he responded.

"When I leave, I don't want you to wait for me."

He looked at her gravely. "But what if I want to wait for you?"

She smiled thinly at him. "It's not fair to you to wait so long. You deserve to be happy, not to be pining away for a woman you can't have. It would be like Lily all over again."

Severus took her hand in his. "No, it wouldn't. I would know that you would come back to me."

"It's too long, Severus," she admonished. "Twenty-five years is too long."

Severus brought her hand up to his mouth and kissed it. "I would wait for eternity if I knew that you would be there at the end of it."

Tears filled Hermione's eyes as she pulled him to her.

"You don't know what that means to me," she confessed softly. "But I don't want you to wait. I want you to be happy."

"Hermione, you make me happy. I've never been this happy in my entire life."

Hermione pulled back so she could look at him. She shook her head as she spoke. "But I won't be here. You will grow to resent my absence. You should just move on. Find another woman you can be happy with. Get married and have a family."

Severus looked into her eyes and put his hand on her neck. "I want to do all of those things with you."

A shock went through her body. He wanted to marry her and have a family. That was exactly what she wanted with him. She pulled him to her and kissed him.

"And I want that too," she murmured. "But it's not fair to you, Severus. You shouldn't have to wait so long to be happy."

"What about you, Hermione? How would you feel going back to your time and finding me in the arms of another woman? How would I be hurting you if that happens? I won't hurt you like that. I will wait for you forever if I have to."

He pulled her into an embrace. "I won't hurt you like that ever."

"I could deal with it," she said into his chest. "I would understand."

"Perhaps, but it would hurt you deeply. I won't do it. You'll just have to accept that I will wait for you."

She tightened her grip around him. "I know I can't make you do anything, love. I just want you to be happy."

"I am happy."

"I would feel better if I knew you wouldn't be lonely," she said after a while.

"If I promise you I won't be lonely, will you drop the matter?" he questioned.

Hermione looked at him quizzically. "How can you promise me that?"

"I promise not to live like the hermit you described to me before," he said with determination.

She looked up into his eyes. "I will hold you to that, Severus Snape," she charged.

"I've no doubt that you will," he countered before he covered her in kisses.

oooOOOooo

Lucius paced back and forth in front of Hermione's classroom. He needed to speak with her, but she wasn't there. He knew she would come by sooner or later as her quarters were right next to the classroom. He didn't need to wait long. Severus and Hermione wandered up about half an hour later. Hermione smiled at Lucius.

"Good evening, Mr. Malfoy," she said to him.

"Can I speak with you privately, Professor Granger?" His eyes wandered over to Severus.

Hermione looked concerned. "Of course, Mr. Malfoy. Why don't we head into my office?"

She turned and gave Severus a good night kiss and proceeded into her classroom. Lucius followed her. She headed to the back, where the office was, and opened the door. With a flick of her wand, the candles lit up the room. She frowned at the papers that covered the desk. Malfoy had left a mess behind her in her rush to end her day. Hermione proceeded to the desk and sat down, leaving the papers strewn about. Lucius followed closely and sat in the chair that was strategically placed in front of the desk.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked him with concern.

"It's my father."

"What has he done?" Hermione asked.

"I was wrong in my assumption," Lucius explained. "We have argued by owl about your class constantly. Now he is threatening to disown me if I don't drop it."

Hermione thinned her lips as she thought about Lucius' statement. She finally looked back up at him.

"I think the time for making stands is over. It's not worth it for you to continue in my class just to lose your family."

"But his request is absurd!" Lucius said hotly.

"That may be, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione said calmly. "He is your father, though. You don't want to be separated from your family just to prove a point."

Lucius balled his hands into fists. "Why can't he just accept that you're a teacher here? What is the big deal?"

"Mr. Malfoy, I suspect that I will always have this problem as a teacher, simply because of my birth circumstances."

"But that's not fair. You are a good teacher. Isn't that all that should count?"

"In a perfect world, that is all that would count," Hermione said ruefully. "But our world is filled with prejudices. You deal with them all the time, Mr. Malfoy. Aren't you a Death Eater?"

Lucius looked shocked that she had brought that up. He nodded curtly.

"Isn't the whole mantra of Voldemort to get rid of the dirty blood in our race? How do you expect to do that without killing off Muggle-borns or even half-bloods for that matter?"

Lucius looked down. "I'm not in it for the killing. I'm in it for the power. It doesn't interest me so much to destroy Muggle-borns. Not anymore."

"How can you serve your 'Master' with that attitude?"

"He doesn't know I feel this way. I am loyal to him. I do what he asks. That's all he cares about."

"Lucius, you're going to have to walk this line for the rest of your life. You will eventually need to make a decision as to where you stand. Right now, even though you are an adult, you're under your father's rules, but someday you will decide for yourself what you believe and how you will act about it."

"I believe, thanks to you, that Muggle-born witches and wizards are no different from us."

Hermione smiled at him. She had succeeded.

"Then you have learned all you can from me. Drop the class, Lucius. You don't need the extra N.E.W.T., you already said so. Don't separate yourself from your family. Ultimately, our families are all that we have."

He looked down. "It just seems so unfair," he muttered.

"Sometimes you have to do things that seem unfair for a better end. You can probably hear the same statement from Headmaster Dumbledore if you were to ask him."

He looked at her for a long time. "Okay," he said finally, "I'll drop your class. I want you to know that it's against my better judgment."

"Don't worry, Mr. Malfoy, I won't hold it against you." She smiled at him as he rose to leave.

He reached out to shake her hand. Hermione looked at it. Lucius Malfoy wanted to shake hands with her. Would wonders never cease? She reached out and grasped his hand. They shook hands with each other.

"Thank you for opening my eyes, Professor."

"To be honest with you, I wasn't sure it was possible, Mr. Malfoy. Thank you for proving me wrong."

He gave her a grin. "Now you're sure you're doing okay with Severus? I'm always available you know."

Hermione laughed. "I'm sure your father would love that development."

Lucius laughed as well. He turned and left her office. Hermione leaned back in her chair. It seemed that her mission was over. She had actually succeeded in changing Lucius Malfoy's ideas on Muggle-born wizards. She couldn't believe it. Her musings were interrupted by Severus coming into her office. She looked up at him.

"I waited outside until Lucius left," Severus explained. "Did he hit on you again? He and Narcissa are going through a tough time right now."

"Of course he did! Are you jealous?"

He crossed the room to her and stooped down so he was eye level with her. "Of course I am," he confessed with a grin.

"There's nothing to worry about. I told you he's not my type." She looked into Severus' dark eyes. "It worked, Severus. His views of Muggle-born wizards have changed. My mission is complete."

Severus frowned at her while stroking her face. "When will you go then?"

"I'm not ready to leave you yet. Staying a little while longer won't hurt anything in the future."

"I'm glad you're not going anywhere just yet," he said.

She leaned in and kissed him. She felt melancholy as her lips came to his. These wonderful kisses would soon be over. She would miss this Severus. She threw her arms around him and kissed him more, trying to make him part of her, so she would always remember how he was now.

A/N: Next up: Happy Birthday!

Thank you everyone, for reading and for your wonderful reviews.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 46

A birthday to remember.

Chapter 16

Severus frowned as he entered the Arithmancy classroom looking for Hermione. She was at her desk, reading a text on Charms. He stood in front of the desk and cleared his throat. Hermione glanced up from her book and gave him a big smile.

"What brings you to my classroom at this time of the day, Mr. Snape?" she asked.

He scowled. "McGonagall gave me a detention tonight. I won't be able to see you."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. "What did you do?"

"I turned Potter's nose into a beak," he said sharply.

Hermione tried to look stern. She tried not to laugh. She failed miserably. A stifled laugh finally escaped her closed lips. She looked at him with exasperation.

"Whatever did you do that for?" she asked finally.

"He called me a..." Severus looked crossly at the floor.

"What did he call you, Severus?" Hermione asked with concern.

"He called me a murdering Death Eater that had to *Imperio* you to get you to like me."

Hermione sat back in her chair with her arms folded in front of her.

"Is what he said true?"

Severus gave her a toxic look. "Of course not!"

She shrugged then. "So, why didn't you just let it go?"

"Hermione! He... he..." Severus looked down at the ground again. "I couldn't. He just made me so furious!"

Hermione smiled benevolently at him. "My love," she responded softly, "you need to learn to pick your battles. Don't take Potter so seriously. He's just a prat, and we all know it. Now you have to serve detention because you lost your temper. I suppose Professor McGonagall didn't catch his nasty comments to you?"

"Of course not! She's blind to the Gryffindors in the room. They can do no wrong!"

"Severus, calm down. She probably just didn't hear him. She is very fair minded, even when it comes to her Gryffindors. I'm sorry we won't be able to spend the evening together." She looked at him slyly. "And I'm sorry I didn't see your trick myself."

He smiled at her and told her he had to get to class. He quickly turned and left the room. Hermione put her chin in her hands. His detention certainly spoiled the evening she had planned. Today was Severus' birthday. He didn't know that she knew. She had planned to take him to Hogsmeade to celebrate. She frowned. They would have to celebrate another night, she supposed. Suddenly she got an idea. She hurriedly got up and left the room in search of Minerva.

She knocked on her door a few minutes later.

"Come in!" she heard from back in the classroom.

Hermione was glad that Minerva had an off hour now too, so she could speak with her right away.

"Hi, Minerva, how are you?" Hermione asked.

"I am well, and yourself, Hermione?"

Hermione smiled at her. "I'm fine." She hesitated for a minute. "Can I ask you a favor, Minerva?"

"Well, I suppose you could."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Severus told me he received a detention from you for tonight?"

"That's right." Minerva said.

"Today is his birthday. I was wondering if he could do the official detention tomorrow, and I could take over the monitoring of his detention today."

"Hermione, did he tell you what he did?"

"He said he gave James Potter a beak," she said blandly.

Minerva looked at her crossly. "And why should I be lenient on such behavior?"

Hermione sighed. "You shouldn't, Minerva. I fully understand his having to do a detention. But he told me that Potter had insulted him, and that's why he reacted. I know that's not an excuse for bad behavior, but he did have a reason."

Minerva regarded Hermione curiously. "What exactly did Potter say to him?"

"He called him a murderous Death Eater and accused him of using an Imperius curse on me to get me to like him."

Minerva raised an eyebrow at that. "I suppose I can't blame the lad for reacting as he did."

"Minerva, I'm only asking for a day's postponement. I understand that he can't go popping off on people like that, but it's his birthday. Please?"

"I never would have believed I would hear you beg, Professor Granger!"

"Is that a yes?" Hermione asked with a raised eyebrow.

Minerva gave her a sympathetic look. "Alright, but this gets out to nobody, is that understood? I don't want my reputation as a hard nose to be destroyed!"

Hermione giggled at her. "Of course, Minerva! Thank you!"

"What are you planning, anyway?" Minerva asked curiously.

"Just a little surprise party," Hermione said cryptically.

"Have fun then," Minerva said to her as Hermione turned and left the room.

oooOOOooo

Everything was set. Hermione looked over what she had set up, happy with the way everything looked. She smiled to herself. All she would have to do now was to wait for Severus to arrive.

oooOOOooo

Severus scowled as he came up to the Transfiguration classroom. He was annoyed that he had to spend his birthday in detention. He had been looking forward to spending it with Hermione. She, of course, didn't know it was his birthday, as he hadn't told her, but he had hoped to spend a quiet evening with her in his arms. He could think of no better birthday present than that. Bother.

He approached the door and knocked loudly. The door swung open of its own accord. He peeked in and saw that the classroom was empty. He went into the room tentatively, calling Professor McGonagall's name, but received no welcome. He walked further into the room and approached her desk. Perhaps she had left him a note.

What he saw there surprised him. There was a small wrapped package with his name on it sitting on McGonagall's desk. He eyed it curiously and then picked it up. The tag said Happy Birthday. *Why would Professor McGonagall give me a birthday present?* he wondered.

He put the box back down and pulled out his wand. After performing every spell he knew to detect traps, he deemed that the package was not harmful. He picked it up again and unwrapped the dark blue paper. He opened the box and peered into it curiously. He realized this present wasn't from McGonagall at all, but had no clue as to whom it was from. The gift was a pocket watch with the face smashed in. Was it a warning of some kind?

He lifted the pocket watch out of the box, and before he knew it, he felt a pull at his stomach. Severus disappeared from the room. The Portkey rematerialized him in a dark room which was ringed with thick candles. They lit the room dimly, just giving him a hint of what was there. He could see a comfortable looking couch in the middle of the room and a table and chairs off in the corner under a window. A couple of arm chairs and a bureau were scattered around the room. Severus looked around suspiciously and withdrew his wand.

He felt two arms surround him from behind, and he stiffened.

"You won't be needing your wand tonight," he heard Hermione's voice from behind him. "Happy Birthday, love," Hermione whispered in his ear, standing on tiptoe.

Severus whipped around in shock.

"Hermione? What is all this?"

"It's your birthday party, Severus. I didn't think you would appreciate balloons, but I thought perhaps candles would be a nice touch."

"How did you know it was my birthday?" he asked curiously.

"I knew in the future. Why didn't you tell me?"

Severus shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't want to make a big deal of it."

Hermione frowned at him. "I'm quite hurt."

"Hermione, I didn't mean..."

His excuse was cut off by her lips closing in on his. She kissed him with fervor, and he quickly responded, pulling her to him and kissing her until he felt her shudder.

She pulled back finally, catching her breath. "Okay, I'm not that hurt," she confessed. "Happy Birthday!"

"Did you plan all of this with McGonagall from the beginning?" he asked with suspicion.

"No, but I did beg her to postpone your detention until tomorrow. She reluctantly agreed. I suppose I'll owe her something in the future."

Severus smiled at her. Hermione thought she would melt into him with that smile. He wrapped his arms around her and embraced her tightly.

"Thank you, Hermione," Severus told her.

He pulled back and took a good look at her. She was wearing a midnight blue satin dress that had black netting over the skirt. The top was squared and had short sleeves. Her hair was pulled up and flowed around her head in a cascade of curls. She was a vision.

"You look beautiful," Severus said appreciatively as he looked her up and down.

"Thank you," Hermione beamed.

"I don't seem to be dressed appropriately," Severus murmured.

"That can be easily taken care of," Hermione returned, and with a flick of her wand his clothes had transformed themselves into a black suit.

Severus frowned down at himself and took his wand out, changing the suit to a charcoal gray. Hermione raised an eyebrow at him.

"What?" Severus demanded.

"I never thought I'd see you in any color other than black, Severus."

"Black gets a bit drab after a while," Severus admitted.

Hermione gaped at him. "Excuse me?" she asked.

"I said that black gets drab after a while," Severus repeated.

Hermione reached up and felt his forehead. "Well, you don't seem to have a fever... Has someone hexed you?"

Severus looked at Hermione crossly. "What are you going on about, woman?"

Despite his annoyance, Hermione's laughter was music to his ears. "Severus, you always wear black!"

Severus rolled his eyes. "I'm sure it's just a uniform, Hermione."

"Yes, a uniform that you choose the color of. Now, don't get me wrong, Severus, I think you look incredibly sexy in black."

Severus tilted his head and regarded her thoughtfully. "Should I change this back then?" he asked curiously.

Hermione looked him over. "I wouldn't have you change a thing. You look incredibly sexy in gray too." She fiddled with the collar of his suit coat. "In fact, you're incredibly sexy in anything you put on."

"You flatter me, witch!" Severus whispered into her ear as he pulled her close.

Hermione pulled away and looked him over once again. "You know, you couldn't have picked a color closer to black if you had tried." She laughed after she had said that.

"It's my birthday, do not tease me!"

Hermione gaped at him. "Me! Tease *you* on your *birthday*? I would shudder to think I would do such a horrible thing to you."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her as she smiled innocently at him.

"Come on, I have a cake for you," Hermione gushed as she grabbed his hand and led him to the table in the corner of the room.

"Where are we anyway?"

"This is one of the rooms above the *Leaky Cauldron*," Hermione explained. "I've had this planned for weeks, and I was quite put out that Minerva had given you a detention tonight."

"It seemed that you took care of that in any case, Hermione."

Hermione smiled at him as they drew up to the table. Severus saw a dark chocolate cake with a single candle on it in the center of the table. Hermione flicked her wand at the cake, and the candle lit.

"Now make a wish, and blow out the candle," she instructed.

Severus glared at her.

"Surely you've had a birthday cake before, Severus. It's tradition to make a wish."

"My wish already came true," he said huskily.

Hermione looked at him coyly. "And just what was your wish?"

"That you would be mine."

Hermione felt her heart flutter at his words. He was completely amazing. She gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"It's okay to have more than one wish in a lifetime, my love," she told him.

Severus rolled his eyes and thought of a wish. Wishing that she would decide to stay with him in this time forever, he stooped over the cake and blew the candle out. Hermione clapped and gave him a hug.

"I'm sure you'll kill me if I break into the Happy Birthday song," she advised him, "so I'll just skip it."

"Wise choice," he muttered as he hugged her tightly.

She pulled herself away from him and took a knife and cut two pieces of cake. She placed them on plates and handed one to Severus who seated himself at the table. He looked at the cake. It looked like it was made of solid chocolate.

"What kind of cake is this?" Severus asked Hermione as she took the seat across the table from him.

"It's called a Chocolate Decadence Cake. It's flourless and absolutely sinful."

Severus took a small bite of it and savored it. He closed his eyes for a moment as the rich, smooth chocolate coated his mouth. He had to agree with Hermione on the sinfulness of this cake.

"It's delicious," he said finally. "How did you know I had a penchant for chocolate? Is that another thing I told you about in the future?"

Hermione laughed. "Hardly! As a matter of fact, if you had any idea that I knew about that, you'd probably have been angry that I knew so much about you. This discovery came from years of covert observation. I have found that you gravitate to the chocolate desserts whenever they are offered." She flashed a smile at him as he regarded her slyly.

"How very Slytherin of you, my dear," Severus said smoothly.

Hermione grinned broadly at him. They soon finished their cake, and Hermione stood and put her hand out to him. He took it, and she guided him over to the sofa. They settled into it, and she produced a package from behind it.

"Here's your real present," she said as she handed the box to him. It was very long and thin and wrapped in blue paper that had Happy Birthday scrawled all over it. As Severus tore into the paper, it burst out into song. A chorus of elves sang Happy Birthday from the paper as he tore it off. He glared at Hermione, who looked a bit sheepish.

"I said *I* wouldn't sing, not that *nobody* would sing for you," Hermione exclaimed.

Severus narrowed his eyes at her playfully and then turned to his present. He crumpled up the paper so it would shut up and then turned his attention to the box itself. He lifted the lid off of it and pulled the paper aside to reveal a crystal potions stirring rod. His eyes widened in appreciation as he lifted it gingerly out of the box. The end of the stirrer had a cobra's head carved into it. It seemed to stare at Severus, its head tilted down, and its neck flared out as if it were ready to strike.

"You have one of these in the future exactly like this one. I thought it would be kind of fun for you to have it now instead of whenever you're supposed to get it. That way you can think of me when you're creating your potions." She smiled at him happily.

He smiled back at her as he moved the rod around and looked at it closely. It was almost a yard long. It shimmered in the dim candlelight and sparkled like a diamond. He knew that the crystal had been enchanted to be as hard as diamond. These types of stirring rods were only used by Potions masters. They were shatter proof and resisted the absorption of the ingredients that would be used in the potions that were created. He placed it back into its box and set it down. He moved closer to Hermione.

"It's perfect, Hermione. Thank you. I will always think of you whenever I use it."

He closed in on her and began to kiss her lightly.

"I will think of your smile."

He kissed her on the cheek.

"I will think of your beautiful eyes."

He kissed her on both of her closed eyes.

"I will think of your hugs."

He kissed her other cheek.

"I will think of your kisses."

He finally came to her mouth and kissed her fully. She parted her lips, and his tongue slipped into her mouth and explored her. She groaned in pleasure at his passion. Hermione pulled him closer and wrapped her arms around him, basking in his love. She felt complete when he kissed her like this. All she wanted to do was stay wrapped in his arms, surrounded by his love and kisses. Her heart belonged to him.

"You're amazing," she said after they had separated.

"So are you," Severus confessed to her.

Hermione took her hand and caressed his face with it. "Happy Birthday, my love. I hope this has been a nice birthday for you."

Severus smiled at her. "It has been the nicest birthday I have ever had," he told her before he kissed her again.

A/N: Next up: Voldemort's request.

Thank you, thank you, for reading this and for all of your support. I truly love hearing from all of you and enjoy what you have to say, whether it be praise or criticism. I hope you enjoyed our little fluff fest. We will be back to story line with the next chapter, as you may guess, given the hint. Now what could that pesky Voldemort want now?

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 46

We find out what Voldemort wants of Severus.

Chapter 17

"I have a 'Meeting' tonight, so I won't be able to spend time with you, Hermione."

Hermione looked at Severus from behind her desk. They were alone in the classroom as class had just dismissed. This was his first meeting in over a month. Perhaps now that spring was here, Voldemort would increase his activity. Hermione had been secretly glad he hadn't been called very often, but now her heart filled with trepidation once again. How would he return?

"Be careful, Severus," she warned.

"I always am."

"Come find me if you're hurt."

"Why would I be hurt?" he asked curiously.

Hermione looked down. "Voldemort likes to play with his followers. He liked to play with you a lot in my past. Besides, if he finds out you're dating me, he will be livid."

Severus stared at her in silence, processing what she had said. Had he consigned himself to a life of torture? When Dumbledore had explained his role as a spy, he knew there would be the chance that he would be tortured and perhaps even killed, but he wasn't expecting to be at Voldemort's wand tip consistently. Frowning, he hoped he would be able to take whatever was thrown at him without breaking his cover.

Dumbledore's instruction in Occlumency had gone well. He had developed the talent quickly, and he was quite good at it. He had even become smug about his abilities, but if he were to be tortured, how strong would he be? Would he be able to keep the Dark Lord out of his thoughts? Would all of his secrets come tumbling out of his head and into Voldemort's? He would need to redouble his efforts and strengthen his skills even more. If his cover was blown, it would not only mean his death, but the possible destruction of the Order as well. Of course, if Voldemort were ever to know anything about his relationship with Hermione, it would probably mean the death of the both of them.

"I will be careful, Hermione," he said finally. "He will never know about us. I won't let him find out. And if for some reason I am hurt, I will come to you."

Hermione looked back up at him, then rose from her desk and came around to hug him. She placed a quick kiss on his lips.

"I suppose I won't see you until tomorrow then," she said after they parted.

"I will be fine, and I will see you tomorrow."

She nodded, and he disappeared. Hermione braced herself for an evening of worry about his welfare. She knew she wouldn't rest easily until she saw his black eyes looking at her from the Slytherin table at breakfast in the morning.

oooOOOooo

There was a loud banging on Hermione's door. She sat bolt upright in her bed. She had dozed off and had been startled awake by the pounding. She glanced at the clock while she got a robe on. It was midnight. Perhaps Severus had returned. She hurried to the door and pulled it open. Sure enough, Severus was on the other side. He quickly entered the room, looking crazed. Before she even had a chance to close the door, he had pulled her to him and hugged her as if she were a lifeline.

"What is it?" Hermione asked.

Severus released her and closed the door. He turned back to Hermione and embraced her again.

"Voldemort told me to kill you," he said finally.

Hermione stiffened.

"He said that you have ignored his warning to leave. You must be taken care of. It will send a message to all Muggle-borns that they must be obedient to him. He wants me to do it tonight."

"Severus, what are we going to do?"

He pulled away from her. "You have to go back, Hermione; to your time."

She crushed him in an embrace. "No! I'm not ready to leave! I can't leave you, Severus."

"You have to. If I refuse to kill you, I will be killed, and then they will send someone else to kill you. I will not have you murdered. You must go back."

Hermione burst into tears. "I won't leave you," she cried. "We can fight him. I'll go into hiding!"

He pushed her back and grabbed her shoulders. "Hermione, think! You have to do this."

Hermione looked down and sniffled, trying to control her tears. "I know... I just don't want to," she finally said.

"You will see me again."

"Everything will be different," she said dismally.

"My love for you will never change."

She looked at him searchingly. Of course it would change. Everything would change. He would have twenty-five years to forget her. He would move on. But she had known that he would. She had prepared herself for their separation. She just wasn't ready for it to be right now. Unfortunately, Voldemort had sealed her fate. She was so tired of him driving everyone's lives. At least when she returned to her present, he would be gone.

"I'll go get the Time-Turner," she said in defeat.

She turned and went to her bedroom. She quickly changed her clothes and went over to her nightstand. She pulled the turner from the nightstand and put it around her neck. She went back out to Severus.

"I want to do this in Dumbledore's office. I would rather appear there in the future. He will at least know what was going on."

Severus nodded and took her hand. They left her room and headed for the Headmaster's office. Still holding her hand, Severus glanced over at her. Teardrops fell silently down her face. He watched her for a few minutes and then stopped and turned to her. He reached out and cradled her face in his hands.

"Don't cry, Hermione," he said and kissed her tears.

"I'm alright, Severus," she sniffled. "Let's just go."

They continued down the hall hand in hand.

"What will you tell Voldemort?" Hermione asked finally.

"I will tell him that when I got to your room, it was deserted. You had packed everything and must have left secretly in the night."

"He will punish you."

"Perhaps, but you will be safe," Severus replied with determination.

"Does he suspect that you are in a relationship with me?"

"No, he has no idea."

They had reached the Gargoyle, and Hermione murmured the password. As the Gargoyle moved aside, she pulled Severus into another embrace.

"You must forget about me," she told him.

"I will never forget you," he responded.

"Then forget that you love me."

"No."

"I just want you to be happy."

"I will be, knowing that you are safe."

"Find someone who will care for you, Severus."

"I already have."

Hermione sobbed and buried her head into his shoulder. "I don't want to leave," she moaned.

"But you will go, because that is what you have to do."

"Please, Severus, move on with your life."

"I will never move on unless you are by my side."

Hermione fought to compose herself. She glared at Severus. "You, Severus Snape, are more stubborn than I am," she said finally in exasperation.

He smiled. "You see, we are perfect for each other."

They turned, ascended the stairway, and knocked on the office door. It took a while, but finally Albus opened the door and let them in, looking from one to the other curiously. They quickly explained everything, and he urged Hermione to get on with the time travel.

Severus had been staring at Hermione the entire time, trying to memorize every part of her. She turned to him and looked at him sadly. He rushed over, and she flung herself into his arms. Severus took her chin in his trembling hand. He lifted her face up so he could stare into her eyes. A million things were said without words in each of their looks. Severus bent down towards her, stopped, and looked at her again. He gazed at her beautiful face, knowing he would not see it again for twenty-five years. He slowly pulled in close to her lips. They kissed one last time as Dumbledore turned to give them some privacy. Tears streamed down Hermione's face as Severus kissed her passionately. She returned his kiss lovingly, conveying her feelings for him and sadness at having to be torn apart. Finally they broke apart. Severus wiped her tears away.

"You will see me very soon," he told her.

"You will not," Hermione said sadly.

She knew in her heart that this was the end of them. How could he wait for her? There was too much time between now and their future reunion. As determined as he may feel now, she knew that when she appeared in her time, their relationship would be over. She looked upon him again, hoping to sear his face into her memory. It would be the only thing that would console her when she returned.

Looking into his eyes, she saw such immense love in them. It took her breath away. Could it be possible that that love would last? A glimmer of hope flickered in her heart as a tear slid down her cheek. It was selfish, she knew, to want him to continue loving her. But she couldn't help it. Her life seemed empty without him. She truly didn't know how she would go on in the future without his love.

Severus touched her face again, memorizing everything about it. She broke out of her reverie as he caressed her and kissed her lightly once more.

"You'd better go," he said finally and moved away.

She picked up the Time-Turner and took her wand. She readied herself to spin the turner and return to her present. She regretted not having more time with Severus, but thanks to Voldemort, they had no other choice. She glanced back up at the man she loved and gave him a brilliant smile.

"I love you," she told him and tapped the turner.

"I love you too," he replied as he watched the small instrument begin to spin wildly. Before he had a chance to look back into her face, she had disappeared. His life was

gone.

Dumbledore turned back to Severus.

"I'm sorry, Severus. I'm sure this is hard for you."

Severus fought back tears and looked at Dumbledore. "I will be alright. She is safe. I need to report back to the Dark Lord," he said and turned to leave.

"Good luck, Severus," Dumbledore said as Severus swept from the room.

oooOOOooo

Voldemort sat regally upon a throne in the largest room in his hideaway. The 'Dark Lord' did nothing shabbily. The floor was made of marble, and the room was filled with expensive tapestries depicting great Wizards in history. The largest sat behind the throne. It was a depiction of Salazar Slytherin in front of a statue of a snake. The colorful tapestry covered the wall from floor to ceiling.

"Is she dead, Severus?" Voldemort demanded as he hissed out the words.

The Dark Lord's eyes looked to his tool in expectation.

Severus bowed low on one knee and said, "My Lord, when I arrived at her rooms, I found them empty. All of her belongings were gone. She has escaped."

"What!" Voldemort screamed. "How could she know what we were planning? Someone tipped her off."

"My Lord, it seemed that she had been gone for some time; probably before our meeting dispersed. I don't know how, but she must have had some foreboding. I don't think you have been betrayed."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes at Severus. He swept into Severus' mind and saw the same things that Severus had just explained. Evidently, his minion was telling the truth.

"I'll teach you to think, Severus," he cried and extended his wand.

The Cruciatus curse hit Severus, and he crumpled to the floor. He had never felt such excruciating pain before. Voldemort held the curse for what seemed like forever, and Severus screamed. The tears he had been holding back since Hermione had left flowed down his face as he reacted to the pain and to her departure. He pulled himself into a ball and shivered as Voldemort lifted the curse.

"Next time, when I give you an assignment, I expect it to be done! Is that understood?"

"Yes, my Lord," Severus groaned from the floor.

"Leave me," Voldemort ordered.

Severus shakily got to his feet. He was unsure if he could Apparate properly but was even more sure that delaying his departure would cause more pain. He turned on the spot and disappeared. He collapsed in front of the gates of Hogwarts. Curling into a ball again, he screamed. He wasn't sure if he was screaming from the pain of the curse or from his intense feeling of loss. Hermione was gone. He would not see her again for twenty-five years. It was as if she had died. Tears coursed down his cheeks as he screamed again. He wrapped his arms around his legs and sobbed.

He felt gentle hands pulling him to a standing position. Dumbledore was supporting his weakened form.

"We should get you to the infirmary, my boy," he told Severus.

Dumbledore put his arms supportively around Severus' shoulders and guided him up the walkway.

"It will get easier with time," he muttered to Severus as they slowly made their way into the castle.

Severus frowned. *Twenty-five years worth of time*, he thought morosely.

oooOOOooo

Severus spent that night in the infirmary, recuperating from the Cruciatus curse that had been cast upon him for his inability to kill Hermione. Madam Pomfrey had given him the necessary potions to recover, but he found that he still ached all over. The ache was more of a feeling of loss than of pain. He sobbed in agony into his pillow for most of the night, feeling more alone than he ever had. Hermione was gone. She would no longer flash a quick smile at him in the middle of class. They would no longer share their evenings together in the Room of Requirement. He would no longer feel her loving embrace and have her wonderful kisses to encourage him. He didn't even have a picture of her.

How could he go on without her? She had become essential to his life, like the beating of his heart. Now all he felt was an incredible emptiness. His heart felt like it would explode in grief. His chest physically ached from his sense of loss. When he thought of the months and years he would have to endure without her, his chest constricted so tightly he thought he would be unable to continue breathing. He was alone, utterly alone, and no one could help him ease the pain of his loss. No one could understand what he was feeling. He would have to endure this horrible agony alone for what seemed like forever. He punched his pillow in frustration.

"Hermione!" he sobbed. "I can't do it. I can't live without you for that long!"

He sunk into hopelessness. The years he had to wait stretched in front of him, mocking him. Would he ever feel happy again before she returned? Was he consigned to this bitter grief for what would seem to be the rest of his life? How could he live his life alone like this? He felt empty, drained of everything that made him feel good. There would be no happiness for him. He was to be nothing but a puppet of Voldemort, with no passion, no joy, just misery.

For a little bit, he wished he had never met her. But if that had been the case, he would be consigned to a fate that seemed to him now to be worse than death. Becoming the monster that Hermione had described to him would be so much worse than living without her for the next twenty-five years. At least if he could change his life, when she reappeared in it, she would see him in a new light. Hopefully it would be a light that she would find appealing.

Slowly, his sobs quieted and stopped completely. He had no more tears to shed. He finally slipped into a fitful sleep, tossing and turning on the bed. His dreams were filled with nightmares of Hermione coming toward him and then being pulled away into a vortex where she was crying his name over and over again until she disappeared from his sight.

oooOOOooo

The next months were difficult for Severus. Hermione's disappearance had been spoken of often among students and faculty alike, bringing memories that Severus would have rather forgotten right back into the forefront of his mind. Every night he went to the Room of Requirement. Every night he tortured himself about her being gone. Some nights he missed her so much he would sleep in the room, emerging the next day looking haggard. It was as if she were dead, and in truth, to him it seemed she was. Her return seemed so far away that he could not fathom spending all of that time without her. He contemplated ending his life, but quickly threw those feelings out of his mind. They would serve no purpose; he would still be without his Hermione.

He went about classes in a fog. He didn't care anymore whether he passed or not. People left him alone even more than before. They would give him a wide berth in the

hallway, and even Lucius didn't sit with him at meals anymore. The Marauders had lost interest in taunting him also, as he would just ignore them, taking the fun out of their teasing. If only he had known that was the key to their silence before. The faculty tried to get him out of his funk, but he just ignored their concern and hid himself away in the Room of Requirement for as long as he could when school wasn't in session.

Slowly, he began to mourn less. He began concentrating on happy memories of the two of them and tried to look forward to their reunion, even if it seemed like it was so far in the future that it would never come. He tried to concentrate on other things. He poured himself into his studies once again; even more so than before Hermione had gone. He concentrated on Potions and asked Professor Slughorn if he could help him brew in the evenings. Slughorn had seemed a bit taken aback, but he accepted Severus' offer readily. The Professor needed to brew a lot for the infirmary among other things and welcomed a helping hand.

Severus learned much from Professor Slughorn and told him of his desire to become a Potions master. Slughorn had seemed pleased that one of his students had such a liking to his subject and had suggested he try to set up an apprenticeship with a master friend of his. Severus went about the normal formalities, and before he knew it, he had an offer to study under the foremost Potions master in the world. Slughorn did have great contacts after all.

Severus continued his missions with the Dark Lord. He quietly slipped information to Dumbledore, and some of Voldemort's plans were thwarted. Other times they were not. More than once Severus was forced to take part in things that gave him nightmares for months afterwards. He had been forced to torture innocent people and had watched as other Death Eaters had mercilessly killed innocent Muggles. He had even been forced to kill some himself, usually to keep them from suffering worse fates. His stomach turned every time he was a part of such brutality, but he stayed stoic behind his mask.

Before he realized it, the school year had come to an end, and he was preparing to begin his apprenticeship. His Potions Master lived in London; so unfortunately, he would still be tied to the Dark Lord. No matter, he was studying a subject he found fascinating.

His memories of Hermione had now turned bittersweet. He held his love for her deep within his heart and thought of her fondly. He no longer had the urge to destroy things when he thought of them being parted. He no longer wished he were dead. He looked forward to the future. A future far away, where she would be in his life again, and they would never be separated. The thoughts of that future helped him to deal with the harsh realities of his current life.

A/N: Next up: History repeats itself; with a few twists.

Stupid Voldemort, ruining everything. I think Hermione might have hung out in the past for several years had it not been for his death order. Don't forget to leave a review, and thanks for reading.

Part II: Waiting for you: Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 46

Voldemort hears the prophecy.

Part II: Waiting For You

Chapter 18

Several years had passed, and Severus had taken up the position of Potions master at Hogwarts. He sat in the dungeons and worried. Voldemort had found out about the prophecy several weeks before. Lucius Malfoy, of all people, had been the one to overhear it and had quickly reported it to the Dark Lord. Things were turning out much the way Hermione had described them. Voldemort had decided that Lily was the bearer of the boy in the prophecy. Severus had tried to sway his opinion, stating that such prophecies were ridiculous and couldn't be trusted, but the Dark Lord had put his trust in the words of a batty Seer. There was nothing to be done.

Dumbledore had once again set up wards and made the Potter household unplotable, but Severus knew that it was just a matter of time before they were to be betrayed. He wished he could speak of what he knew of the future with Dumbledore, but he had given his word to Hermione never to speak of what she had told him to anyone, no matter what the circumstances. It seemed he was in this alone. He wondered who the traitor was. Hermione had never said. She hadn't even told him exactly when the accursed murders happened either. He was working at a great disadvantage. Perhaps if he kept his eyes and ears open he could find out who the traitor was. He was determined to do all he could to prevent Lily from being killed. He no longer loved her, but he treasured the friendship they had had in his youth.

oooOOOooo

Severus sat in the *Leaky Cauldron* staring at the woman across from him. He wondered what had possessed him to invite her here for drinks in the first place. She was pretty enough and had a pleasant disposition, but with every word that came out of her mouth, the differences between Hermione and this woman were becoming more evident. He listened to the woman chatter. Her name was Toni Miller. She was from America and had taken on the Defense teacher position this year. She and Severus had formed a decent friendship, and after almost the entire year, Severus had taken a chance and asked her out. He figured if it didn't go well she would probably be gone in a few months anyway, as the DADA position was cursed. Now he was just asking himself why he had not seen how incompatible they really were before he had asked her out.

"So, John Taylor took his wand and turned Silas Anderson's head into a cockroach's!" Toni cried.

Severus smiled at her. Perhaps he was expecting too much. They were friends, but why should he expect sparks on their first date? He watched her as she downed the rest of her butterbeer.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

She looked at him oddly. They had only been here twenty minutes.

"Well, if you're ready to go," she said hesitantly.

"I thought we could enjoy the walk back to Hogwarts. There's hardly a moon, and the stars should be quite beautiful."

Toni smiled at him. "That sounds lovely."

They rose and left the bar. Heading out of town, they soon were on the dark path that connected the village to the school. Toni grabbed his hand as they walked. Severus had a hard time not pulling it away from her, but he eventually relaxed. After they had gotten away from the lights of Hogsmeade, they stopped and looked up into the sky.

The stars were magnificent. There seemed to be thousands of them. He could even see the edge of the Milky Way, making a thin cloud of stars streaking along the sky. Severus heard Toni gasp beside him and wished he were here with Hermione instead. He could just picture her face turned up in wonderment as she gazed upon the beautiful sky, basking in its loveliness. Hermione found beauty in everything and fully immersed herself in it when she did. Who was he kidding? He should have never tried to date when his feelings for Hermione were still so raw within him. Sighing, he turned to Toni.

"Toni, I need to offer you an apology."

Toni looked back at him in puzzlement.

"I consider you a good friend and like you quite well. I asked you out because I thought that perhaps we could be a little more to each other than we are already."

Toni smiled at him as he explained himself.

"I'm sorry. This just isn't working out," he told her finally, not sure how else to say it.

Toni frowned. "What is it, Severus? Did I talk too much?"

Severus' eyebrows furrowed, and he heaved a great sigh. "No, Toni, it's not that at all. It's just that I thought I was over my last relationship. Unfortunately, this evening has proven me completely wrong."

"Is that where you've been all night? Thinking of some other girl?"

Severus looked down at the ground in embarrassment. "I'm sorry," he told her. "I really thought it would be different, but I find I cannot get my mind off of her. Just being with another woman brings her right back to the forefront of my mind."

Toni smiled at him. "Well, she must be something special then. Perhaps you should go after her."

"I would if I could," Severus sighed.

"Why can't you?" Toni asked.

"It's a long story."

Toni looked at him with interest. "I have all evening. Severus, I was happy when you asked me out, but I'm your friend first. It's okay that things didn't work out. I still hope we can be friends. You can tell me what happened with your girlfriend if you'd like."

Severus gave her a smirk. "Now wouldn't that be romantic?"

Toni laughed. "It's okay, Severus. I wasn't feeling anything either. I suppose we work better as friends than as a couple."

Severus sighed. "You're being incredibly understanding about all of this."

Toni shrugged and smiled at him.

"She's gone away," Severus said finally. "I don't even know how to get a hold of her. I know she'll come back eventually, but it won't be for a long time. Years in fact."

"Does she still love you?"

"Yes, I believe she does."

"Wow, that's really romantic. I hope things work out for you."

Severus rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry. This has been a total disaster."

"No, it hasn't. I had a good time, despite the fact that we've decided not to pursue a relationship."

"You're quite understanding, Toni." Severus said as they continued down the road and back to Hogwarts.

"Mmm, perhaps you can find someone who would appreciate that quality in me since you're already taken."

Severus smiled at that.

oooOOooo

Severus sat in Dumbledore's office looking deathly grim. He finally leaned forward and put his head in his hands. Everything he had tried had failed. He had not uncovered Voldemort's mole until it was too late. Sirius Black had deceived James Potter and divulged his family's location to Voldemort. Voldemort had told no one of his plan and had struck before Severus even had an inkling of what was happening. Lily and James Potter were dead once again, and the young baby, Harry, was now an orphan. Everything had come crashing down upon him, as he suspected it had in the past. He felt Dumbledore's hand on his shoulder.

"Voldemort is not dead," Albus said. "The baby is in danger. Voldemort will return. I need you to protect Harry from him."

Severus just nodded, keeping his head in his hands. Some things just couldn't be changed, he assumed.

"What has happened to the boy?" Severus asked grimly.

"He has been taken to his relative's home. Through Lily's sacrifice there are protections over the house. He will be safe there as he grows and learns."

Severus looked at Albus in horror. "You don't mean to tell me you left him with the Dursleys?"

"You know them?" Albus asked with interest.

"I know the woman, Petunia. She is Lily's sister. She is a horrid woman. I am sure her husband would be much the same. How could you do that, Albus? He will have a horrible upbringing."

"They are all he has. The protections on their household are real. It is the safest place for him until he is old enough to come to Hogwarts."

"What if I were to raise him?" Severus asked.

"No, that will not do at all. He is better off with his own blood. Besides, even you might not be able to protect him as well as that household unknowingly will. You will leave them alone and let him grow at his own pace."

Severus looked at Albus in anger. It was typical of the old man to make decisions that would influence someone for the rest of his or her life, especially detrimental decisions. However, Severus knew further argument was useless. Once Albus had made up his mind, nothing would change it. Of course, the Headmaster could not deny

him one simple visit, could he?

"I am going to have a chat with Petunia," Severus said tersely.

"Severus, I said you were to leave them alone."

"I will not go near the boy," Severus cried in exasperation. "I will just speak with Petunia, just this once."

Albus gave him a knowing look. "Alright, but don't scare her! She needs to keep Harry. She has agreed to watch out for him, but if you anger her, everything will fall apart."

Severus nodded his head to Albus as he rose. "I will not endanger the baby's position within the household," Severus said solemnly. He furrowed his eyes at Dumbledore. "I hope you know what you're doing, Albus," he said finally before exiting the Headmaster's office.

A/N: Next up: Severus threatens Petunia

I think some of you may have thought that we would wind up going straight to when Hermione reappears in the future. We won't. We'll follow Severus through time and see what changes have occurred because of Hermione's trip into the past. There's just too much going on to deal with it in flashback mode. Enjoy the ride.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 46

Severus asks a favor of Petunia.

Chapter 19

The next day, Severus Apparated to Privet Drive for his confrontation with Petunia Dursley. He had left his cloak at home, but still wore his usual black button-down suit coat and pants. He hoped he looked plain enough to blend in while in this Muggle neighborhood. He walked up to number four and rapped on the door. A few minutes later the door opened, revealing a stern looking woman.

"Petunia, how nice to see you again," Severus said caustically.

"You! What gives you the right to show up on my doorstep, you incorrigible boy!"

"It might be hard for you believe, Petunia, but I am no longer a boy," Severus replied with a snort. "I need to speak with you for a few moments."

"This is about the baby, isn't it? I knew I shouldn't have agreed to take him in!"

Severus pushed past her and stalked into the room. Not one, but two babies met his gaze. They both sat on the floor, playing with trucks. Both babies looked at Severus and smiled happily. The chubbier one raised a truck to his mouth and began to chew on it.

"Now just a minute, Severus!" Petunia barked at him. "You have no right barging in here like this!"

Severus extended his wand at Petunia. "This wand and that baby give me the right," he stated coldly.

Petunia got a look of fear in her face and rushed to the chubby baby boy and picked him up, trying to shield him from Severus and his wand.

"You have a son?" Severus asked while lowering his wand.

"This is Dudley."

"Fanciful name," Severus said blandly.

Petunia looked at him crossly. Severus went to baby Harry and picked him up tentatively. He noticed the lightning bolt wound on his head. The baby smiled at him and giggled. He grabbed at Severus' nose and laughed out loud. Severus wasn't sure if he should be offended or amused by the baby's behavior. He finally turned to Petunia.

"I understand that having another baby put upon you is a burden, Petunia, but I have a favor to ask of you." Severus' tone had become soft and gentle.

Petunia looked at him in astonishment. She had never heard him speak so kindly. He had always had the utmost disdain for her and had taken every opportunity to insult her. She finally snapped out of her amazement and spoke again.

"What is it you want, Severus?"

The baby giggled more as he grabbed at Severus nose again. Severus pulled his face out of the babies grasp, giving him his finger to play with instead. He looked back at Petunia.

"I want you to treat him as if he is your own."

"But you know what he represents! How can I have *that* in my home and act like everything is normal? How can I treat him like he's mine when he's a *freak*?"

Severus' eyes narrowed at Petunia. She suddenly became frightened.

"He is no more a freak than that little chub in your arms is a freak. He just has abilities that others do not."

Petunia became angry. "He is a disgrace! How can we live in this neighborhood with that thing? He'll destroy our reputation!"

Severus closed the distance between them. Suddenly Harry wasn't laughing.

"You will treat him like your own son or suffer the consequences. I will watch you, and if you do not treat him well, I will return. I'm sure having me on your doorstep will be much worse for your reputation than simply having a harmless baby here to take care of. Besides, Petunia, I know your little secret. Lily told me. Don't think I don't understand that you would die if it came out."

Petunia looked at him in horror.

"Oh, yes, what would your dear husband say if he knew, Petunia?" Severus arched an eyebrow and looked at Petunia sternly. "How would he react if he knew that you also were a freak? That you too had magical powers? Undeveloped powers, yet there nonetheless. What would he say? Would he still love you? Would he run shrieking in horror?"

"They are just flukes!" Petunia shrieked. "They're nothing! Odd coincidences! They just appear now and then. I don't make them happen! They came to me too late for me to go to Hogwarts. She went to Hogwarts! She knew how to use them. But did she offer to help me? No! She knew I was terrified by them, but did she help me? She laughed at me!"

Severus eyed Petunia menacingly. "You would not let her help you, Petunia. She tried, oh, yes, she did. During her fifth year, when she went home for Christmas break to find you could levitate things with your mind. Lily was ecstatic. She thought you two would finally be close because of your new-found bond. But you rejected her, just like you always did! You called her unnatural, of all things. If there ever was anything unnatural in that family, it was you! Constantly jealous of Lily because of the extra attention she got. You are so filled with jealousy and hate you cannot see past your own nose! And, of course, when you exhibited the same powers, you were afraid. You were so afraid that you shunned her help. You feared becoming like her. You hid your talents away and never developed them."

Petunia was shrinking back now. "Stop! Please, just stop! I'll do whatever you ask! Just don't speak of my weakness again!"

Severus looked haughtily at her. "You speak of strength as weakness. You are truly pathetic."

"How can something so horrid be strength?" Petunia cried.

Severus' shoulders drooped in defeat. He would never get through to this woman. She was so wound up in her beliefs that she would not even entertain the thought that perhaps she was looking at this in the wrong way.

"It all depends on how you use those powers, Petunia," he said softly. "They can be a great asset or a great curse. It is up to you to decide how you want to use them."

Petunia stared at Severus curiously. His words had struck a chord in her.

"Just treat the baby fairly. You don't have to shower him with gifts and spoil him. Just make him feel loved. Make him know that someone cares. Don't take out your hatred of your sister on him."

"I never hated Lily," Petunia said quietly.

"You had a strange way of showing that you didn't," Severus remarked.

"I will do as you ask, but Vernon, my husband, will not treat him well, no matter what I say or do."

"Have you no influence over your own husband, Petunia?"

"Of course I do, but he has very strong beliefs about this abomination, and he will not accept Harry, no matter what."

"Abomination? Is that your word, or your husband's?" Severus demanded.

"It is Vernon's. He hates that I have agreed to take Harry in and doesn't understand why I am doing it. He will go along with it though. He will just never like it."

"Will he not soften as he gets to know the boy? He seems like a fine child." Severus looked over at Harry, who was still in his arms. The boy had placed his head on Severus' shoulder and was now fast asleep. Severus stared at him in wonder. He had never been around babies before and was unsure how to react with them, but this child seemed to take to him quite well. He wondered if all children were this easy to deal with. He turned back to Petunia for her answer.

She shook her head. "He will never come around. I know he won't."

Severus sighed. "Then will you make up for his arrogance?"

"What do you mean?" she asked curiously.

"Love this baby. Make him know that he is not alone in the world. Even if Vernon does not treat him well, the love of a mother can counteract much in a boy's life. You know that my mother was the only one who loved me. My father was horrid, my upbringing intolerable, but I can look back at the love my mother gave me and have some peace at those memories."

Severus thought of his childhood. It had been filled with a drunken father who beat both his mother and himself. Try as she could, his mother wasn't able to calm her father when he was in one of his drunken states. She had thrown herself in between Severus and his father on several occasions, taking the brunt of the beating. When his father had finally given up, or the more likely outcome, passed out, his mother would cradle Severus in her arms, rocking him back and forth, telling him how much she loved him, and she would protect him. Unfortunately she was never strong enough to fully protect him.

When he got older, the scene reversed itself. His father ignored him and concentrated on beating his mother. He would be the one protecting her from his father's wrath. He would not let his monster of a father hurt the only person who loved him. He had done all he could to keep his mother out of harm's way.

"Vernon would never beat Harry like you were beaten, Severus," Petunia remarked. "He will be gruff and nasty, but he will never lay a hand on the boy."

"All the better," Severus sighed.

"I will do as you ask, Severus. Even I understand the importance of a mother in a young man's life. He may not have the easiest upbringing, but I will try to treat him fairly."

Severus stared amazedly at Petunia. "It seems that I have underestimated you, Petunia. You are more caring than I thought."

Petunia picked her head up proudly at Severus. "I am not the devil, Severus."

Severus looked at her for a long time. Finally he decided that his visit was over. He asked Petunia what he should do with the baby, and she ushered him up to the babies' bedroom. Powder blue assaulted Severus eyes as he entered the small bedroom which held a white crib, a small baby basket that had evidently held Harry when he arrived, and an assortment of baby necessities.

"We haven't had a chance to get another crib," Petunia explained as she motioned for Severus to place Harry into the crib.

He laid the little boy down gently. The babe did not awaken in the slightest. Turning back to Petunia, Severus regarded her with interest.

"Thank you," he said finally.

She nodded to him.

"If you ever want to learn more about your magic, contact me. I would be happy to help you buy a wand and work on some simple spells. Your sister was an incredibly powerful witch. Who knows what you are capable of?"

Petunia frowned at him. "Just go, Severus. I have been more than patient with you."

Severus nodded at her. "Don't forget what I said about the baby and your magic. I would be interested to teach you. I work at Hogwarts. You can get in touch with me there"

"Out!" Petunia cried.

"Okay, okay," Severus chuckled as he backed out of the baby's room and left the small home.

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Severus was surprised two weeks later when he received an odd letter. He recognized it as Muggle mail. He opened it, and his eyes grew wide. It was from Petunia. Evidently she had thought about his offer and wanted to learn more about her powers now that she had a magical baby in the house. She wanted to meet with him during the day when Vernon was at work and see what she could learn from him. Severus lowered the letter and stared in amazement. Wonders never ceased, he supposed.

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They met weekly for about a year. Petunia by that time had good control of her magic. She was almost as powerful as Lily had been. She had been able to hide her new talent from Vernon easily, as he was not wont to see things unless they were right in front of his nose.

Severus and she spent most of their days together sparring and dueling. Severus was quite surprised that she actually gave him a good fight each and every time. She would never best him, but she always came close. He looked over at Petunia as she readied herself to shoot another spell at him. They had enlarged the living room and pushed all the furniture to the side, giving them enough room to spar effectively. Petunia pointed her wand at Severus and shouted *Stupify*. Severus shot back and landed on the floor.

"That was too easy," Petunia cried. "You let me win!"

Severus pulled himself back to a standing position and smiled at Petunia. She had become a much nicer person in the year they had been working together. Severus could now see signs of Lily in her that had been invisible in all her pent up rage before.

"You deserved a good win," he said finally.

"How am I to be of any use if you are constantly letting me win?" she asked angrily.

"You are a talented witch, Petunia."

Petunia still winced at the title, but she gave him a smile eventually.

"Your training is over," Severus commented.

Petunia looked at Severus in shock. "You mean I'm a full-fledged witch?"

"You always have been. You just never knew it."

"What now?" she asked.

"You will be able protect Harry if needed."

"Perhaps I could Obliviate him so he won't remember how awful Vernon is to him."

Severus smiled. "Perhaps you could Obliviate Vernon, so he won't be so nasty to Harry."

Petunia smiled back. "Sorry, I can't do that. No matter how enticing it sounds. I love my husband and would have him no other way."

"You are a glutton for punishment, Petunia."

She smiled again. "Will I see you again?" she asked him, wondering what would happen now that their lessons were over.

"Technically, I am not supposed to be interfering with your life, on Dumbledore's orders. I have been coming here without his knowledge all of this time. I am sorry to say that I will be unable to return. I have kept this little secret for too long as it is. I don't want Albus to become suspicious."

She looked at him sadly. "Can't you come by occasionally? Harry really enjoys your company."

Severus frowned as he looked at the toddler, who was playing with some blocks on the floor.

"I am afraid not. I am fearful of being found out. Now that a year has passed, some of Voldemort's loyal followers are coming out of the wood-work again, trying to organize. If they are to find that I have been coming here and continue to do so, they will suspect my motives. After all, I should have killed Harry the first time I stepped through the door. So, for the safety of all of you, I will not return. I will see Harry when he turns eleven and comes to Hogwarts. Perhaps we can renew our friendship then."

He went over to Harry and hoisted him up into his arms. The toddler smiled at him and grabbed his nose. It was their little game.

"Sevvie, pway wif Harry?" the little boy asked.

Severus smiled at Harry. "I can't today, Harry. I must be going."

Harry frowned at him. "Sevvie, pway now!"

Severus pulled the toddler into a hug. "I will miss you, little one," he said gently to Harry.

"Where go?" Harry asked as his chubby arms encircled Severus neck.

"I must go back to work," Severus explained. "I will not be able to visit you for a long time."

Harry pouted. "Sevvie, no go," he said simply.

Severus felt his heart constrict within him. The last thing he had ever expected was to have strong feelings for the son of James Potter, but here he was, filled with love for the boy.

"I will see you again, Harry," he murmured into the little boy's ear.

"See me now!" Harry exclaimed.

Severus laughed at the young boy's persistence, but set him down and told him to find his cousin and play. Harry scampered off, forgetting his demands on Severus in the excitement of finding Dudley.

Petunia regarded Severus sadly. "I was hoping you could be a father figure to him," she said softly.

"I regret that I cannot be so at this time."

"I understand. Thank you, Severus, for seeing past my anger and helping me to become something more than I was."

Severus looked at her curiously. He had not expected such kind words from her, even though they had formed a decent friendship.

"It was the least I could do," he said finally.

Petunia stared at Severus as several emotions flitted across her face. Before Severus knew it, he was enveloped in a great bear hug. The woman was much stronger than her petite build revealed. Not quite knowing how to react, Severus slowly put his arms around Petunia and returned the hug.

"Thank you, Severus. I shall always be indebted to you."

"Just care for Harry. That is the only thanks that I need." With that, Severus pulled himself from Petunia and left the home, never to return.

A/N: Next up: Harry's 11th birthday approaches, aka: Owls a plenty.

So, were you surprised at Petunia's hidden talent? I'm sure she was too the first time something flew off her bed stand on its own.

It seems that Severus is saying a lot of good-bye's lately.

Big hugs to everyone of you. I appreciate your comments and just the fact that you've read this far.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of 46

The Dursleys get a surprise visitor.

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling owns these characters and any plot that seems familiar. If you think you've read something like this before, it was borrowed, and possibly twisted, from *The Sorcerer's Stone*.

Chapter 20

They were fighting again. Petunia and Vernon fought almost constantly about Harry Potter. He insisted that the boy sleep in the alcove under the stairs; she demanded that Vernon be reasonable and give Harry the spare bedroom, now occupied with all of Dudley's possessions. It was a hopeless cause. They had had this conversation weekly for Harry's entire life, but Vernon refused to give in to Petunia's demands. Harry would remain under the stairs. Petunia stomped down those very same stairs in a huff, going to the kitchen to make breakfast.

She winked at Harry as he emerged from his cubby. He gave her a quick smile and went to get the mail. Vernon plodded down the stairs, almost breaking through them, he was so huge. He harrumphed as he sat down and opened his paper to read while awaiting his plentiful breakfast.

Harry came back with the mail, a peculiar look on his face. He handed all but one letter to Uncle Vernon. He stared at the letter, which was addressed to him.

Dudley, who had been sitting at the table the whole time, started shrieking, "He's got mail!"

Vernon ripped the letter out of Harry's hand and stared at it. "Hogwarts!" he exclaimed.

Harry looked curiously at the letter, and Petunia's head snapped around. She stared at Vernon. She watched in dismay as he ripped the letter to shreds. He then proceeded to look through the rest of the mail as Harry complained that his mail had been destroyed. Suddenly a huge gasp rang from Vernon's throat.

"What is the meaning of this?" he shouted.

Petunia raced over to see what the hubbub was about. There in Vernon's hand was yet another letter from Hogwarts. This one was addressed to Dudley. Petunia pursed her lips and then pretended to be surprised by the sudden development. She had secretly been watching Dudley. He had shown a small amount of magical power, and she thought he might be a late bloomer as she had been. She was unsure, though, if he would be chosen to attend Hogwarts. Here was the proof that he had been.

"Why, what do you suppose it means, Vernon?" she said innocently.

Vernon glowered at her. "It means they think he's one of *them*!" he yelled.

He took the second letter and shredded it in his hands as he had done the first.

"Perhaps you should have opened it, Vernon. We should know what it says."

"I'll tell you what it says! It says that our son is a monstrosity. I'll have none of it! Do you understand me? Neither of these boys will be responding to *those* letters!"

Dudley and Harry watched the argument curiously. Harry looked over at Dudley and shrugged his shoulders. Dudley did the same. The two boys got along well enough, except when Dudley tried to bully Harry. He was much bigger than Harry and used his size to get what he wanted. The boy was spoiled. Vernon gave him whatever he asked for, but Petunia tried to be equally fair to the two boys.

They both turned their attention back to the fight. They knew better than to interrupt. They would only be told what was going on if Vernon deemed it necessary.

Harry sighed. The way his aunt and uncle's fight was going, he might never know what that letter was all about.

"Perhaps it would be good for them to go. If they have the ability, they should be trained so they can use it correctly," Petunia argued.

Vernon's face got beet red. "Since when have you become a sympathizer, Petunia? I thought we agreed on this matter. We decided together that it was best left alone."

Petunia hesitated for a minute. "I'm not a sympathizer. I just want what's best for the boys."

"What's best for the boys is that they stay where they are, learning normal things, not freakish abominations that will turn them into lunatics!"

Petunia had enough. She went back to her breakfast fixings, asking Harry to make the eggs while she got the toast and bacon going.

Vernon smirked to himself and thought, *That's that, then*. Little did he know the trouble that was coming.

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After multiple attempts to deliver Harry and Dudley's letters, the owls had sent an onslaught of letters barreling through the Dursley household. Petunia had screamed to Vernon to acknowledge the letters, but his fat, stubborn self had tut-tutted her, and they had fled the home.

They now were hiding out in a hut out at sea. Harry was unsure why his Uncle Vernon referred to this place as a hut. It was made of stone and looked like an old abandoned lighthouse. It was dark inside, the only light coming from a small lantern set in the middle of the room. The room itself was circular with a great wooden door at its entry. A small staircase started at the doorway and wrapped itself around the interior of the building, rising through a hole in the ceiling as it made its way up to the top of the 'hut.' The family had strewn sleeping bags on the floor and were all settled down to sleeping. Harry found he could not sleep, however, and was listening to the waves hitting the shore of the small island where the hut was located.

Vernon had been smug in the fact that the owls could never get to them at such a hiding place. It was now late at night, and Harry listened to the even breathing of his family. He wondered how they could all sleep so soundly on the hard floor of the 'hut.' Harry stared at the ceiling, checking his watch occasionally. When the watch struck midnight, Harry quietly sat up and whispered, "Happy Birthday, Harry," to himself.

Suddenly a small package appeared in his lap. He looked over to his aunt, who had thrown it over to him and was now propped up on an elbow. She had a finger up to her mouth and was making a 'shh' sound. He smiled at her and unwrapped the box. Inside was a new watch. He grinned at her again and mouthed the words 'thank you' to her. She smiled at him.

Their quiet moment was shattered with a loud crash at the hut's door. Vernon, startled awake, reached for his gun, just as the biggest man any of them had ever seen came crashing through the door. Vernon held his gun up and pointed it at the giant's head.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Vernon demanded.

"Sorry about tha'," came a voice. "My name is Hagrid. I'm here to collect Dudley and Harry to go to Hogwarts."

"Over my dead body!" Vernon cried as he lifted the gun, aiming it and getting ready to fire.

"That's it!" came an exasperated cry.

It was Petunia. She pulled her wand out, and with a flick, the gun sailed into her hands.

"I have had enough of your claptrap, Vernon Dursley. You must see that you can't avoid this nor keep it from happening. I will not see you shed innocent blood just because you are too stubborn to let these boys know the truth about themselves!"

Vernon sputtered at her. "What... what... did you just do?"

She waved her wand at him. "I magically took your gun away. I have been hiding these powers from you for all of our married life, afraid of how you would react, but I can do it no longer. I am a witch. I denied it for years, but finally came to accept my magic. Severus Snape helped me to learn how to use my powers when Harry and Dudley were just babies."

Hagrid chimed in at the mention of Snape's name. "Oh, Professor Snape, he's a great man, he is!"

Petunia gave him a small smile. Vernon did not. He glared at Petunia instead.

"You mean to tell me that you have these horrid powers too? I thought you were normal, like me, but you're just as monstrous as Harry! And as much of an abomination as my own son! All of you! I'm surrounded by freaks! Get me out of here!"

"Vernon, calm down! You'll give yourself a coronary," Petunia said blandly.

"I'll give myself a coronary?" he snarled as his double chins shook with his annoyance. Vernon got closer to Petunia and looked at her menacingly. "No, you will drive me to my death, the lot of you, with your magic and unnatural behaviors. I'll have nothing to do with it. This relationship is over."

Petunia looked at him sadly. "I wish you would reconsider, Vernon. Despite everything, I love you."

"I could never love a misfit like you. You're an abomination, a monstrosity. I never want to see you again!"

Petunia regarded Vernon sadly. "I'm sorry you feel that way," she murmured.

Everything she had feared had come to pass. Her husband no longer saw her as human. Well, she had denied her heritage long enough. She had hated her sister and ruined their relationship because of it. She would not let Vernon ruin her son's or her nephew's opportunity to learn and grow in their magical abilities. She ignored Vernon as he seethed and turned to Hagrid.

"What do they need to do to get ready for the school year?" she asked him.

"Why, it's all in the letter." He pulled two more copies out of his vest and handed them to her. "I'll gladly take them to get their supplies if ye'd like, Madam."

Petunia glanced once again at Vernon. He looked like his head was about to explode.

"Oh, I almost fergot," Hagrid said suddenly.

He pulled a box out of his pocket and handed it to Harry.

"Happy Birthday, Harry!" he exclaimed.

Harry lifted the lid to find a small cake with 'Happee Burthday, Harry' scrawled on it.

"How did you know...?" Harry asked in amazement.

"We wizards know all about you, Harry," Hagrid answered.

Harry glanced at his aunt. She had secretly told him about being a wizard since he was a small boy. He understood what had happened to his parents, but had been told to go along with the lie that his Uncle had created. Part of him had not known whether to believe Aunt Petunia's odd story, but now he could see that all she had said was true.

"What's this Hogwarts?" he asked.

Dudley nodded his head furiously.

"Why, it's the greatest school for wizards that ever was!" Hagrid said happily.

"A school for wizards?" Dudley asked.

"That's right! And you two are wizards. You'll be able to go there and learn all about 'bein' magical. It's a wonderful place. You'll love it there."

Harry grinned at Hagrid and then at Dudley. "When do we leave?" he asked.

"Well, right now if you'd like?"

Petunia glanced at Vernon. He had moved into a corner of the small room, his back to the group. She heaved a sigh.

"Hagrid, would it be okay if I came along too? I don't know that I have a home to go back to."

Vernon piped in. "You can have the house. I want nothing to do with anything in it except my personal belongings. I will not subject myself to such monstrosities any more."

"You can come with us anyway, Mrs. Dursley," Hagrid said benevolently. "It'll give Mr. Dursley the chance to get out of yer life while yer with us."

Petunia stiffened and gave Hagrid a short nod. She turned back to Vernon.

"Are you sure there's no working this out?"

He turned and glared at her. "You're dead to me, woman. As far as I'm concerned the last fifteen years never happened."

She looked at Vernon sadly, then hung her head and headed for the door. It was the last time she would ever see him. An enormous hand reached out and patted her on the back, causing her to stumble forward.

"Oops, sorry 'bout tha'. I don't know my own strength sometimes," Hagrid said sheepishly.

Petunia could not help but smile, even though she was miserable inside. They left Vernon to himself, to make his own way off the small island in the sea. As Hagrid rode to shore, Dudley and Harry both could not keep quiet about how brave Petunia had been to stand up to Vernon.

"You were great, Mum, especially when you pulled that gun out of his hand!" Dudley gushed.

"How did you do it, Aunt Petunia?" Harry asked curiously.

She pulled her wand out and showed it to them. She had never done magic in front of them, although she had secretly told them about being able to.

"This is a wand. I believe we will probably get one for each of you tomorrow. It helps a witch or wizard to direct their magic and use it to their best abilities."

"Well said, Mrs. Dursley," Hagrid piped in.

She gave him a wan smile.

Hagrid gave her an understanding look. "Mrs. Dursley, if yeh don't mind me sayin', I think in the long run, you'll be much happier without yer husband. He seemed to be... well... sort of a jerk."

Petunia couldn't help laughing out loud at Hagrid's dancing around the truth.

"That he is, Hagrid. It doesn't negate the fact that I love him."

Hagrid nodded. "I'm sorry fer that, Mrs. Dursley. It's too bad he can't see past the end of his nose to understand that."

She shrugged. "I knew this day would come eventually. I had just hoped that it wouldn't."

"Well, Harry, Dudley, and I will cheer you up. We'll have a grand time tomorrow in Diagon Alley. Have you ever been?"

"Severus took me there to buy my wand, but that was years ago."

"It hasn't changed much. There are some new shops and the like, but it's still swarming with people."

She smiled at that. Perhaps a throng of people was what she needed to get her mind off of her ruined marriage.

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They thoroughly enjoyed their trip to Diagon Alley. Hagrid had taken them everywhere they needed to go and saw that they purchased everything required. He presented the two boys with owls as belated birthday presents. Harry's was a beautiful white snowy owl, and Dudley's was a dark brown one. Too soon the day ended, and they found themselves once again at Privet Drive.

"Would you like to come in, Mr. Hagrid?" Petunia asked.

"No, no, thank you though. I have been gone long enough. I need ter get back ter my duties at Hogwarts." He turned to the two boys. "I'll see you both at the end of next month."

They bid him goodbye and headed for the door. When Petunia entered, she was not surprised to see that everything that belonged to Vernon had disappeared. She went up to their bedroom and found his part of the closet and all of his drawers empty. She looked around bitterly. Fifteen years wasted. She knew she would never see him again. She sank down on the bed and began to cry, covering her face with her hands.

Harry and Dudley came in after a little while. Each of them put an arm around her.

"It's alright, Mum," Dudley said. "He was always mean to you anyway."

"Yeah," Harry piped in, "he didn't know the meaning of the word nice."

Petunia smiled despite herself. "Well, one good thing has come of Vernon's departure," she said calmly.

"What's that?" the two boys said in unison.

"Harry gets his own bedroom finally."

Harry's grin was enough to make Petunia forget her own troubles.

"Come on," she said, "we have some moving to do. And now we can use magic. It'll take no time at all."

The three of them got up and went to move Harry's stuff upstairs. Soon everything was as it should be, and he had a real room. It even had a window that looked out onto the street.

"I know you won't be here long to enjoy it, Harry, but it's yours nonetheless."

"Thanks, Aunt Petunia," he said and gave her a hug.

A/N: Next up: Harry's first year at Hogwarts.

I hope you all enjoyed that little turn of events. At least Harry gets his own room now! Severus will be back in the next chapter, as you might imagine, and we'll see Hermione again. A great big hug to all of you wonderful readers, and thank you for all of the lovely reviews.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 of 46

Hermione's first year at Hogwarts.

Disclaimer: Not mine, not mine, NOT MINE! But oh how I wish it were. This is my twist, though, but all of the characters belong to the very rich and talented JK Rowling.

Anything that seems vaguely familiar in this chapter has been quoted, paraphrased, or just plain old summarized from The Sorcerer's Stone.

Chapter 21

Hermione's first year:

Severus entered the Headmaster's office with a puzzled look. The regular staff meeting before the feast had already been held and dismissed over an hour ago. He was unsure why he had been summoned again to Dumbledore's side. He found Minerva McGonagall, Mr. Filch, Poppy Pomfrey, and Irma Pince gathered around the desk. Severus wondered at this small group of faculty members. He stood next to Filch and looked to the Headmaster.

"I've called you all here for a short meeting about one of our new students," Albus began.

"We know; Harry Potter is to be attending here," Minerva said. "I do hope he is in my house!"

Albus looked at Minerva fondly. "No, Minerva, we have already discussed Mr. Potter in our meeting earlier. This is a different student. One whom you have all heard of before."

Everyone stared at Dumbledore curiously. Severus had it figured out in an instant.

"You're talking about Hermione," he stated.

Albus nodded.

"Hermione who?" Poppy asked.

"Hermione Granger," Albus offered.

The other faculty members' eyes widened, and they began to murmur to each other.

Albus began the explanation. "Hermione Granger is to be a new first-year student here. In her future, she will travel back in time to become the teaching assistant that you all remember. When she disappeared those many years ago, she actually returned to her own time. Severus and I were the only ones who knew about her time travel, so it was voiced around that she had fled the country because of Voldemort."

Everyone except for Severus stared incredulously at the Headmaster.

"I must implore you to not show any recognition of the girl and to treat her as you would any other student here. She is not to know about her future. The girl needs to concentrate on her studies, not what she will perform in her twenties. Are we all in agreement?"

Everyone agreed, and Albus adjourned the meeting. Severus stayed behind. He went up to the desk. Albus looked at him gravely.

"There is one other who knows of Hermione's time travel," Severus said quickly.

Albus raised his eyebrows.

"Lucius Malfoy is aware of her being from the future," Severus told Albus.

"How did that come about?" Albus asked curiously.

"I told him."

"Why would you do that? You compromised her position, Severus. What if Voldemort had found out?"

"Lucius considered Hermione a good friend. He would not divulge her secret."

Albus put his head down and stroked his beard. "Well, that's good to know," he said absently. He then looked back at Severus. "Are you alright with her arrival, Severus?" he asked.

"I am," Severus stated simply.

"This can't be easy for you," Albus commiserated.

"It will be easier than not seeing her at all."

Albus nodded his head. "I see your point. Can you treat her like every other student?"

"Of course; that's what you pay me for, isn't it?"

Albus chuckled. "You are so very mercenary, my boy. You know the things that you do for me are invaluable to our cause."

Severus rolled his eyes. "You would use another if I was not under your thumb. I can keep a secret, and you know it, Albus. You have nothing to fear."

Albus smiled at Severus, his eyes twinkling. Severus rolled his eyes. "Must you twinkle at me like that, old man?"

"I'm just looking forward to the future," Albus admitted.

"You and I both!" Severus replied in exasperation.

oooOOOooo

Severus sat in the Great Hall watching the new first-years. He arched an eyebrow at the young man who looked so much like his father. Harry Potter looked at him and rubbed his head. Severus noted the lightning bolt scar as the boy rubbed it. It hadn't seemed very long ago that he had hoisted the boy up into his arms and allowed him to grab at his nose as if it were a squeak toy. He marveled at how quickly time had passed and how big Harry was now.

Although interested with the Boy Who Lived, he was more taken with the young girl who stood behind him. He studied Hermione covertly. He smiled thinly at her. Her beautiful hair was an unkempt mess. She had not quite learned how to tame the bush that sat atop her head. Her mouth showed off some prominent front teeth. He thought back to her promise to hex him if he ever said anything about her teeth. Now he understood her comment better. He would be sure to avoid that topic at all costs. He saw her chatting matter-of-factly to another child, and his heart constricted within him. He would make sure she never feared him like she had in his Hermione's past.

He watched her covertly under a sheet of his hair. Although a remembrance of things lost, Hermione's presence soothed him. It was a reminder that she would eventually return. Granted, that time would be many years into the future and much would happen between now and then. But at least she was here. That meant the time was closer than it had been. Oh, how he wished he could go to sleep tonight and wake up in the morning having all of the coming years behind him and his love in his arms.

oooOOOooo

Severus rolled his eyes as the sorting went on. Potter was put in Gryffindor, Hermione, of course, Gryffindor, Weasley, Gryffindor, no surprise there. Malfoy, Slytherin, surprise, surprise. Dursley, whom he had almost forgotten about, had been put into Hufflepuff. Severus chuckled at that, thinking it had been a good match.

He eyed his new Slytherins. Many were sons and daughters of Death Eaters. They could never know of his true allegiances. He would have to be very careful now that Potter was at the school. He couldn't be seen as favoring him in any way or things would be said, and parents would become suspicious. Even though the Dark Lord was no more, Severus needed to keep his spy work a secret. He knew he would become valuable once again when the Dark Lord returned.

oooOOOooo

"I can help you learn to stopper death," Severus said in his deep, mysterious voice.

He looked around the room and noticed that Harry Potter seemed to be doodling. He frowned and walked over to the young man's table, ready to chastise him for not paying attention. He looked down at what Potter was writing. He saw that the boy was taking notes. He arched an eyebrow at him as Harry looked up. The boy looked at him innocently, and Severus worked hard not to smile at him. He looked to Hermione, who was sitting beside Harry, and gave her his signature arched eyebrow as well.

"If you are to excel in this class, you will have to work hard," he explained as he continued his walk around the classroom. "I do not accept fooling around in this room as the slightest discrepancy from your work can have explosive results."

He turned and stared at the first-years, pulling his cloak around his folded arms, trying to convey the importance of being serious in his class. He gave them all an appraising look. He had learned that if he could instill respect in the first few weeks of the student's lives, he would have it for their entire tenure at Hogwarts.

"Any foolish behavior will be rewarded with detentions. You will come to class prepared to work, and you will work efficiently. There will be no sharing of work unless you are assigned into teams. If you are not sure of an answer in my class, it is better to keep your mouth closed, as foolish comments are not tolerated."

Severus looked around at the students. They seemed to be duly respectful of him. He decided his intimidation had worked and began the lesson in earnest. He instructed them in the tools of the Potioneer, and with a flick of his wand, a simple boil cure potion scrawled itself on the board.

"You should have everything needed for this potion in your kits. You may begin."

Severus continued to wander the classroom, watching the progress of the students. He noticed one boy looking scared and tentative as he shakily picked up several porcupine quills and held them above his cauldron. The boy's hand continued to shake as he prepared to drop them in the cauldron to complete the Potion. Severus quickly went to the boy's side.

"Mr. Longbottom," he said. The boy looked up with a frightened look on his face.

"Please read the directions on the board once again," Severus directed.

Neville stared at the board, and his eyes grew wide. He carefully took the cauldron off the fire and then dropped in the porcupine quills.

Severus nodded in approval.

"Mr. Longbottom, had you added those quills before taking the cauldron off the fire, you would have succeeded in melting your cauldron and possibly harming yourself."

Neville looked down in embarrassment. "I'm sorry, sir," he said sheepishly.

"Mr. Longbottom, if you carefully follow the directions to any potion assigned to you in this class, I assure you, you will succeed. There is no need for you to doubt your abilities. Is that understood?"

Neville looked up and gave Severus a slight nod. "I'll pay closer attention next time, sir."

Severus gave Neville a slight nod. "Attention to detail, Mr. Longbottom," he said as he moved off to view another student's attempt.

"Yes, sir," Neville replied with fervor.

Severus arched his brow at him as he moved away.

Soon enough, the class was over, and the young first-years filed out. Severus watched Hermione gather her books and leave all by herself. He hoped she would find some friends soon.

He snapped out of his musings as his seventh-year class came bustling in. They all smiled at him and greeted him, asking him about his summer. He smiled faintly and told them of a trip he had made to Germany to look for rare Potions ingredients. Soon it was time to start class, and he began once again to teach.

oooOOOooo

That night Severus dreamed the dream again. He hadn't dreamed it in months, but seeing Hermione, even as a little girl, must have brought it back to him. It was a dream he longed to have every night. His Hermione was with him in the dream.

They were in their room in the Room of Requirement, cuddling on the couch. She was kissing him. It felt wonderful to have her in his arms again and to be kissing her.

She pulled away after a long while. "I will be with you soon, my love," she told him.

"Don't go, Hermione. I want you with me always," Severus pleaded with her.

"I must," she said as she stroked his cheek. "I am only here to help you through the hard times, but someday I will be with you forever."

"You have been gone for so long. You will come back and not want to be with me."

She smiled at him. "Of course I will want to be with you. I love you."

"Please, Hermione, always love me," he begged her.

She kissed him again. "I will, Severus. I will love you forever."

Severus pulled her close, but felt her evaporate in his embrace. He looked to where she was, but she was gone. His life had left once again.

Severus awoke, not feeling sad, but feeling comforted. The dream always made him feel this way, even though it ended in her disappearance. It was as if his subconscious knew when he needed to see her and obliged him with this dream.

He turned in the bed and repositioned himself into a more comfortable position. He felt contented, even though he would not see his Hermione for years to come. He knew that when he did, they would never part again, and he would be the happiest man alive.

oooOOOooo

"Mister Potter, a word please," Severus said as the class was beginning to leave.

Harry looked up with concern and packed his things away. Soon the room was empty except for him, and he was standing in front of Severus, looking nervous.

"Mister Potter, I need to speak to you about a private matter."

Harry looked interested.

Severus leaned forward. "I was good friends with your mother when I was a youth."

Harry stared at Severus and then finally said, "What was she like?"

Severus smiled as he got a faraway look. "She was feisty, very pretty, and very smart. I thought you might like to learn a little more about her." He looked at Potter expectantly.

Harry nodded eagerly. "Yes, sir!" he said.

"Come back here at seven tonight. We'll have a... chat. If anyone asks, tell them I gave you detention."

"Thank you, Professor Snape!" Harry cried and ran from the room, waving at him. Severus couldn't help chuckle to himself at the boy's exuberance.

oooOOOooo

There was a loud knock at the Potions classroom door.

"Enter," Severus bellowed, so the visitor would hear him.

Harry Potter strode through the door, looking eager.

Severus smirked at him as he approached the desk and then motioned for him to have a seat.

"Are you adjusting to life at Hogwarts, Mr. Potter?" he asked the boy as he settled into the chair.

"I'm having a bit of a time finding my way around still, sir. Other than that, things are going alright."

Severus nodded. "Yes, between the countless classrooms and moving stairs, it takes some getting used to."

Harry nodded back.

"Do you have any specific questions about your mother?" Severus asked.

"Well, I just want to know everything. My Aunt Petunia doesn't speak of her much. She says they didn't get along as children and hardly spoke when they were adults. Do you know why that is?"

Severus looked at Harry thoughtfully. He had not expected the conversation to turn to Petunia so quickly.

"It is because your aunt was jealous of your mother and her magic for quite some time. You must not hold it against her. She has more than made up for her foolhardiness as a younger girl. I was witness to her change of attitude. I helped her accept the fact that she was a witch and trained her in her abilities."

"You must be who Aunt Petunia was talking about. She mentioned your name, but with all of the other things going on with getting ready for school, I forgot it."

"I spent quite some time at your home when you were just a baby," Severus divulged.

Harry was thoughtful for a minute. He studied Severus carefully and then his eyes grew wide.

"I remember you now! I thought you were a dream! I always dreamed of this man in black who would come to visit and play with me. For a while I thought you were my father until Aunt Petunia showed me a picture of my mum and him. You never came to visit though, so I figured it was all in my imagination. You're Sevvie!"

Severus turned red. It was one thing for a toddler to call him by that name, but another entirely for an eleven-year-old student to refer to him as 'Sevvie'.

"Yes, I am," he said distastefully. "We shall dispense with that nickname, please. I do have a reputation as a teacher to keep up."

Harry grinned and then became thoughtful again. "How come you never came back?"

"I will explain that in due time. First, let us speak about your mother."

Harry nodded. "So, what was she like? My mum, I mean."

Severus sat back and began to tell Harry about his mother. He went into detail about their friendship in school and how Lily would always fight for the underdog. He avoided the more unpleasant memories that he held, not feeling it necessary for the boy to know such dark secrets. At least not at this time.

"Lily was incredibly smart. She rivaled me at Potions making. We would often work together to create new potions."

"So, do you think she might have become a Potions mistress if she had lived?" Harry asked.

Severus thought about that. "I'm sure she could have been had she wanted to. However, she was more interested in Transfiguration. She did even better in that class. No one could best her. Not even me."

Harry smiled at the thought of one of his professors admitting that someone other than themselves was better at something.

"What is the smirk for, Mr. Potter?" Severus asked.

"Oh, nothing, sir! I was just imagining my mother Transfiguring a troll into a house or something," he explained quickly.

Severus regarded him dubiously. He didn't need to be a Legilimens to see that the boy was keeping whatever he really thought to himself. He decided to let the affair slip and continue describing Harry's mum to him.

Severus not only told him about his mother, he told him about his spy work for Dumbledore. He explained why he never returned to Privet Drive and made sure that Harry understood that even though Voldemort was not around, he could not treat him any differently in class and even at times, might be quite cruel, but he could not have anyone think that Harry and he had an alliance.

"That is, of course, if you choose to ally yourself with me," Severus went on.

Harry's eyes grew wide. "... I would be honored, sir, if you chose to have me help you, even in a small way."

Severus nodded at him. He knew that he was affecting the timeline with his admissions, but he wanted Harry to have a better opportunity to defeat Voldemort this time around. He had grown to care for him quite well when he was visiting Petunia to teach her about her magic. Although he knew that in Hermione's time Harry *had* defeated the Dark Lord, he wanted to make sure that that would happen again no matter what.

Without giving too much away, he explained that the Dark Lord would not be in hiding for long, that Harry would have a great impact in his defeat as he got older, and that Severus wanted him to be as prepared as humanly possible.

"But what can I do?" Harry questioned. "I'm just an eleven-year-old boy."

"You will not always remain eleven years old, Mr. Potter. The Dark Lord will not come back for a while, but he will return. I hope that you will be ready when the time comes. In fact, I would like to help you prepare to defend yourself against Voldemort when he returns. I'm sure that you realize by that scar on your head that you will not be silent in the fight that is to come."

"Are you telling me you want to teach me Defense?"

"If you are agreeable to it, yes. As a Death Eater spy, I have learned many skills that are not taught inside of these walls normally. I will not teach you dark magic, but I can teach you defensive techniques that will help you in your fight against such magic in the future."

Harry accepted eagerly. "Sir, I would love to learn whatever you would wish to teach me."

Severus nodded. "You will meet me Saturday morning at nine a.m. up on the seventh floor. Wait in the corridor by the tapestry with the trolls trying to dance ballet. You must tell no one where you are going. Make up something that your friends will believe. We will meet there every week and train for one or two hours. I believe by the time Voldemort returns, you will be a formidable opponent."

"But how can we train in a hallway, sir?"

"There is a secret room nearby that we will use."

Harry nodded, eager for Saturday to come.

"If you have no more questions about your mother, you are free to go."

Harry stood up and smiled gratefully at Severus. "Thank you, Professor. I really enjoyed our talk."

"As did I, Mr. Potter. Have a good night."

oooOOOooo

Harry excitedly met up with Severus on the seventh floor that Saturday. He smiled as he approached his professor. Severus gave him a nod of his head in greeting and turned to the empty wall. He paced in front of it three times, and a door appeared. Harry's eyes grew wide.

"Wow!" he exclaimed.

Severus looked over at the youth. "Wow, indeed," Severus agreed. He opened the door, and the two entered the room.

Harry's eyes grew wide again. The room was large and open. The side wall was made up of mirrors, and there was a dummy sitting in the middle of the floor. It seemed to be staring Harry down, goading him to strike it with a curse. Harry wandered over to the dummy and looked up at it.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's a dueling dummy," Severus explained. "You won't begin to duel until later this year in your Defense class, but the sooner you start, the better."

Harry nodded his head and turned expectantly to Severus, awaiting instructions.

"Harry, we will be learning diverse ways to block attacks. We will also learn some defensive attack spells that you can use when in a fight. The first one I would like to work on with you is a disarmament spell."

Harry straightened and gripped his wand, ready to learn. Severus couldn't help but smile a bit at him.

"The spell is done by chanting the word *Expelliarmus*. You draw your wand up straight and flick it up and down like this." Severus made the motion with his wrist. "You try the motion," he directed.

Harry nodded and extended his wand. He flicked his wrist up and down quickly.

"That's about right," Severus coached. "What you want is a more determined stroke: Straight up and down, with determination." He watched Harry do the maneuver a couple of times. "That's right."

Severus walked over to the dummy. He opened a small compartment in the back of the mannequin and extracted a toy wand. He placed it in the clamp-like hand of the dummy. He backed up and extended his wand at the wand-wielding mannequin.

"Now observe what happens when I cast the spell," he told Harry.

Harry turned his attention to the dummy.

"Expelliarmus!"

The wand flew from the dummy's hand and sailed into Severus'. Harry's eyes grew wide yet again. It seemed that he would be amazed quite often in these teaching sessions.

"Wow!" he said.

Severus smirked at him.

"Alright, you try it with the dummy." Severus walked over and replaced the wand in the dummy's hand.

Harry pointed his wand at the dummy and cried *"Expellyamus!"*

The wand shattered in the dummy's hand. Severus chuckled as he went and retrieved a new wand from the back of the dummy.

"You mispronounced it, Harry. It's Ex-pell-y-ar-mus. Don't drop the 'r' or you'll be exploding wands every time. Of course, if this had been a real wand, it would have just vibrated and stayed in the wizard's hand. Try again."

Harry repeated the exercise. This time the wand flew into his hands. Harry looked down at where it rested and then up at Severus, a huge grin on his face. Severus couldn't help but smile too.

He performed the spell correctly on the dummy a few more times until Severus held his hand up for him to stop.

"Good, now let's see how you do with a real wizard and wand. Try to disarm me."

Severus took a stance, his wand held in his right hand, slightly pointing away from Harry. Harry chanted the spell, but nothing happened. He looked at Severus in puzzlement.

"As in most spells, Mr. Potter, intent determines the outcome. With a simple toy, the intent you had mattered little. The toy wand did your bidding. With a real wizard and wand, where there is an affinity between the two because of ownership, you need to truly intend to disarm me. Try again, this time seeing the outcome and desiring to obtain my wand."

Harry tried again. The wand fell from Severus' hand and to the floor.

"Almost," Severus encouraged. "Try a little harder."

Harry did it again, this time to perfection. Severus' wand sailed into his hand. Severus stood up straight and nodded at Harry.

"Good. *Accio* wand." Severus wand sailed back into his hand.

"How did you do that?" Harry asked.

"It's a simple summoning charm. Has Professor Flitwick not taught that yet?"

Harry shook his head.

"I'm sure you'll learn it within the next few weeks. It's similar to summoning your broom into your hand when preparing for flight."

Harry nodded.

"Alright, Mr. Potter. Let's have another go at it."

Severus and Harry readied themselves. Harry threw the spell, but this time, Severus chanted *Protego*, effectively shielded himself and blocking it. His movement was so quick, Harry almost didn't see it. He looked at Severus curiously.

"What did you do?" he asked his professor.

"That was a shielding charm. It is effective for blocking almost any spell. That is our task for our next lesson. You have done well today. When you can, find an empty room, or come up here, and practice this skill. It will be an important weapon in your arsenal. We will continue again next week."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said. The two of them left the room together.

oooOOOooo

Harry worked hard with Severus that year. Severus went slowly, cognizant to the fact of Harry's young age. He knew they had time to train properly and did not want to rush anything, but he still taught him several advanced spells and hexes. Harry learned much more than he ever thought possible, but he knew there was still more for him to master before he could even begin to think about confronting Voldemort. He was just thankful for the extra tutelage that Professor Snape had offered him. He couldn't imagine going against Voldemort without such preparation. He was grateful for the friendship of his Potions professor. They had formed a strong bond during the year. When Harry and his friends realized that someone was trying to get to the Sorcerer's Stone, it never crossed Harry's mind once that Severus might be the culprit.

oooOOOooo

Severus rushed to the girl's bathroom as best he could. That foul, three headed, aptly named, hellhound had made a huge gash in his leg. The fool dog had left the real culprit, Quirrell, alone and had chosen to attack him instead. At least he had been able to escape the foul beast with only a hurt leg. He had also distracted Quirrell from his mission. Now Severus was headed for the girl's bathroom, where the troll was rumored to be holed up. He was surprised to see Hermione, Harry, and Ron standing over the unconscious body of the troll. Minerva was giving them all a piece of her mind.

"It was my fault, Professor," Hermione cried.

She explained that she wanted to take on the creature alone and that Harry and Ron had come in to save her when they realized what she was up to. Severus eyed her curiously. He knew many of Hermione's mannerisms and was quite sure that the girl was lying. But what motive would she have to lie? Minerva chastised Hermione and dismissed all of them.

"Would you mind staying behind, Miss Granger?" Severus asked of her.

Hermione nodded her head and stared at the floor.

"Are you alright, Miss Granger?"

She nodded.

"Please be more careful in the future. Going after a troll by oneself is foolhardy for an adult, let alone for a first-year."

Hermione nodded again.

"Would you care to tell me the real reason the three of you took on that troll?"

Hermione snapped her head up, her eyes wide.

"It's just as I said, Professor."

"Miss Granger, I find it hard to believe that you would be foolhardy enough to take on a troll by yourself. Your vast knowledge of everything magical would have alerted you to the dangers of such a folly."

Hermione shifted nervously and looked away. She looked back, and her eyes were pleading with him.

"You mustn't tell. Things have just gotten better, and if they find out I told, they'll hate me again."

"Who will hate you, Miss Granger?" Severus asked curiously.

"Ron and Harry! They locked the troll in here, but they didn't realize I was in here. Then they came in and saved me."

"Why were you in here when you should have been in the Great Hall with all of the other students?"

Hermione's eyebrows knotted together. "I'd rather not say, Professor," she replied.

"Whether you'd like to say, or not, Miss Granger, you must tell me if you wish for me to keep your secret."

Hermione looked at Severus tentatively. "You won't tell if I tell you?"

Severus kept the smile that was trying to emerge from filling his face. He looked at her sternly.

"Do I look like someone who goes back on my word?" he asked tersely.

"No! No, Sir. Of course not."

"Then why were you in here?"

Hermione folded her arms and turned from Severus.

"I was upset. I came in here to be alone."

"What were you upset about?" Severus asked.

Hermione didn't respond right away.

"Miss Granger?"

"I heard Ron and Harry talking after class. Ron said I was mental." She turned and looked at Severus furiously. "I'm not mental!"

Severus raged inwardly at Weasley's insensitivity. "Of course not, Miss Granger. I would never consider you to be mental."

Hermione's anger abated a bit. "I had thought they were my friends, but Ron's remark was cruel, and I realized I had been kidding myself."

"So, you came in here to have a good cry?"

Hermione's eyes widened. She did not want to admit to her professor that she had been bawling her eyes out in the bathroom. Severus decided to let her off the hook.

"I assume your shared experience felling the troll has patched things up between the three of you?"

Hermione looked at Severus and nodded her head.

Severus stood a bit straighter. "Good, then I can assume we will have no more unwanted heroics from you and your *friends*?"

"Of course not, sir."

Severus gave Hermione a quick nod of his head. "You're dismissed," he said quietly.

Hermione made a beeline for the door and escaped without a look back. Severus smirked at her hasty departure. He too left the bathroom and went to take care of his wounded leg. He hoped that Weasley would not be foolish enough to badmouth Hermione again. He knew they were practically inseparable in the future, but he was unsure how long it took the three friends to become close. Severus shook his head. It was hard to believe that Hermione actually dated Weasley after their inauspicious beginnings.

A/N: Next up: Second year hijinks.

Are you surprised? Did you like Severus' dream? It was just a small gift to tide you all over until Hermione returns in earnest, as an adult, not a kid. You can probably figure that's not going to happen for several chapters. Thank you all for reading and for your input.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of 46

It's Hermione's second year and the Golden Trio are always in trouble.

Disclaimer: *These characters are not mine. Anything that seems vaguely familiar in this chapter has been quoted, paraphrased, or just plain old summarized from The Chamber of Secrets. Oh, and if it's not here, it happened just as it did in Canon.*

Chapter 22

Hermione's second year:

Severus threw the paper down and glared at the two second-years standing before him.

"You were seen by no less than seven Muggles. What were you thinking?"

Harry looked down sheepishly. "Sorry, sir."

Severus eyed him in annoyance. "I expected more from the two of you."

"But, sir!" Ron sputtered. "We were trapped! We couldn't get to the platform. My parents had gone through without us. We had no choice."

Severus sat back in his chair and thrummed his fingers on the desk.

"Mr. Weasley," he said finally. "There are always choices. You could have waited for your parents at the car. You could have sent an owl here. There were numerous things that were much less *stupid* for you to choose from. Why did you decide to do the most foolish and dangerous thing that came to mind? I did not take the two of you for dunderheads!"

"Sir," Harry piped in. "We didn't think. We just acted."

"I believe that's obvious, Mr. Potter," Severus stated evenly. "Not only were you seen, but you did considerable damage to a tree that has been on school property for longer than you've both been alive."

"I think it did more damage to us," Ron muttered.

Severus glared at Ron. "Do you not know when to shut it, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron looked sheepishly to the floor.

"I am not your head of house, so I will not be involved in your punishment, but I assure you, Professor McGonagall will not be lenient with you. You will both be lucky to be a part of this school when she is finished with you. You will stay here while I fetch her."

Severus got up and rigidly stalked out of his office. A few minutes later he returned with Minerva.

She listened to the whole tale, frowning all the way. The Headmaster then made an appearance, and the tale was retold. More frowns were displayed by the Headmaster and the two Professors. Harry wished he could disappear into the floor he was so embarrassed. All three teachers were looking at Ron and him with such disdain. He was sure they would be expelled.

Harry almost fainted when he finally did hear the punishment. No expulsion, no house points taken, only a detention and a note to his Aunt Petunia and one to Ron's parents. Although the latter disturbed him as he didn't want to let his aunt down, he was thrilled that he wasn't heading home this minute.

The three teachers regarded the students sternly. Minerva waved her wand, and a plate of sandwiches and two drinks appeared.

"Eat in here and then go straight to your rooms," she ordered. "We must get back to the feast."

Harry and Ron sputtered their thanks and watched the three teachers leave the room. Harry could have sworn he saw smirks on all of their faces before they turned and left the two boys alone.

oooOOOooo

Harry watched as the bright red howler yelled ferociously at Ron. He looked down at the letter in his own hand and was thankful that his aunt had not chosen the same type of correspondence for him. He would have deserved it, of course, but he would rather not have the entire school know of her displeasure. Unfortunately, even though this

wasn't a howler, he knew it would be different from her other correspondence to him which he had received the previous year.

Ron's howler destroyed itself after blowing a raspberry at him. Ron grimaced and looked like a lost puppy. Harry almost laughed, but then remembered the parchment in his hand. He opened it tentatively.

Dear Harry,

I received a startling owl last night describing your escapades with your friend Ron. While I'm sure it must have been entertaining to fly a car to Hogwarts, I assure you, your stunt is not appreciated. You and Dudley are to represent the Evans' name while at Hogwarts. What would your mother have said if she knew what you did? Please, Harry, think before you act. I'm glad you weren't hurt.

Love,

Aunt Petunia

It would have been better if she had sent the howler. Harry felt even worse with her kind words and inference about his mother. He folded the letter and stuffed it in his robes. Ron and he exchanged sad glances.

"Not happy, was she?" Ron asked Harry.

"No, but she didn't say anything mean."

"Lucky," Ron mused.

"Yeah," Harry said thoughtfully.

oooOOOooo

Lucius sat with Severus in the *Three Broomsticks*. The two were sipping butterbeers and were deep in conversation.

"Draco has been griping about her all summer," Lucius drawled. "I think it's more that she's friends with Potter than anything. I finally saw her at *Flourish and Botts* before term started. Why didn't you tell me last year that she had arrived at Hogwarts?"

Severus narrowed his eyes at Lucius.

"I didn't know you were interested in the arrival of a child who would have no recollection of knowing you."

Lucius rolled his eyes. "She was my friend too. I would have liked to know that she was here again."

Severus leaned in to Lucius.

"Listen, Hermione is not who you remember and won't be for years. She would be puzzled to have any interest from you. And what of the Dark Lord? He never met Hermione and didn't know what she looked like. What happens if he is not truly dead? What if he returns? We would not even be able to think about her in his presence or he may figure out that this young girl is the same woman who bested him so long ago. If he ever found out, he would kill her before she even had a chance to travel back in time."

Lucius' smug look fell from his face, and he appeared to be concerned.

"Well," he said pensively, "I wouldn't want to endanger Professor Granger in any way."

"Then say nothing of this again. When she returns, I'm sure she'll make herself known to you."

Lucius nodded his head to Severus.

"Alright. I'll keep quiet," he acquiesced.

Severus gave him a terse smile.

oooOOOooo

Severus entered the classroom wearily. It had been a long day, and he was looking forward to curling up in his nice warm bed for a good night's rest. He just needed to check the supplies for the classes in the morning before turning in. He stopped abruptly when he saw a light coming from beneath the doorway to his private stores. He wandered up silently and threw open the door. He was surprised to see Hermione, Miss Granger, taking some bottles down from the shelf.

Hermione jumped at his noisy entrance. She spun around, looking guilty. Severus narrowed his eyes at her and demanded an explanation. Anger coursed throughout his body. Love of his life or not, this young girl was stealing his stores. That was something he had no patience for.

"I'm sorry, Professor, I..." she looked down. She had no explanation for her actions whatsoever.

"Just what do you mean by pilfering my stores, Miss Granger," he asked angrily.

"I'm sorry, sir, I should have just asked you," she said remorsefully. "It's just that I'm sure you'll say no."

"Say no to what?" he snapped

"Polyjuice potion, sir. I'm brewing some."

"Why would a second-year student need to brew Polyjuice Potion? Besides, what makes you so sure you are capable of brewing it correctly?" he asked tersely.

She told him everything. Hermione explained how they suspected Draco Malfoy of being the Heir of Slytherin and how they wanted to get near him and see what he knew. She spoke of the plan to transform into his best friends so he would be open with them. Then she looked at him sheepishly and asked him not to be too mad at her. Her pathetically sorrowful face made his anger lessen a bit as he thought about what to do.

"Draco Malfoy may be a braggart, but I do not believe he has anything to do with the Chamber of Secrets," Severus said finally.

"How can you be sure?" she threw back at him.

In reality, he couldn't. However, that would not stop him from arguing his point with Hermione.

"He does not have any great hatred for Muggle-borns," he said finally. Although Draco's mother was prejudiced against everyone and everything not pureblood, his father had been able to instill in Draco a more even regard for those in the world around him.

Hermione huffed at him. "That doesn't mean that he's not involved. He hates Harry. Perhaps he's trying to frame him or something."

"Miss Granger, that's absurd. Why would he go to such great lengths just to frame Mr. Potter?"

Hermione pursed her lips and looked to the ground. "I don't know. But if he's not the Heir of Slytherin, who is?"

Severus regarded her thoughtfully. "I don't know, but you are just a student, Miss Granger, a second year student at that. It is not your place to play detective."

Hermione looked at him pleadingly. "Professor, please? We'll bring anything we find straight to you."

"You seem to think that you are invincible, Miss Granger. I know you are very smart, but you cannot do everything. I assure you, you are not invincible. It would be remiss of me as a teacher to allow you to dabble in things you are not prepared for."

"Could you oversee my continuing with the potion, then, sir?"

"It is not the potion that is the problem. It is what you plan to do with said potion."

Hermione studied him. "Perhaps you could look on it as a harmless prank?"

Severus' eyes narrowed at her. "There are no harmless pranks, Miss Granger."

"Well, do you have a better idea?" Hermione snapped.

"Mind your tongue, Miss Granger! Ten points from Gryffindor."

Hermione softened her tone. "Please, sir. No harm will come of it. The worst that can happen is that Malfoy finds out we're trying to get information from him. But if it works, we'll know if he's to be trusted or not."

The direness of the situation, and the fact that Dumbledore was perplexed as to who may have opened the Chamber, drew heavily on Severus' mind. If even the old gray wizard who knew everything did not know who this particular culprit was, then they were at a serious disadvantage. He seriously doubted that the Malfoy child had anything to do with the Chamber, although he had been quite cheeky in his boastings as of late. Perhaps Hermione was right in wanting to question him. If he wasn't the culprit, perhaps he knew who was. He shook his head as to the lengths to which he would let this girl go. He seriously had a soft spot in his heart for her.

"Miss Granger, I cannot allow you to proceed with this plan. I can neither condone your making of the Polyjuice Potion nor the use of it. You will vanish what you have so far and not attempt to brew it again. You have detention tomorrow night with Mr. Filch for breaking into my private stores. Turn off the light when you are done putting my ingredients away."

With that, he turned and swept from the room, leaving a very curious Hermione staring after him. She wondered why he had left her to herself, knowing she had been trying to take what didn't belong to her. She turned back to the shelves, pulled the bicorn horn and Boomslang skin off the shelves and stuffed them under her robes. She quickly escaped from the store room, making sure the light was off when she left.

From the shadows, Severus watched the young girl make a quick escape from his storeroom, her cloak bulging. He raised an eyebrow at her cheek. He was not surprised, however. He knew that the minute he left her she would take the Polyjuice ingredients. The girl was rash and headstrong, much like her older self.

oooOOooo

Dudley came up to the Gryffindor table towards the end of dinner. He tapped Harry on the shoulder. Harry looked up at Dudley expectantly.

"Can I ask you a question?" Dudley asked.

"You just did," Harry joked.

Dudley gave him a quick smile. "It's a private question. Can we go somewhere and chat?"

Harry nodded to Hermione and Ron and got up. "Sure, Dud, let's take a walk outside."

The two boys headed for the door and soon found themselves walking down the pathway towards the lake.

Dudley looked uncomfortable. Harry turned to him and became worried.

"What's wrong, Dudley?" he asked.

Dudley furrowed his brows. "I've heard some... things about you, Harry. Some things about this Chamber of Secrets too."

Harry looked back at Dudley with concern.

"What have you heard, Dud?"

"That you're the Heir of Slytherin."

"I can assure you, I'm not."

Dudley looked over at Harry, searching him for the truth.

"Don't you believe me, Dudley?"

Dudley heaved a huge sigh. "I don't know what to believe, especially after the dueling class! What was all that with talking with the snake? Why did you send it to attack Justin?"

"Dudley, I was telling that snake to be nice. I told it to leave Finch-Fletchley alone. I didn't realize at the time that I was the only one who could understand what I was saying. I know it seems suspicious, but I was trying to help!"

Dudley watched Harry closely as he explained himself. His shoulders finally sagged in relief.

"I'm sorry I thought badly of you, Harry, it's just that everyone is talking about you. Even Susan and Hannah are suspicious. Justin is scared to death that he'll be petrified before the week is out."

Susan Bones, Hannah Abbot, and Justin Finch-Fletchley were Dudley's best friends. Most of the time they were inseparable, but he also spent a bit of his spare time with Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"Not much of what anyone is saying is flattering," Dudley went on.

Harry shook his head. "You know how the rumor mill is here. The story now probably says I arm wrestled the snake and then wrapped it around Fletchley's body and told it

to kill."

Dudley thought about that for a moment. "Yup, that's pretty much what I heard."

The two boys chuckled and continued their walk, discussing the finer points of school gossip. After a long while they had circled around and returned to the school.

"I still think you should have gone out for the Quidditch team, Dud," Harry mused.

"Quidditch is your thing, Harry, not mine," Dudley retorted.

"So, what is your thing?"

Dudley grinned from ear to ear. "I'm a ladies man," he drawled.

Harry laughed at his pudgy cousin. He had to admit, though, Dudley didn't have much fear when it came to talking to girls. Even though his body wasn't perfect, he never let that stop him from flirting with the ladies of Hufflepuff. He especially spent a lot of time with Susan Bones. She seemed to enjoy his company and always had a smile for him. Maybe his cousin's joke wasn't as much of a joke as Harry had first thought. He pondered that as they went into the school together with Harry patting Dudley's shoulder appreciatively.

oooOOOooo

Severus shot the spell and watched Harry crash into the wall. He lowered his wand.

"Whatever is wrong with you today?" he asked. "You have been distracted throughout our entire session."

Harry got to his feet and furrowed his brows. "I'm sorry. I just have a lot going on."

"Yes, and I don't," Severus shot back.

"You don't understand. The entire school hates me," Harry griped.

Severus raised an eyebrow at Harry's comment. "And why, pray tell, do they hate you? Are you not the Golden Child?"

"Stop making fun of me!" Harry yelled.

Severus regarded Harry with concern. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to be offensive, only to lighten the mood. Why don't you tell me what's going on?"

"Everyone thinks that I'm the Heir of Slytherin! They all avoid me like I'm a pariah. When they do talk to me, they are nasty, or afraid. I can't take it anymore!"

Severus' shoulders sagged. "Unfortunately, you will have to take it until this whole thing is solved. Your little Polyjuice incident uncovered nothing and only managed to send Miss Granger to the infirmary for weeks. Now, of course, she is trapped there again."

"Everyone's saying I'm the cause of her being petrified. Why would they think I would petrify my own friend?" Harry cried.

"The students don't think things out like that, Harry. They just hear a rumor and believe it. You could be petrified yourself, and they'd still think you were the Heir of Slytherin."

Harry chuckled at the stupidity in that.

Severus waved his wand, and two chairs appeared next to them. They both sat down.

"Harry, you said before that I didn't understand what you were going through. You're wrong. I understand all too well."

Harry looked at Severus curiously.

"Unlike you, I was never liked at school, so the silence from the other students never bothered me much, as I was used to it. I was also used to the frightened glares and the avoidance from them."

"You weren't popular at school?" Harry asked.

"I just said that, didn't I?" Severus asked back.

Harry looked embarrassed. "Sorry," he muttered. "But didn't you have any friends? I thought you were friends with my mum."

"She was my only friend for most of my time at Hogwarts. I was also friends with Lucius Malfoy, but they were the only two people, save one professor my seventh year, who ever treated me like a real friend."

"You just said you were friends with my mum most of the time you were at Hogwarts. What does that mean?"

"I said something offensive to her during an embarrassing incident in our fifth year. That ended our friendship."

Harry looked startled. "What did you say to her?"

Severus looked down to the ground. "I called her a Mudblood."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Wow. Malfoy called Hermione that a few months ago. She was really upset when she found out what it meant."

Severus looked livid. He wanted to go up to Malfoy this instant and have a stern talk with him. The boy had been taught better than that. Of course, if he did speak to Draco, the young man would wonder why he had come to Hermione's defense. Lucius would find out, and questions would be asked. He sighed to himself. Being a spy had great disadvantages.

"I would expect more from Mr. Malfoy," Severus commented. "His father has taught him better than to say such things."

Harry shrugged. "He was just annoyed with something Hermione had said. He said it more to hurt her feelings than anything else, I think."

"Nonetheless, it was a crass thing to say." He got back to the topic at hand.

"I said what I did to your mother because I was angry and embarrassed about something very vulgar some other student had done to me. Lily had come to my aid. I was even more embarrassed that she had seen what had happened, so I lashed out at her. I was not what you would call a sociable person at the time. I didn't know how to react to people, even when they were looking out for me."

"What happened that made you so angry in the first place?" Harry asked.

Severus regarded Harry thoughtfully. He was uncertain whether to divulge the nastiness of Harry's own father to him.

"There were a group of students who sought me out to tease me at school. I was not completely innocent in the matter, but they were usually the instigators."

"What did they do?"

"On this particular occasion one of them had strung me up in a tree and removed my trousers."

Harry gaped at Severus. Even Malfoy wouldn't be that cruel, would he?

"That's awful," Harry muttered.

Severus nodded. "So, as you can see, I can understand fully how it feels to be ostracized by an entire school. You just need to move forward and not let it bother you. Things will settle down eventually and be back to normal. You need to work on concentrating on the things at hand. Your dueling today has been abominable. If you were involved in a real duel with your current mindset, you would be dead ten times over."

"I can't believe someone would do that to you, Professor, it's awful." Harry said. He was still in shock at Severus' revelation.

"Yes, well, life is not often fair," Severus mumbled.

"Who did it, Professor?"

"No one you know, Harry," Severus sighed.

"Is he a Death Eater now?"

Severus laughed. "No, he is not a Death Eater now. He is not alive now."

"What happened to him?"

Severus looked at the young boy in front of him. He was so unlike his father. Severus couldn't think of an instance where Harry would lash out at someone unprovoked like his father had. He knew Harry had an unusual protective feeling toward his father. He did not want to shatter that love and respect that he had for him.

"I would rather not go into it," Severus said finally.

"Sir, please. I want to know."

Severus again studied Harry. He was no longer a little boy. He would learn about this story eventually and then maybe resent Severus for not telling him about it right away. He could not shelter him. The boy had too much to do in his life to be sheltered.

"The man was your father, Harry. You know his story. He was killed by Voldemort."

Harry's eyes grew wide. "My... my father! But he was a great man!"

Severus sighed. "He may have been a great man, but he was a swine of a student."

"He was part of that group you were speaking of, the ones that would torment you endlessly?"

Severus nodded.

"I can't believe it," Harry said angrily. "Why would he do that?"

"He did it because he was a smug, show-off."

Harry cradled his head in his hands.

"I always thought he was a hero for standing up to Voldemort the way he did."

Severus leaned forward in his chair. "Harry, he was a hero. He tried to protect both you and your mother. About the things he did as a youth; kids do horrid things to one another." Severus swallowed hard, not believing that he was going to admit to what he was about to utter. "I'm sure if he were alive now, he would be the great man that you thought he was."

Harry looked at Severus with incredulity. "How can you defend him? He was horrid to you."

"I have found that hating those who have wronged me in the past is a waste of time. I probably would not be friends with your father were he alive now, but I do not hate him."

Harry looked upon Severus and thought about all he had said. He was quite surprised to find that his Professor could speak of such nasty events so nonchalantly. Of course, Professor Snape had lived with the knowledge of all of it for a long time. Harry had just heard it. Harry was embarrassed. He was embarrassed to be the son of James Potter. How could his father have been so awful? He was worse than Malfoy!

Harry looked to the ground. "I can't believe that my father was so cruel to you. I'm sorry that he was."

"Your father's sins are not on your head, Harry."

"I know, but I feel horrible just the same," Harry confided.

Severus smirked at him. "And there is the difference between you and your father. Your father never felt guilty about the things he did. He just did them and moved on. He felt justified in everything that he did."

"There's no justification for being so cruel," Harry said with a grimace.

"I agree," Severus said. He had a far away look, as if he was reliving the past.

"Thank you for sharing that with me, Professor. I'm sure it wasn't easy to talk about."

"If it will help you to realize the importance of not letting things affect you to the brink of destruction, than I am glad to have done so. Are you ready to continue?"

Harry looked at Severus gratefully and nodded. "Thank you for not holding my father's actions against me," he said finally.

Severus smirked at Harry. "You are not him, Harry. You are kinder, like your mother was." He stood, signaling the end of the conversation.

Harry stood also, and the two chairs disappeared. Before Harry even had a chance to get ready, a silent spell came at his head.

Harry cried, "Protego." He barely got the shield up in time.

Severus smiled. "Nicely done, Mr. Potter. That's more like it."

oooOOOooo

Severus waited until past midnight to go to the infirmary. He certainly didn't want to be seen here by anyone, including Poppy. He sneaked in and silently moved to the young girl's bed. Hermione lay there petrified. She stared vacantly at nothing. He bent over her and caressed the young girl's cheek, wishing there was something he could do for her. He supposed that she would be fine once the Mandrake Draught was made and administered, but he still was worried. It seemed like Hermione had spent half the year in the infirmary between the Polyjuice incident and this petrifying. *Foolish Gryffindor*, he thought, *always getting into trouble*.

If she kept going like this, she would never live to travel back into the past. Severus put his hand on hers and squeezed it. How he wished the years would pass quickly, and this young girl would emerge as the beautiful woman he knew she would become. Having to watch her as she matured had been harder than he had expected. He enjoyed their encounters in and out of class, but they were constant reminders of what he couldn't have. At least, what he couldn't have now. His heart ached for her return to him. Sometimes it strained within him so tightly, he thought it would burst. Those were the times he would quickly escape to his room and hide away while pining for his lost love.

What he wouldn't give to have her back in his arms again. What he wouldn't give to see her smile at him with her eyes filled with love. What he wouldn't give to be able to tell her how much he loved her. But none of those things were possible now. She was just a child, and her return to him was years in the future. At times, it felt like her return would never come. But looking down at Hermione now, he knew that it would. He knew that if he patiently held out, she would return to him. He would need to wait for her to grow up, but it would happen, just as surely as he was holding her hand right now. He gathered his thoughts and leaned over her, whispering in her ear.

"Just get better, and grow up, my love," he murmured to her before he straightened and silently exited the infirmary.

A/N: Next up: Third year: Werewolf Watching

I think out of all of the years, this was the hardest for me to get right. Hopefully it doesn't leave anything wanting.

Also, if I don't cover something that happened in canon, it happened the same way in this story. There's so much to cover I have chosen not to cover stuff that just repeats itself. The only exceptions would be Harry's summers, which are much more pleasant now. Things like Aunt Marge visiting never happened because she's no longer part of the family, being Vernon's sister. Harry never had to be rescued in the beginning of this chapter, because Petunia just let him go stay with the Weasleys for a couple of weeks before school started.

I'll cover any important changes with Petunia and Harry's summers too. But if you ever have questions about anything, please ask. I love hearing from you and answering what I can without spoiling the future plot.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 of 46

The first part of Hermione's third year.

Disclaimer: *Anything that seems vaguely familiar in this chapter or the next has been quoted, paraphrased, or just plain old summarized from the Prisoner of Azkaban. If you don't see it, it happened the way it did in canon.*

Chapter 23

Hermione's third year part 1:

"Oh, dear!" cried Petunia as they stood on Platform nine and three-quarters. The Hogwarts Express was just rounding the bend and disappearing out of sight.

"This is not good," she murmured to herself.

"Shall we use a flying car like Harry did last year?" cried Dudley.

Petunia frowned at him. "Of course not, Dudders, that would be silly. Where would we find another flying car anyway?"

"Maybe we can enchant one?" Harry piped in.

Petunia smiled at him. "No, Harry, there are other modes of transportation, but we'll have to leave the train station."

Petunia smiled and hurried along. "Come, children. I need to get to work."

When Vernon had left, Petunia had sought employment outside of the home. She had worked in a bank for a year, but found the job tedious. Now that she had embraced her magical side, she wanted to be involved in something magical.

When she had dropped off Harry at the Burrow the summer before, Arthur Weasley had taken a quick liking to her. He had spirited her away to his garage to proudly show her his collection of all things Muggle. She had expressed an interest in helping wizards understand Muggle technology, and before she knew it, Arthur had suggested she take a job at the Ministry. He explained that most wizards had no interest in Muggle technology, but her expertise might be useful in other areas.

Petunia was now part of the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee. She helped the committee make up excuses for Wizarding catastrophes. She had been a great asset to the committee as she had helped them to see what would be believable excuses among Muggles. Sometimes the committee would come up with the most outlandish reasons for something happening. Petunia helped them to see their folly. Usually, it was a simple excuse that worked the best.

When an older witch had messed up a potion, causing her entire house to explode, the Ministry had chosen not to Obliviate the neighbors. If a sensible excuse could be found, Obliviating was always avoided. Petunia had sat and watched the committee argue about how to explain away such a thing. The newest member of the committee

suggested a story which involved a dragon flying overhead and sneezing at an inopportune moment. He was quickly reminded that Muggles didn't believe in dragons. Petunia had almost fallen to the floor, she had laughed so heartily. She then suggested a furnace explosion. She had been met with blank stares. Although the committee had heard of gas leaks, they were at a loss as to what a furnace was. She explained to them how Muggles used furnaces to heat their homes and the committee embraced her idea with great enthusiasm. The committee wasn't always so obtuse. They understood more about Muggles than your average witch or wizard, but this incident would forever be cemented in her mind as an example of the great chasm between her two worlds.

Petunia was brought back to reality by her two boys' bickering. She listened to them as they emerged from the station and headed for the street.

"I told you, Harry, you shouldn't have let Hedwig make that last hunt," Dudley chided. "It's her fault we're late."

"It's not like she wears a watch, Dudley. It's not her fault," Harry said crossly.

Dudley harrumphed.

Soon they were on the curb beside the street. Petunia thought of what she needed and extended her wand hand. Suddenly a bright purple Double-Decker bus appeared from nowhere. The door swung open, and a thin wizard with pimples all over his face smiled at them.

"Hi, I'm Stan. Stan Shunpike. Welcome to the Knight Bus."

Harry and Dudley stared in amazement as Petunia stepped closer to the door of the bus.

"These two young wizards missed the Hogwarts Express and need a lift to Hogwarts."

"Eleven sickles each, please," Stan said by rote.

Petunia dug in her bag and brought out the money, placing it in Shunpike's awaiting hand. She turned and gave a quick hug to each boy.

"Now you two be good and learn a lot."

Dudley turned red at the show of affection, but Harry hugged Petunia back enthusiastically.

"Take care, Aunt Petunia. We'll see you at Holiday," he told her.

She watched as they got onto the bus and waved to them. The bus disappeared in an instant. Petunia looked around her to see if she was alone. She saw nothing but a big black dog sitting across the street, watching her. She gave the animal no further thought, turned and Apparated to the Ministry.

oooOOOooo

After what only seemed like minutes, Dudley and Harry were dropped off at the Hogwarts gates. In the time that they had entered the bus until the time they had arrived at the gates of Hogwarts, they had discussed Sirius Black in full with Shunpike, the bus driver, and the shrunken head that had hung from the mirror. Harry and Dudley had been keeping up on the news about Black's escape since it had happened. Harry had asked Aunt Petunia about the things that the paper had written about Black, but she had not known what the truth was. She had informed Harry that all she knew about his parents' deaths was that they occurred at the hands of Voldemort. She had not been involved in the Wizarding world at the time of their murders.

The three on the Knight Bus, however, had seemed to have all of the answers. They had confirmed the disgusting story of how Sirius Black had betrayed his friends to Voldemort and had been the cause of their deaths. Shunpike had even gone on to say that Black deserved nothing less than to receive the Dementor's Kiss for what he had done.

"What's the Dementor's Kiss?" Dudley asked curiously.

"Why it's the most horrible thing that can happen to a person!" cried the bus driver.

"You get your soul sucked right out of you!" remarked the shrunken head.

"When they're done with you, there's nothing left but an empty shell." This came from Shunpike, who had gotten very close to Dudley and Harry as he uttered the horrid result of the Kiss.

Harry and Dudley grimaced at the thought of losing one's soul.

"Black deserves it!" Stan had continued while nodding his head vigorously.

"He's a real maniac, that one," said the shrunken head. "He'd kill his own mother if he saw her in the streets!"

The two boys had mumbled agreements but had been relieved when the bus had pulled up at Hogwarts seconds later. They hadn't wanted to hear anymore about the crazed lunatic murderer or kisses that stole your soul.

Harry and Dudley dragged their chests and the rest of their belongings up to the door and dropped them inside of it. They vowed never to miss the train again, thinking of how the luggage usually just unloaded itself. As they set their trunks down, a voice interrupted them.

"You're a little early, gentlemen."

They wheeled around and saw Dumbledore standing there with his hands behind his back, his eyes twinkling.

Harry could have sworn that Dumbledore was not surprised to see them at all.

"We missed the train, sir," Dudley explained. "My mum sent us on the Knight Bus."

"Ah!" exclaimed Dumbledore. "A much better solution than last year, eh, Harry?"

Harry blushed. Would he never live down that incident?

"Yes, sir," he finally said.

"Why don't you boys go up to your rooms? The rest of the students won't be here for several hours. Just don't forget to come down for the feast."

"Yes, sir," the two boys chimed together.

"All right, off with you," Dumbledore said, waving his hands to get them to move along.

He watched them ascend the stairs as Severus came up behind him.

"How do you know everything?" Severus asked.

"What do you mean, Severus?" Albus returned.

"You said we had guests and turned and left in the middle of our conversation. How did you know they were here?"

"Why, I just heard the door slam, Severus. Didn't you?" Albus turned to Severus with a curious look on his face.

Severus just rolled his eyes. "Never mind," he said in frustration. "You never give a straight answer anyway."

Severus turned and went back into the Great Hall to finish the final preparations for the feast. He missed Albus' Cheshire-cat-like grin.

oooOOoooo

Harry rifled through his belongings, searching for his overcoat. It was nowhere to be seen. Dudley and he had been hanging around in the Hufflepuff common room for the last couple of hours, but Harry had wanted to come up to his room before the feast. He was just about to go down to the Great Hall when he noticed his coat was missing. He must have dropped it on the way in to the castle. He bounded out of his room and began the long descent to the grounds, hoping he would find it before it got trampled on by the students.

Harry finally made it out to the grounds and followed the path down to the gate. He was sure he would find his coat lying on the ground somewhere between here and there. Lighting his wand, he began to search. After a few minutes, he noticed the coat lying just outside of the Hogwarts gates. He sighed in frustration, as the coat was lying in a puddle of mud. He went beyond the gates and lifted the coat from the ground. It dripped with goo. Harry waved his wand, uttered *Evanesco*, and watched the mud disappear from the coat.

Harry looked over his surroundings. He could see the line of carriages off in the distance, heading for the school. They would be here in a matter of minutes. But something was not right. He felt a chill run down his spine. He noticed that things around him were beginning to be covered in frost. He shot a few glances around him but saw nothing out of the ordinary, save the frost. Then out of nowhere a creature descended in front of him. It wore a large black cloak, and its face was invisible behind a great hood. Harry could not pull his eyes away from the creature as it floated in front of him. He felt a great despair sink over him as he looked to where the creature's eyes should be. Harry could not move. He felt himself becoming more despondent as his knees buckled underneath him. The last thing he heard was a woman's scream before he lost consciousness.

Not a second later there was a loud pop, and a man appeared out of nowhere. He saw a student passed out on the ground and a Dementor hovering over him.

Quickly the man extracted his wand and cried, "*Expecto Patronum*"

The Dementor shot away quickly, and the man rushed up to the wounded boy on the ground. He lifted him up and noticed the scar on his forehead. He looked over the boy carefully, making sure there were no visible injuries. After a minute, Harry began to stir. He opened his eyes and found a man he didn't recognize staring down at him.

"What happened?" Harry asked weakly.

"You were attacked by a Dementor," the man said.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a chocolate bar as Harry sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Eat this," the man ordered, "it will help."

Harry looked at the chocolate skeptically, then at the man.

"Who are you?" he asked suspiciously.

"I'm Remus Lupin, the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Take the chocolate, Harry, as I said before, it will help."

Harry took the chocolate and nibbled a piece off of the bar. He looked at the man again. He appeared to be haggard. There were great long scars running down the side of his face, and his eyes looking like they had seen too much for a man his age.

"How do you know my name?" Harry asked him.

"The scar," Lupin said as he pointed to Harry's head.

Harry rubbed the scar and smirked. "It's a dead giveaway, huh?"

Remus nodded.

"It's a good thing I decided to Apparate to the gates instead of taking the carriages," Lupin remarked as the first carriage pulled up to the gates. "You would certainly be nothing more than a shell by now had I not come along when I did."

"What was that thing that attacked me, sir?"

"That, my boy, was a Dementor."

Harry looked at Professor Lupin with fear. "Does that have anything to do with a Dementor's Kiss?"

"Yes, Harry. Dementors are the beings who give the kiss. How did you hear about the Dementor's Kiss?"

Harry explained his strange but brief ride on the Knight Bus. Professor Lupin helped Harry up, and they made their way to the school doors. Lupin explained more about Dementors and how they were the guards at Azkaban. The whole thing thoroughly gave Harry the creeps. Lupin quickly led Harry through the Great Hall and over to Madam Pomfrey, who took the boy into the Trophy room and examined him quickly. Declaring him fit, she released him, and he joined his friends, who were by now seated at the Gryffindor table. He quickly gave them a rundown of the events that had happened up until his arrival at their side.

"Those Dementors searched the train too!" Ron exclaimed.

"No one passed out, though," Hermione said thoughtfully.

Harry's eyebrows furrowed. Why had he collapsed if no one else had?

Dumbledore's voice echoed in the Hall, and all eyes turned to him. He explained about the Dementors and how the children should give them a wide berth. He apologized for the one which attacked Harry, as the Dementors had been told to stay away from the gates that evening, but the one had not followed orders. He emphasized the need for caution, as Sirius Black was on the loose, and even though the school was quite safe, no one could be too careful. He then clapped his hands, and the feast appeared.

Harry ate in silence, turning over in his mind all of the things that had happened in the last hour. Black wouldn't make an appearance here. There was no reason for him to come to Hogwarts. Or was there? Harry had visited the Weasleys for a week near the end of summer break. They had been excited about their recent trip to Egypt, and they

had filled him with stories about the trip. The family had even made the front page of *The Prophet*.

At one point he had caught Mr. Weasley and Mrs. Weasley talking about him secretly. They had said that Black would target him because he wanted revenge for what Harry had done to Voldemort. Hearing that had sent a shiver down Harry's spine, but he was not one to cower in the face of danger. If Black sought him out, Harry would not be held responsible for what he did to the man who led Voldemort to his parents.

oooOOooo

Harry knocked on the door to the Potions classroom. He heard a voice asking him to enter, so he swung the door open and walked in. He found the room to be empty.

"In the back!" the voice called again.

Harry walked to the door at the back of the classroom and peered into the private lab of Severus Snape. He had not seen it before, and his eyes widened as he surveyed it. It was just the right size for there to be two tables parallel to one another. On the back table was a cauldron being stirred by his Potions Professor. The other table was empty. Along the wall and in front of the table were shelves that held several different cauldrons, a few stirring rods, and many beakers and flasks. It looked like a Muggle chemistry room.

Harry turned his attention to Professor Snape, who was still stirring the cauldron with an unusual stirring rod. It looked like it was made of glass and had the head of a snake on it. The snake's head seemed to be looking at Snape as he stirred the draught vigorously.

"You wanted to see me, Professor?" Harry asked.

Severus took a second to look up. "I'll be with you in two minutes, Harry," he said and went back to his work.

The two minutes having elapsed, Severus removed the rod from the mixture and set it beside the cauldron. He walked over to Harry and motioned him to a set of chairs in the corner that Harry had failed to notice before. He sat in one and watched his professor do the same.

"I didn't get a chance to speak with you after the events that transpired at the end of last year. I take it you were able to recover fully?" Severus asked him.

Harry nodded his head.

"And you're feeling better after the Dementor attack?"

Harry screwed his face up but nodded.

"What is it, Harry?"

"Hermione and Ron told me that Dementors searched the train too, but no one passed out. I was wondering why I was so weak that I couldn't fight them off."

Severus looked Harry directly in the eyes. "Collapsing from a Dementor attack is not a sign of weakness, Harry."

"Then why am I the only one who fainted like a little girl?"

Severus smirked at his reference. "Harry, did Professor Lupin tell you what the Dementors feed on?"

Harry shook his head. "Yes, they suck all of the happiness out of a soul."

"I would think that very few people in this school have worse memories than you do. When all the happy parts of your life are taken from you, the horrors that are left are much more than anyone else your age would have to deal with. The intensity of the memories increases the Dementors control. It's no wonder you collapsed."

"I think I heard my mum screaming my name before I passed out."

Severus' jaw tightened as a picture of what that scene must have looked like was brought to the forefront of his mind.

"It seems that even at that young age, her death was horrible enough for you to have a memory of it."

"I had never thought of it before then."

Severus nodded his head. "The Dementors are artisans at bringing out memories that have been forgotten or repressed."

Harry shrugged, not wanting to talk about it any more. "You asked me after class to come by tonight. What's up?"

Severus arched an eyebrow at his forwardness. "I was wondering why you chose to go to that buffoon Lockhart instead of coming to me when you realized the truth about the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry watched Severus closely. Snape evidently had felt slighted by his oversight. That hadn't been Harry's intent at all.

"I would have come to you, but he was so adamant about knowing where the entry to the Chamber was when you were all gathered on the second floor. Ron and I thought that if we told him what we knew, he would be able to get Ginny out quicker."

"I see."

"By the time we realized he was just a big phony, it was too late. We had to take him with us. We were lucky Ron's wand backfired, or we'd both be babbling idiots."

"I hope you now realize the folly of your actions."

Harry looked up at Severus. "Of course, sir."

Severus sighed. "Harry, you have this tendency to go off half-cocked when you have an idea in your head. You will do yourself a grave disservice if you continue along this path. One day you will walk into a trap that you cannot extricate yourself from."

Harry looked down, duly chastised. "I know, sir. I've been thinking about that a lot this summer."

"I hope you have set some rules for yourself as to your conduct in the future," Severus advised.

"I have, sir. I won't let myself get so deeply involved in something that I don't think about the possible repercussions."

"You know, Harry, you can always come to me in such situations. I would be happy to help you sort things out if need be."

Harry glanced up at Severus. His face was impassive, but Harry could tell that his words were heartfelt.

"Thank you, sir. I will do so in the future."

Severus nodded and stood, signaling the end of their 'talk'. He wandered back to his potion.

"What's that you're working on, Professor?" Harry asked with interest.

"It's a Strengthening Solution," Severus told him.

"Doesn't that use snake skin in it?" Harry asked.

Severus looked up at Harry as he picked up his stirring rod. "Yes, it does."

Harry got a gleam in his eye. "Have you ever thought of substituting Basilisk skin?"

Severus harrumphed. "I would think that such an addition would make an incredibly potent potion. Unfortunately, because there are no Basilisks from which to get skin, it is a theory that shall remain untested."

"I know where you can find a Basilisk skin, sir." Harry said eagerly, trying to make up for not involving his Professor at the end of the last year.

Severus' head popped up as what Harry was saying dawned on him. "The Basilisk in the Chamber!" he cried in amazement.

Harry nodded and smiled conspiratorially. "Do you want to get some?" he asked Severus.

Severus' eyes lit up. Then he had second thoughts. Hadn't he just admonished Harry for going off half-cocked? He was an adult. He couldn't just go sliding down into the Chamber of Secrets just to prove a theory.

"Harry, it's not safe to go down there again. Didn't half of the Chamber collapse?"

"Oh, it's nothing a little wand work won't fix. Besides, the skin is located before the collapse. Come on. This could be an enormous breakthrough!"

"It's only a temporary one. There's only so much Basilisk skin available."

"So, what? They'll be talking about you for centuries to come, Professor!"

Severus groaned. "I am not in the potions business for fame."

"Then what's all that stuff you spout to the first-years on the first day of class every year?"

Severus gave Harry a caustic look. "Young man, I need not remind you who is the superior in this room."

"At least I'm not afraid to try something new."

Severus raised an eyebrow at that. The boy was an insufferable prat, trying to goad him into going down into the Chamber.

"I swear, sir. I killed the big, bad Basilisk already. There's really nothing to fear."

Severus harrumphed. "I am not fearful, Mr. Potter, just cautious. Remember, you try and get yourself killed at least once a year? That is the kind of thing I'm trying to avoid."

Harry laughed finally. "Oh, come on! The skin is just sitting there. It's near the entrance. It won't take any time at all to get some."

Severus thought about it and then chided himself for even giving the idea any credence. He then decided that he probably would never forgive himself if he didn't at least try to get the skin.

"All right, we'll go," he said finally.

"I knew you'd see things my way, sir," Harry beamed at him.

"Don't press your luck, Potter."

oooOOOooo

They were standing in the girls' bathroom, and Harry was fiddling with the sink. Finally he muttered something, and the entire sink fixture split apart, revealing a deep hole that led how far down, Severus didn't want to know.

"It's down there," Harry said.

Severus gave him a caustic look. "Really? I thought we'd have to go up into the ceiling and crawl through the rafters to get there." His sarcastic remark was emphasized by a wave at the ceiling.

Not catching his sarcasm, Harry just went on. "No, it's down there, alright."

Severus muttered to himself as he extracted his wand and waved it over the hole. A rope ladder attached itself to the edge of the hole and dropped down silently into it. It would descend until it reached the bottom.

"Well, now you've taken all the fun out of it," Harry murmured.

Severus looked at him in incredulity.

"No, really, you can't imagine how much fun it was to fall down that hole blindly. I thought I would have a heart attack before I reached the bottom."

Severus smiled at him. "After you, Mr. Potter."

Harry swung his legs onto the ladder and began his descent, closely followed by Severus. Down, down they went for quite some time. At times the tunnel almost leveled out, which made ladder climbing a bit difficult, but it would eventually head downward again, and they would find the traveling easier. Finally, Harry felt the familiar crunch of a thousand skeletons under his feet. He left the ladder and made room for Severus to find a spot on the floor. Extracting his wand, he said "*Lumos*," and a small part of the chamber was lit up so they could see.

By this time Severus had reached the ground and was surveying his surroundings with a grimace on his face. The skeletons of small animals were strewn about everywhere. There was no space left clean on the floor.

"The skin is this way," Harry said as he pointed his wand and started for the Basilisk's shed skin.

Severus followed closely behind, his own wand lit. They didn't have to go far before they came upon the skin. Severus' eyes widened as he examined the large skin. He had known that the creature was huge, but actually seeing the size of the skin made him appreciate its grandeur even more.

"It's gigantic," he muttered.

"It even looks bigger when it's on the Basilisk," Harry quipped.

"It's a miracle you survived, Harry."

"I had a little help from a Phoenix."

"Indeed," Severus replied.

Severus took a tiny bag from his pocket and enlarged it. Going up to the Basilisk skin, he used his wand like a surgeon's scalpel and sliced a two foot part of the skin away from the rest of the remains. He levitated the sample into the bag and closed it up. He shrunk it back down to its original size and placed it into his pocket.

"All right," he said, "I think that's all I'll need."

"Did you want to take a look around?" Harry asked.

Severus regarded Harry with disdain. "Not really. What's to see anyway, some huge, dead snake?"

"The stonework is rather intricate," Harry mused.

"Ah... stonework... sounds fascinating."

"You're really a party pooper, you know that?" Harry told him blatantly.

"Yes, I've been known to destroy a party or two in my day. Let's just go. I can feel the Dark Lord's presence lingering, and I want to be nowhere near it."

Harry's eyes grew wide. "You can feel Voldemort? But Riddle was destroyed, and his spirit, or whatever, wasn't even in this part of the Chamber."

"Perhaps it's not Voldemort, per se, just evil in general. Can you not feel it?"

Harry stood still for a moment and tried to get in touch with his inner self. He tried to feel the evil but only got a sense of fear.

"I'm just creeped out by this place. I don't really feel any evil. It is somewhat frightening, I guess."

Severus nodded. Perhaps it was the fact that he was older and more experienced with evil. Perhaps it was because he had made evil a close friend, but it was unmistakable to him, whether Harry could feel it or not.

"Maybe places like this just exude evil because of their very nature," Severus mused as Harry looked at him curiously.

"Come," Severus ordered. "We have gotten what we came for. Let us leave this place."

Harry nodded and followed him back to the pipe that would lead to their freedom.

oooOOOooo

Back in his lab, Severus removed the bag from his pocket again and returned it to its original size. Donning gloves, he picked up the skin and examined it closely. It was very thick and leathery. He knew that on the Basilisk itself, the skin would be as hard as dragon hide, but this seemed quite a bit suppler. He could still see the scale pattern pressed into it. It was remarkably beautiful for something so hideous. He debated on how much to use in the potion. He knew Basilisk fangs were fatally poisonous, but the skin was not reputed to be dangerous to ingest. He used his wand and cut a tiny piece off of the skin. It was no bigger than a stick of gum. Taking his knife, he sliced it thinly as he would the snake skin that was used in this potion. He gathered the slices and then diced them evenly. Harry sat in the chair in the corner and watched him work. Finally Severus had scooped the diced skins up into his gloved hand and looked up to Harry.

"Here it goes. If the cauldron explodes, please see that I get a decent funeral."

"I didn't know bats got funerals when they died," Harry quipped. A huge smirk covered his face.

Severus' only response was a raised eyebrow. He was concentrating on the potion too seriously to continue the banter.

Harry smirked at him again as he watched Severus drop the skins into the cauldron, lift his rod, and begin the tedious task of stirring the potion. It would need to be stirred for fifteen minutes in a clockwise direction, then another fifteen minutes counterclockwise.

There was no immediate explosion, although quite a bit of smoke rose from the cauldron with the addition of the Basilisk skin. Severus seemed to stir forever, and Harry's mind wandered as his gaze became blurry, and he began to think of other things. Finally, Severus stopped stirring and removed the rod from the cauldron. Harry rose and went up to him.

"Well, you're still alive so far. Do you think it worked?"

"I'll have to test it to be sure."

"Do you really want to try it? What if the Basilisk skin is poisonous?"

Severus didn't say anything but went into the main classroom. He took a cage off of a shelf and brought it back into the lab. Harry saw that there were three white mice in the cage.

"Our test subjects," Severus offered as he pulled one mouse from the cage and made it drink some of the potion from a spoon.

He placed the mouse back in the cage and watched it carefully for adverse reactions. The mouse seemed to be fine.

"How long will the potion take to work?" Harry asked.

"It should be effective within one minute, if not sooner."

They watched together in rapt attention as the mouse wandered in the cage with its friends. Suddenly the mouse began to run. It ran circles around the edge of the cage. Every lap around it the mouse seemed to run faster. Soon it was almost a blur, ringing the cage speedily.

"Wow," Harry muttered.

"Wow, indeed," Severus repeated.

"Let's see what else this little guy can do," Severus said as he lifted the cage door and tried to catch the mouse.

It proved impossible as the mouse was too fast for him. But they really didn't need to come up with a different solution as the mouse stopped for a minute and then made a

mad dash for the cage wall. It burst through the metal bars as if they were made of paper and scurried away, breaking a hole through the door as it ran off.

"I think Dumbledore is going to be angry with you that you let Mighty Mouse off on his own."

"It's not like I had a choice!" Severus retorted.

Harry laughed at his professor's clipped tone. "How long will the potion last?"

Severus sighed. "An hour. I hope that rat doesn't destroy the whole castle by then."

"Maybe it will just find a nice hole in the wall and fall asleep."

"We can only hope."

oooOOOooo

Of course, the mouse didn't find a hole and fall asleep. It decided to torture the Slytherin girls' dorm. Somehow it found its way in there, and Pansy Parkinson was the first to see it. She screamed like a banshee and jumped onto a chair. The mouse got skittery after the shriek and rushed at the chair, knocking a leg off of it and sending Pansy crashing to the floor. The other girls in the room began to scream too as they saw Pansy tumble to the ground. Pansy scurried off the floor in an instant, and they all jumped on their beds. It wasn't until Severus came in almost half an hour later and caught the creature that they finally got down and stopped screaming.

"For Merlin's sake, girls, it's just a mouse! Quit screaming!" he bellowed as he entered the room, closely followed by Draco Malfoy, who had alerted Severus to where the mouse had gone.

"Have you seen where it went?" he asked the shrieking girls.

Lucinda Wright stopped screaming for a minute and pointed to a corner of the room behind one of the girl's trunks. Severus slinked over and levitated the trunk out of the way. There sat the tiny mouse, looking scared. Severus had come prepared with a titanium box. He doubted that even Mighty Mouse, as Harry had dubbed him, would be able to break free from that trap.

Flicking his wand, he said, "*Accio mouse.*"

The mouse sailed through the air and landed in the box. Severus shut the lid with a clang. The four girls stopped screaming and gasped for air. Slowly, they each got off their beds.

"Now, I hope you all can have a quiet rest of the night," Severus chided them. "I do not want to be bothered with reports of other four legged creatures tormenting you. If they appear, ignore them!"

With that, Severus stalked out of the room, metal box and mouse in hand.

oooOOOooo

Severus was back in his lab, and Harry was eyeing the Titanium box with unease.

"Are you sure it can't escape from there?"

Severus eyed him with contempt. "Of course not, it's made of Titanium."

The mouse had been still up until now, but it began to move again, making dents in the box as it rammed itself against the sides in an attempt to escape. Severus regarded it curiously, now wondering with Harry if the small creature was fully contained.

"I think we should forgo the experiments on the other two," Harry mused. His eyes never left the box.

"Yes, I believe you're right." Severus muttered. "I suppose it is time for a human trial. Would you like to volunteer?"

Harry looked to Severus nervously. "Now wait a minute! I never said I was going to be your guinea pig, Professor. I just had the idea."

Severus gave him a wicked smile. "All the more reason for you to be the test subject."

Harry's eyes grew wide, and he took a step back. "What if part of that potion makes me crazy like that mouse? What if it's not just the mouse's personality? What if the potion never wears off?"

"Harry," Severus said more seriously. "I was just kidding about you trying it. I want to bring a sample to Albus first to get his feelings on having a human try it out."

Harry visibly relaxed. "Oh, okay," he said softly.

Severus laughed. "You are easily duped, Mr. Potter. I suppose that gets us even for you calling me a bat earlier."

Harry laughed too.

oooOOOooo

Albus eyed the vial filled with greenish-yellow fluid. He then looked to the box on his desk, which held the mouse test subject. Small dents peppered the box, but the mouse had not escaped its prison. He looked up at Severus.

"So, you decided to go down into the Chamber of Secrets, take some Basilisk skin, make a potion with it, and administer it to a mouse. I suppose I should be happy you didn't just go ahead and knock back a flask yourself."

Severus raised an eyebrow at Albus.

"Headmaster, I'm sure you'll agree that if this potion works, it could be a new era in Strengthening Solutions."

"Yes, and will probably instill a great desire to illegally raise Basilisks by some less than honorable Potions masters, yourself excluded, of course."

"Albus, do you think the potion is safe to be tried on a human subject?" Severus asked while ignoring Dumbledore's comment.

"Has the potion worn off the mouse yet?" Albus questioned.

Severus checked his watch. "If it works like normal Strengthening Solution, it should have stopped working fifteen minutes ago."

"Ah, then it should be safe to open the box?" Albus asked.

Severus nodded.

Albus took the box and unlocked and lifted the lid. The mouse was cowering in a corner but looked no worse for wear. Albus tentatively put his hand into the box and lifted the small creature out. He examined it fully and then placed the mouse on his desk. The little animal began to move slowly around the desk sniffing at its surroundings.

"It seems to be okay," Harry said.

Albus took a lemon drop and placed it in front of the mouse. It began to lick at it. He studied the mouse for several minutes. There seemed to be no adverse reactions on the mouse's part. He looked up to Severus.

"There's no chance it will fall over dead in a few hours?" he asked him.

Severus arched an eyebrow. "There's always a chance, but the possibility is slim."

Albus crossed his arms in front of him. "So, who do you have in mind to test it?"

"Well, I was just going to..."

"No, Severus, you can't test it on yourself. You're the only one who can save whoever takes it if it winds up being harmful. I will try it."

"Albus, I didn't come here to force you to take an untested potion," Severus bellowed.

"Nonsense! I am eager to see how it works. Now monitor my vitals in case something goes awry."

With that, he unstopped the bottle and downed the potion without further argument. Severus pulled his wand out and began to wave it to monitor Albus. Everything seemed to be alright when suddenly Albus' face turned purple. There were no other signs of distress, but the odd color was worrisome enough.

"Are you alright, Professor?" Harry asked.

"It's a strange feeling, but I feel that I am in no danger." He looked around his office until his eyes fell on the titanium box. His face had finally returned to its original color.

"Perhaps a little test of strength?" he uttered.

Severus nodded as he looked to the box also. Dumbledore picked it up in both hands and looked at it for a minute. Then he crumpled it up into a ball as if it were a piece of paper. He looked down at the box in surprise.

"Well, well, well, it would seem that your new addition has worked wonders for this potion, Severus. I used little effort to crush that box."

Severus' only response was the lifting of his eyebrow.

"Let's go to the Defense classroom and try some hand to hand fighting," Albus suggested.

"Harry," Severus looked to the boy. "Get Madam Pomfrey, and ask her to meet us in the Defense classroom. Have her bring any healing draughts, some Skele-gro, and anything else she might deem necessary to heal someone wounded in a fistfight."

Harry gave a quick nod and left the room.

oooOOOooo

A little while later, Severus lay in a bed in the infirmary. Albus had gone lightly, but he still had broken three of Severus' ribs. He had managed to blacken both of Severus' eyes, and there had been bruises all over his body. Poppy had patched him up in the Defense classroom, and his face was now back to normal, but she insisted that he spend the night in the infirmary. It seemed that the potion had worked better than anyone had expected.

Severus pondered the meaning of that. With a few more experiments behind him, he would have a marketable potion. Of course, being the only one with access to the main ingredient of the potion, Severus could become a very rich man. With the small amount of Basilisk skin needed, Severus figured he could brew the potion far into the next century without worry of running out of skin.

oooOOOooo

After a few more experiments, Severus had gotten the potion to a state that was safe for the person ingesting it. He had ultimately reduced the amount of Basilisk skin by half, which kept the subject from turning purple as the potion went into effect. The level of strength had diminished. No one would be crushing titanium boxes when under its influence, but it was still extremely potent. Someone ingesting it would never lose a fight. It did not increase magical ability, nor did it decrease it, but Severus found that taking it too often left him lightheaded for days afterward. Like the *Felix Felicis* Potion, it was a potion that could not be taken on a regular basis.

He had submitted his findings to the Ministry of Magic, and they had readily approved his request to market the potion. They, in fact, created a Contract of Exclusivity with him immediately, which meant that he would be distributing the potion to the Ministry and the Ministry alone. Minister Fudge thought it would be a great asset for his Aurors and didn't want the stuff leaking out to the public. The fee they settled on had made Severus quite a rich man. Bottle fame, brew glory, and stopper death indeed!

A/N: Next up: Is the Werewolf helping the Dog?

Hope you liked it. There have been quite a few questions about Lucius. Yes, he's still a Death Eater. He just doesn't hate Muggle-borns like he did before, and he's not quite as snobby because of it. He has no interest in going against anything Voldemort preached. He loves his status as a Death Eater. It makes him feel powerful.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 of 46

The rat is exposed.

Hermione's third year continued:

"Who can tell me the difference between an Animagus and a Werewolf?" Severus queried. He was filling in for Lupin, teaching his classes for him, as the Werewolf was 'under the weather' from his transformations.

Hermione's hand shot up as he knew it would. He looked around at the rest of the class and saw nothing but blank faces. He sighed and called on Hermione who gave a perfect textbook answer to the question. He continued to lecture, and her hand was raised constantly, eager to answer every question he posed to the class.

"Miss Granger, a word after class," he snapped while scowling at her, staying in his spy character.

When she approached his desk a little later, she looked apprehensive.

"Miss Granger, I'm sorry I snapped at you earlier, but I don't wish for anyone to think that I tolerate you and your friends in the least."

Hermione nodded. She knew about Severus being a spy because Harry had been given permission to divulge the fact to Ron and Hermione. She knew that sometimes he was harder on them because he didn't want his cover blown. She greatly respected the man and was glad that his sourness was not truly heartfelt.

"I feel the need to give you some advice, Miss Granger," he said.

She looked at him curiously, but said nothing.

"All of your teachers are well aware of how intelligent you are. We don't need to be showered with your knowledge every minute of the day." Severus hesitated. He didn't want to sound so nasty. Softening his tone, he went on.

"I'm just trying to say that you don't need to answer every question. The other students seem to resent your constant hand waving. I believe you might have an easier go of it if they didn't think you were trying to show off."

"I'm not trying to show off, sir," she said as she looked to the ground.

Severus watched her for a moment. "I know that, Miss Granger, but your peers do not. Just consider what I've said. Your teachers will not think less of you if you are somewhat quieter in class than you usually are."

Hermione looked up at him with sadness. "I just..."

He cut her off. "I know, Miss Granger. I too wanted the respect of my teachers as a youth. I didn't go about it the same way you do, but I sought their attention as well. Believe me when I say you have that respect already."

Hermione looked at him for a long time before finally saying anything. "Thank you, Professor, I appreciate the advice."

She turned and left the room. Severus sighed. He wished his Hermione was here. He had no idea how to relate to the child that had just left the room. He tripped over his words and found it very awkward to speak with her. He felt comfort from her presence but longed for the woman she would become. He knew it would be harder and harder to distance himself from her as the years went on and she grew into someone who resembled his Hermione more and more. Distance was the last thing he wanted anyway. The closer she was, the better he felt. Perhaps he could foster a friendship without having his heart shattered.

oooOOOooo

Severus sat in his room, thinking. He was sitting on one of two dark green couches that sat in front of the fireplace. He had a perfect view out of the enchanted window that made up the wall in front of him. It showed a view of the lake both above and below water. Every so often a few fish would swim by, or a Grindylow would peer out at him. Of course, there really was no window, the whole thing was made by a spell, but it was still quite mesmerizing.

Severus, however, was not paying attention to the sea life that swam by his window. His thoughts were on a much darker subject. Sirius Black had been wreaking havoc throughout the school. Severus secretly thought that Black's old friend Remus Lupin was helping the murderer. He was furious that Lupin would endanger the students in such a way. Of course, he had no proof, and Dumbledore just dismissed his theory, so there was not much he could do but watch and wait.

The escaped prisoner had gotten into the school twice now, the last time right into Harry Potter's room, almost killing Ron Weasley. Things had gotten out of hand. Someone was letting Black into the school. It had to be Lupin because no one else would be foolish enough to help the murderer. Severus would double his efforts in watching Lupin. He was sure that the werewolf would give himself away eventually, and Severus wanted to be the one who found Black. It would be sweet revenge for his treachery against Lily.

oooOOOooo

Severus rounded the corner and illuminated his wand. He found Harry Potter standing there in the pitch black.

"Harry, what are you doing prowling the halls in the middle of the night? Do you need to serve a detention to learn you are to stay in your dorm after curfew?"

Harry looked sheepish. "Sorry, Professor, I couldn't sleep."

Severus raised an eyebrow at him. The boy was no good at lying.

"Why are you really down here, Harry?"

Harry looked a bit shifty-eyed. "No reason, sir."

Severus gave Harry a look of exasperation. "Turn out your pockets, Mr. Potter."

Harry frowned and emptied his pockets, revealing the parchment that was the Marauder's Map.

Severus took the parchment and examined it.

"What's this?" he inquired.

"It's parchment, sir."

Severus leveled his gaze at Harry.

"I am well aware of that. Why do you have it?"

Harry shrugged.

Severus looked sternly at Harry and placed his wand on the Map. "I would expect you to be a little more forthcoming, Mr. Potter, but if this is how you want to be... *Reveal your secrets,*" he ordered.

Messers Mooney, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs congratulate Messer Snape in finding the secret to this parchment, the Map read.

It then began to spew insults at him, making fun of his nose, his hair, and his appearance in general. It wrote that Hogwarts must certainly be desperate if Messer Snape was a professor there. It then urged Severus to take a bath. It suggested he look into creating a potion that would shrink his nose to a suitable size.

That way, you wouldn't be sticking it in other people's business. Have you never heard of the word privacy? the map queried.

Severus shook with rage as he sneered down at Harry.

"Is this some kind of joke?" he bellowed.

Harry had been reading along with Severus and now looked at him in horror.

"No sir! I swear, sir. I didn't know it could write stuff like that! I would never..."

At that moment, Remus Lupin wandered up.

"Ah, Severus, Harry, how are you both this evening?"

Severus chucked the parchment at Lupin. "What do you make of this?" he asked him suspiciously.

Lupin looked down at the parchment, and his eyes grew wide. "Well, it looks like a joke from Zonko's if you ask me."

Severus narrowed his eyes at him. "Those names up top, they mean nothing to you?"

Remus looked over the names and shrugged. "I've never heard of them before."

Now Severus gave Remus a look of incredulity. "You don't say?"

"I'll tell you what, Severus, I'll examine this more closely. Just to make sure it's not dangerous."

"Dangerous... but, Remus... you said it was just a simple joke."

"Well," Remus chuckled nervously, "one can never be too sure, now, can they?"

He turned to Harry. "Why don't you come with me, Harry? I'd like to know where you got this."

Harry nodded but said nothing. Severus looked over at him and pointed his wand into Harry's chest.

"No more lurking about in the dark, Mr. Potter. Is that understood? We will discuss this in more depth later."

Harry nodded vigorously and walked off with Lupin. Severus watched them as they walked out of sight. He wasn't sure what Lupin was up to, but he knew that Remus knew exactly what that parchment was all about. He was Mooney after all.

oooOOooo

Severus was standing in the Room of Requirement with his arms folded when Harry walked in. He appraised Harry for a moment before speaking.

"Did you come up with a better excuse for your wanderings the other night?" Severus asked caustically.

"Sir, I really don't have an answer for you," Harry said in defeat.

"Fine, what was that parchment?"

Harry looked to the ground.

"Why are you keeping secrets from me?" Severus demanded. "I thought we were allies."

"We are, sir."

"Then tell me what that bloody parchment was!" Severus snapped.

Harry's eyes grew wide as he realized that Severus would not let him keep this secret from him. "It's a map... a map of Hogwarts. It shows everyone in it and where they are in the castle. It even shows if they're moving or not."

"That's very clever. How did you get a hold of such a map, Harry?"

"Fred and George gave it to me. They stole it from Filch's desk in their first year. They thought I would have some protection if I could see everyone in the castle. They said I could tell if Sirius Black was there and be ready if he was going to attack me."

Where's the map now?" Severus asked.

"Professor Lupin has it. He said he needed to keep it. He said that the school was safe, and he was sure Black wouldn't get into the school again. He did tell me not to underestimate Black though." Harry scowled a bit. "If he felt Black shouldn't be underestimated, why did he keep the map?"

Severus thought about what Lupin had told Harry. If he were helping Sirius, of course he wouldn't want Harry to have the map. Lupin also would do his best to assure Harry that he was safe, giving him a false sense of security.

"I think you should still be on your guard, Harry. Black got in twice already, and the last time he was close enough to kill you. You should not think that everything is well when there is such danger about."

Harry nodded. "I agree with you. I have kept my eyes and ears open for signs of Black, but it would be easier to look for him with that map."

Severus nodded. "Perhaps we can get it back."

Harry arched an eyebrow at him.

"You're not suggesting stealing that map, are you, Professor?"

Severus arched an eyebrow back. "Why, of course not, Harry. Perhaps we could simply *borrow* it until all of this Black business is settled."

"The map's faulty anyway."

"What makes you say that?" Severus asked.

"I saw a name on the map that couldn't possibly be there," Harry told him.

"Whose name?"

"Peter Pettigrew's."

Severus' eyes widened.

"That's why I was in the hall that night," Harry admitted finally. "I had seen Pettigrew's name on the map. When I went to Hogsmeade on the last trip, I overheard Professor McGonagall talking to Minister Fudge and Rosmerta about him and how Black had killed him. I knew Pettigrew was dead, but there was his name on the map. I had to investigate it. But as I was studying the map he walked right by me on it. It was before you came along, and I didn't see anyone in the hall but you. There must be something wrong with the map."

"Did you tell Lupin all of this?"

Harry nodded.

"And what was his assessment?"

"He said I was right. The map was malfunctioning somehow."

Severus only nodded, deep in thought.

"You say the map showed Pettigrew walking right by you, but you saw nothing?"

"That's right."

"It sounds pretty faulty to me. Maybe we should just leave it where it is. If it's giving false names, it will be no use in tracking Black."

Harry hated to admit it, but he had to agree.

Severus handed him a dark blue bag. Harry looked at it curiously.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's a share of the profits from my Strengthening Solution."

"But I didn't brew it!" Harry exclaimed.

"I know that, but if it hadn't been for you, I would have never gotten my hands on the Basilisk skin. I appreciate your help. It has turned out to be a very lucrative discovery."

"Professor, I can't accept this."

"Harry, it would be unfair for me to reap all of the rewards when you obviously had a good deal to do with the creation of this potion. Think of it as a finder's fee."

"Really, Professor, I don't need this. I have more than enough money for what I need."

"That's beside the point. I would be remiss to not give this to you. Now don't argue any more and accept it graciously."

Harry smiled at Severus. "Okay, Professor, but it's mine to do with as I wish, correct?"

Severus nodded.

Harry pocketed the bag and withdrew his wand. "Then thank you, Professor. I really appreciate it."

Severus sent a hex at him silently, and Harry shielded it. They continued sparring for quite some time before Harry left with his new-found wealth.

oooOOOooo

Harry went straight up to Dumbledore's office and told the Gargoyle that he needed to see the Headmaster. Soon the Gargoyle slid aside, and Dumbledore appeared in the hallway in front of Harry.

"Professor Dumbledore, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Harry, my boy, do come up! We'll have a chat."

They ascended the stairs, and soon Harry was seated across from the Headmaster. He put the bag of Galleons on Dumbledore's desk.

"Professor Snape just gave these to me as recompense for helping him with his Strengthening Solution," Harry explained.

Dumbledore looked at the bag of gold curiously.

"I appreciate his sentiment, but I have no need for the money." Harry hesitated a moment. "I was wondering if this could somehow wind up on the Weasleys' doorstep... anonymously, of course."

Dumbledore gave a low chuckle. "My boy, that is a wonderful idea. I wish I had thought of it myself. I shall see that this gets delivered to a safe place in the Burrow, and they will have no clue where it came from. If you'd like, I'll leave an anonymous note with it."

Harry nodded. "That's a great idea, Professor."

"I'll deliver it tonight after they have gone to bed."

Harry rose. "Thank you, Professor. I can't imagine a family that could benefit more from this."

"Quite right, Harry, quite right." Albus replied.

oooOOOooo

The next morning Arthur Weasley was awakened to his wife shrieking his name from downstairs in the kitchen. He shot out of bed and down the stairs only to be accosted by her throwing her arms around him.

"Oh! It's a miracle, Arthur, it's a miracle!" she cried.

Arthur hugged her back and asked, "Just what's a miracle, Molly?"

"This!" she exclaimed as she handed the parchment to Arthur. He quickly read the note.

Dear Weasley Family,

I recently came into some money, and being comfortable in my status was not needful of it. I hope you will accept this gift as a token of my esteem for your wonderful family. Please use it any way you see fit.

Sincerely,

A friend

Arthur looked curiously at Molly. She held up a dark blue bag that jingled when she moved it. Arthur stared at it in amazement.

"How much is in there?" he asked, afraid to really find out.

"I don't know," Molly cried, "but it's full of Galleons! There must be hundreds in there!"

A quick counting spell confirmed Molly's guess. There were in fact, 1,000 Galleons in the bag. Arthur and Molly exchanged glances, thinking of all of the things 1,000 Galleons would provide for their family in the year to come. Molly looked to Arthur with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Arthur, it's a dream come true!"

Arthur hugged his wife lovingly. "It sure is, Molly, it sure is."

oooOOOooo

Severus had gone to Lupin's room with his Wolfsbane potion, but when he got there, he found the door ajar and the room empty. He decided to leave the potion on Lupin's desk. He wandered over to the desk and was surprised to find the Map he had taken from Potter unfolded on it. The map showed all of the grounds of Hogwarts. It showed everyone who was at the school in tiny lettering which floated to represent movement. He quickly looked over the map after placing the potion down. He saw his name in Lupin's room and quickly looked for Lupin. He found instead, the names of the Golden Trio out on the lawn heading for the Whomping Willow. There was another name with them. Peter Pettigrew. Severus wondered at that. If the map was faulty, then perhaps the three friends weren't on the grounds at all but safely in their common room. Nonetheless, he knew that the three of them were constantly sneaking around trying to solve the world's problems, so it was more likely that they were indeed roaming the school grounds. He watched the map as Ron Weasley and Peter Pettigrew's names disappeared. Looking at the map curiously, he watched Harry and Hermione's names disappear a minute later.

Unsure of the maps veracity, he decided to investigate. Hoping he wasn't too late, he rushed out of Lupin's room. He needed to get to them quickly before they got themselves killed or a Dementor decided to kiss them. He quickly headed out of castle and out onto the grounds. Finding Harry's invisibility cloak on the ground, he covered himself with it and entered the Willow's secret passage. He quickly made his way to the shrieking shack to find where the trio had gone.

Meanwhile in the shack there was a heated discussion going on. Hermione was accusing Lupin of helping Black. Then Lupin was explaining. He told them of his dangerous transformations and of being friends with James, Sirius, and Pettigrew. He revealed that they were animagi and that Sirius had lured Snape into the Whomping Willow with the express purpose of trying to turn him into a werewolf. He explained his concern when Harry had seen Pettigrew's name on the Marauders Map. He told them who the Marauders were and then gave some impossible theory that Pettigrew was actually the rat owned by Weasley.

All the while Harry was looking at Lupin strangely. When Lupin's tale was done, Harry spoke.

"You were part of the group of four that tormented Professor Snape in school?"

The door banged open, and everyone jumped. None of them realized that Severus stood there under the invisibility cloak. Ron muttered something about ghosts and the Shack being haunted.

"Professor Lupin already explained that to us, Ron," Hermione explained.

"Oh, yeah," Ron muttered.

Harry looked back to Lupin. "You were saying?"

Lupin blanched and looked embarrassed. "Harry, the things I did were stupid. I went along with the group to keep my friends."

Sirius scoffed at Lupin. "Oh, the bat deserved what he got! He was always dabbling in the Dark Arts and strutting around like he knew everything!"

Harry pointed his wand at Sirius. "You almost killed him! You wanted him to become a werewolf! He could have been killed had Professor Lupin attacked him."

Sirius looked to the ground. "It was a foolish prank. I hadn't realized the possibilities when I sent him to the Willow."

Harry did not look appeased. "Why would you and my father torment him like that?"

Sirius sneered. "Because it was easy, alright? He was an easy target. He was odd and kept to himself. He became a Death Eater for heaven's sake! He deserved everything he got!"

Lupin interrupted Sirius' rant. "We could have been nicer, Sirius. We were horrible to him!"

Harry looked to Lupin, but motioned to Sirius with his wand. "Did my father feel the same way he did?"

Remus furrowed his brow. "Not to the same extent. I think he just had fun tormenting people. Like Sirius said, Severus was an easy target; he was disliked by everyone and so there were few repercussions."

"Enough of this idle prattle!" Sirius roared crazily. "I came here to kill, and I want my revenge!"

"And you shall have it, my friend!" Remus replied.

Severus' eyes widened. Lupin had been helping Black all of this time, just as he had suspected. Severus threw the Invisibility cloak aside and drew his wand. Sending a flurry of ropes at Lupin, he bound him and turned his wand onto Black.

"Finally you shall receive your just punishment for all that you have done, Black, and I am happy to be the one who has finally caught you!"

"Snivellus, calm down. You have jumped to the wrong conclusion yet again," Black grumbled.

Severus' eyes narrowed at Black, and he moved his wand to point at the door.

"After you, *murderer*," he said menacingly.

"Professor, wait!" Harry cried.

Severus' head snapped to Harry.

"Professor Lupin is sure that Peter Pettigrew is alive and that he's the rat. That's why he came here, to make Peter take his human form. And that could be why I saw his name on the Map!"

"Potter... Pettigrew is dead at Black's hand!" Severus growled.

"Please, Professor," Hermione begged. "What if Professor Lupin is right? Then Sirius Black is innocent."

"Severus, let me show you!" Lupin pleaded.

Severus looked between Potter, Hermione, Lupin, and Black. He was unsure of what to do. For all these years he had assumed that Black had been Voldemort's puppet, leaking the location of the Potter home to him and then killing Pettigrew. Now it appeared that there was another possible explanation about the story. Should he believe these outrageous accusations or just take Black to his disturbing future?

Suddenly something Hermione said long ago came to his mind. She had said that Lily and James had been 'ratted' out by one of their friends. She had known the truth of the matter and whether Lupin's crazy story was real or not. Had that 'rat' reference been a play on words? If that was so, then the outrageous story about Pettigrew could be true! As he remembered back, he realized that she always was a bit aloof to Pettigrew. He remembered the incident where she allowed him to hex him repeatedly during their duel. Could she have been paying him back somehow without being able to reveal it?

Making his decision, he turned his wand onto Lupin and released him from his bonds. Taking careful aim with his wand, he pointed it back at Black.

"Make your case quickly, Lupin, or I will do the Dementor's work myself!" Severus demanded.

Lupin turned to the rat and chanted the incantation to return him to his human form. Scabbers struggled in Ron's hands and then started to grow. Before all of their eyes, he had turned into a rat-like man sniveling at Sirius' feet. Severus shifted his wand so it pointed at the traitor.

"Sirius, Sirius, I had no choice!" Pettigrew groveled. "The Dark Lord, he scared me. I'm not brave like you. He forced me to do it! I swear! He was going to kill me! You have to believe me! I wouldn't have done it, but he made me."

Sirius looked to Pettigrew in disgust. "You're disgusting. You betrayed them. You're nothing but a coward!"

"All right," Severus said. "Let's get out of here. Pettigrew, perhaps it is you who will receive the Dementor's kiss this night."

Severus motioned for Pettigrew to lead the way and carefully followed him, never letting his wand stray from the man's back. He was followed by Black and Lupin. Hermione and Harry supported Ron as he hobbled out of the shack.

The party emerged from the Willow and began the walk to the school. Suddenly Remus began to whimper. Sirius looked to the sky.

"It's the full moon! It's rising!" he cried.

Severus turned to Lupin, his eyes wide. "The Wolfsbane potion... I left it on your desk!"

Remus looked to the group in fear as he began to shake. They all watched in horror as he transformed into a werewolf, his nose became elongated, and his frame shot up and ripped his clothes off of him. Hair sprouted out all over him. Finally the transformation was complete, and Lupin raised his head and howled at the moon.

Pettigrew saw his chance and took it. While everyone was mesmerized by Lupin's transformation, the traitor shrunk himself back into his rat shape and scurried away, but not before Severus and Harry both shot spells at him to try to stop him. Unfortunately in the dark and with everything else that was going on, both missed their target, and the rat scurried away.

Severus turned back to the werewolf and motioned for the three students to get behind him as he shielded them from certain death. Sirius reverted to his dog form to try to distract the wolf, but Lupin came at the four humans instead. They backed away quickly. Becoming desperate, Sirius jumped on Lupin and bit him lightly on his shoulder. The wolf turned in agony and beat off the dog. He scurried into the night, closely followed by the Werewolf.

Harry cried Sirius' name and bounded after him. Severus tried to grab Harry's clothing, but the boy was too fast. Severus turned to Hermione and Ron.

"Can you get him back to the school?" he asked Hermione, his hand grasping her arm.

"But, Professor... Harry!" Hermione argued.

"I will find Harry. You need to get back to the school. If the wolf doubles back, he will attack you."

"Okay, sir. I'll get Ron back safely," Hermione said solemnly.

Severus waved his wand, and a stretcher appeared. He helped Ron ease himself onto it. Looking back to Hermione, he gave her instructions.

"Go right back to the school. Do not play hero! You and Ron need to get to safety. I will look for Potter, and I will find him. I will keep him safe if I can."

Hermione and Ron nodded to him and set off for the school. Severus watched them for a minute and then turned to search for the Boy-Who-Was-Too-Brave-For-His-Own-Good. He ran through the forest, searching everywhere, but found nothing. He stopped for a moment to listen to his surroundings. He didn't hear anything. There were no werewolf cries, no footsteps... nothing. He ran on, knowing he would find them eventually.

After a while of constant searching, Severus saw a great light up ahead. He shielded his eyes and ran forward, knowing he had found something. He emerged from the forest to see Harry collapsed over Black's body. Looking to the sky, he noticed the Dementors making a hasty retreat, being chased by a Stag Patronus. He arched an eyebrow and raced to Harry.

He turned Harry over and examined him, noting there were no serious injuries. Harry regained consciousness for a moment and looked up at Severus.

"Sirius... Dementors... the Patronus," he stuttered.

"It's okay," Severus told him. "The Dementors are gone, you're both safe."

Harry fell back into unconsciousness. Severus placed him gently back on the ground, conjured up two stretchers, and levitated the two unconscious men onto them. He turned and headed them back to Hogwarts and the infirmary.

oooOOOooo

Some time later, Severus was in a heated discussion with Dumbledore.

"Why did they have to lock him up in the tower?" Severus raged. "He is innocent. I saw Pettigrew with my own eyes!"

"Severus," Dumbledore said softly, "the Ministry does not believe you. They think that you were under a spell set by Black."

Severus scoffed. "That's the most ludicrous thing I have ever heard!"

Dumbledore continued. "The people want safety. If it came out that Black was innocent and the real culprit was still at large, there would be more panic. The Ministry wants to keep order. It's much easier for them if the population just thinks that Black was the culprit and that he's been taken care of with the Dementor's Kiss. Of course, if you had been able to bring Pettigrew in, there would be no argument whatsoever about any of this, but the Ministry is set to give Black the Kiss within the hour."

Severus frowned to himself. Despite his hatred for Black, he could not condone the punishment of an innocent man, especially such a permanent punishment.

"Is there nothing we can do?" he asked Albus hopefully.

"I have a plan that, if put in motion, will save two innocent souls," Dumbledore said cryptically.

"And of course, you cannot tell me what that plan is," Severus said caustically.

Dumbledore patted Severus' shoulder. "I would rather not, my boy."

With that, Dumbledore shoed Severus and all other non essential persons out of the infirmary and turned to speak with Hermione Granger.

oooOOOooo

Severus entered the infirmary hurriedly. He looked around for Dumbledore, but he was nowhere to be seen. He went over to Harry's bed.

"Have you seen Professor Dumbledore?" he asked Harry.

Harry gave him an innocent look. "Not since he left a few minutes ago."

Severus could tell Harry was hiding something. His gaze strayed to Hermione, who was seated next to Harry's bed. She was looking a bit nervous, as if she too were hiding something.

"Perhaps the answers I seek are contained in this room?" he said cryptically.

"What answers would that be, sir?" Harry asked.

Severus looked to Hermione. "It seems that Sirius Black has disappeared into thin air. He didn't Disapparate. I am at a loss as to where he has gone, and Minister Fudge is up in arms that his prize prisoner has escaped."

A flash of fear crossed Hermione's face before she put the most nonchalant look upon it. Severus figured she would be the one to crack first. He sat at the edge of Harry's bed and looked directly into her eyes.

"So, where do you suppose he got off to?" Severus asked softly. "He was secured in the West Tower; there was no escape, unless someone let him out. Now, how could someone let him out without being seen?"

Hermione's eyes widened, and her hand suddenly went to her neckline. Severus noticed a necklace chain around Hermione's neck. He followed the line of the chain. It went beneath her robes. He could see her hand covering the faint outline of a circular object that was probably attached to the chain.

"Miss Granger, would you put your hand down for a minute?" he asked her.

She complied with his request, and the outline was clearer.

"What's that underneath your robes?" he asked.

"It's a necklace, sir." She responded.

"What kind of necklace, Miss Granger? It looks like it has an unusual shape."

"Um, it's just an old family heirloom."

"May I see it?"

"No, sir. It... It's quite personal," Hermione stammered.

"Come now, Miss Granger. It's just a necklace."

If Severus' suspicions were right, Hermione's trip back to his time was not her first experience with a Time-Turner.

"Um, I'm really tired from being chased by Lupin. I'm going to lie down and rest now," Hermione said weakly.

Severus put his hand on Hermione's shoulder.

"All right, Miss Granger, you just head over to a bed and lie down then."

He quickly slid his hand from her shoulder to the chain and tugged at it. The pendant surfaced from underneath her robes and was visible.

Severus arched an eyebrow at the Time-Turner. Hermione grabbed at it and stuffed it back under her robes. Severus' eyes slid over to Harry, who had been watching the whole exchange.

"It would seem that you have been experimenting with time, Miss Granger."

Hermione pursed her lips and said nothing.

"Did you accompany her, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, I did. We had to do something about Sirius! Dumbledore told us to do it."

Severus marveled at the audacity of the Headmaster. Of course, Dumbledore had to involve the children in a life-threatening situation. The man never ceased to amaze Severus as to how far he would go to accomplish his goal.

"Miss Granger, how long have you been time traveling?"

"All year, sir. It's how I've been taking so many classes," she said softly.

"And who allowed such a thing?" Severus asked contemptuously.

"Professor McGonagall, sir."

He would have to thank Minerva for introducing Hermione to Time-Turners later.

"So, you have been skipping through time all year?" he asked.

Hermione nodded her head.

Severus heaved a great sigh. "Well, I guess it's a good thing you had that on you, or Sirius Black would have received the Dementor's Kiss by now."

Hermione snapped her head up to him. "You mean you're not going to tell?" she whispered.

"Tell what, Miss Granger? That you have a lovely heirloom necklace around your neck? I don't think anyone would care, personally. Besides, the Ministry hasn't believed a word I've said all night, why should they start now?"

Hermione beamed at him. "Thank you, sir!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah, thanks," Harry piped in.

Severus stood to go. "The both of you get some rest. I'm sure the events of tonight were doubly taxing on the two of you."

They both smirked at him and at that moment Ron awoke.

"Hey," he said, "why's Snape here?"

"Professor Snape," Hermione chimed in.

Severus grinned at her and turned and left the Infirmary.

oooOOOooo

Harry entered Professor Lupin's office. He noticed the man packing away his belongings.

"Sir," he said quietly.

"Oh, Harry, come in, please!"

"It's a shame you have to go, sir. You are a fine teacher."

"Yes, but a teacher who is a werewolf is not one that parents will look kindly upon. Headmaster Dumbledore has done more than enough for me. With everything that happened last night, it will be impossible to keep my status a secret. He will be unable to shield me from the wrath of the parents when my true identity is told them by their children. It's time for me to pack up and take my leave."

"Where will you go?"

Lupin shrugged.

"I have a sudden urge to travel," he mused. He looked back fondly at Harry.

"Listen, Harry, I hope you don't hold the foolishness of my youth against me."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked blankly.

"The way I treated Professor Snape in my past. It's not who I am now."

Harry sighed. "I know that, Professor. If I learned anything this year, it is that you are a good friend and someone to be relied upon. I'm not happy about your doings as a student, but Professor Snape told me it's a waste of time hating people. I wasn't even there. I have no right to judge you."

"I hope you don't judge your godfather too harshly either. He may have been nasty to Snape in the past, but he has a good heart."

Harry smiled at Lupin. "I know. I'm looking forward to learning more about him, if he ever can come out of hiding. It's actually nice to have another living family member."

Remus smiled at Harry and gave him a hug. "I will miss you, Harry. If you ever need anything, I'm just an owl away."

"I'll remember that," Harry said as he returned the hug.

A/N: Next up: Shall we dance?

I'm sorry for the delay in posting this chapter. Between Thanksgiving, illness, and real life, it got pushed to the back burner. I promise to be more diligent with the next update. I hope you enjoyed it. Thanks to all for reading.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 of 46

The start of fourth year and music is in the air.

Chapter 25

You don't remember me

But I remember you

I lie awake and try so hard

Not to think of you

But who can decide what they dream?

And dream I do...

--Taking Over Me by Evanescence

Hermione's fourth year, part 1:

Severus' eyes snapped open. He'd had 'the dream' again. This time he'd almost been able to feel Hermione in his arms before she had disappeared. He heaved a great sigh. At least this dream was better than the ones he had been having lately. They were dark dreams, filled with dark images. They were memories from his Death Eater days and nightmares of the return of Voldemort. Severus would bow before the evil despot and look up to see the green light of the killing curse coming at him, and then everything would go black. He would usually wake up screaming at the end of those dreams.

But this dream was not of evil, it was of her. His heart ached within him for his Hermione. The school year had just started, and already the similarities between his Hermione and the girl who now attended Hogwarts were becoming more and more evident. With each year, the student Hermione was growing into the beautiful woman she would eventually become. Seeing her on a daily basis only drove home the fact that he could not have her now, nor for years to come.

Severus gritted his teeth together. He had known when she had left that he would watch her grow up. He had known it would be difficult, but he hadn't had an inkling as to just how difficult it would be. Sometimes seeing Hermione had made his heart happy, but on other occasions it had seemed that time had just been dragging along, mocking him and laughing at his heartache.

Severus tried to calm himself. He knew she would return. It was one of the few things that kept him going every day. The fact that she would be his eventually made up for a myriad of small heartaches he felt as he watched her be friends with Weasley and Potter, yet simply address him as an acquaintance, a teacher, or someone with whom she was not very familiar.

He wished he could snap his fingers and all of the next eight years would pass away and his Hermione would be back. Unfortunately, time didn't work that way. He was stuck waiting...forever waiting...waiting for a time that never seemed to grow closer.

Sighing, he tossed around and got into a more comfortable position. Remembering Hermione's promise to always love him, Severus slowly went back to sleep, eager for time to pass and her return to his arms.

oooOOOooo

There was a wild knocking on the Potions master's door. Severus got up from the couch and went over to it. He opened it a crack and found an anxious looking Harry Potter.

"Come in," Severus said, and Harry rushed past him.

Severus motioned for him to take a seat on the couch. Harry lowered himself onto it.

"Do you know what the first trial is?" Harry asked.

Severus looked to Harry quizzically. "I do not," he said simply.

"Hagrid showed me. It's dragons! I have to take an egg away from a dragon. What am I supposed to do? I can't use my wand. I'll be burned to a crisp!"

Severus steepled his fingers and gave it some thought. After some time, he got up and went over to a picture of an old wizard stirring a cauldron. Pulling the picture away from the wall, he revealed a hidden cupboard. He extracted a vial from a small group and returned to Harry, sitting next to him on the sofa. He lifted the vial up so Harry could see its yellowish-green liquid.

Harry lifted a brow. "Is that Severus Snape's Patented Strengthening Solution?" he asked.

Severus smirked and nodded.

"What are you suggesting? Are you insinuating that I should get into a fist fight with a dragon?"

Severus arched an eyebrow at him. "Only if you are left with no choice."

Harry carefully took the vial from his professor. "Are you sure you don't have some kind of Potion I could throw on the dragon to put it to sleep?"

"It would be hard to pry an egg from under a sleeping dragon, Harry."

"Yes, but it will be impossible to get one away from a dragon that is awake."

"Harry, you will find a way to do it, I'm sure. The Strengthening Solution gives you extra speed, don't forget. Perhaps you could just run up and run away with the egg."

"I don't know. I'll have to think of something." Harry got up and went to the door. "Thank you for the potion, Professor. I'm sure it will help."

"Harry, these trials, although difficult, are not impossible. You will prevail."

Harry nodded and left the room.

oooOOOooo

The day of the first task had arrived. Harry felt fear grip him, but he shoved it away. It would do no good for him to dwell on such things when he needed to concentrate. He had taken the Potion that Professor Snape had given him just before his turn with the dragon. Taking Professor Moody's advice that he should do what he did best, Hermione and he had worked on summoning charms almost all night. Harry was tired, but he had his plan well formed in his head. He had listened to the other three champions perform each of their challenges, each receiving cheers when it had been accomplished. He feared that he would be the only one to fail. Quickly putting that depressing thought out of his mind, he left the tent to emerge near the Hungarian Horntail and her nest.

He ran over to a rock and hid behind it as the dragon turned and shot some flame his way.

"Accio broom!" he chanted and waited while his broom sped out of his room and raced toward him.

Finally the broom reached his hand, and he climbed aboard it and took off, just missing a spray of fire that the dragon had let loose. He shot into the air and circled the dragon's head, luring it off its nest. Getting his bearings, he found the best angle to see the egg. He spied it, glimmering in the sunlight. Stopping and hovering for a minute, he extended his hand and cried the summoning spell once again. The egg sailed out of the nest and flew at him. He grabbed at it and shot away, just as a plume of fire shot at the spot where he had been hovering.

Harry sped away from the dragon on his broom, but the dragon raced around him and stopped right in front of him. Harry felt his stomach clench as the beast hovered, blocking his path. It seemed his joke to Snape about fist fighting with the dragon was about to come true. He secured the egg within his robe, holding it with one arm to protect it. Harry scooted forward and bent low so that his hand could still grip the broom while his arm protected the egg. Extending the other hand, he made a fist. Aiming for the dragon's underbelly, he shot quickly toward the snarling beast.

Harry felt intense heat at his back as the dragon shot streams of fire toward him. He was traveling so quickly that the flames overshot him and heated his backside. Within seconds he had made contact with the fleshy stomach. His fist crashed into it, sending the dragon flying backwards. It crashed to the ground and slid for some time before coming to a rest. Harry though he heard it whimper.

Harry examined his hand. He thought the hand and entire arm should have been shattered, but the potion had done its job, and he had come away unscathed. He turned his broom around and raced back to the podium, landing lightly and gracefully. He lifted the egg above his head and was rewarded with the crowd going crazy. He smiled in relief, thankful that the harrowing experience was now behind him.

oooOOOooo

It was the night of the Yule Ball. Students danced together to lively music in the Great Hall. It was decorated in a winter theme, the Hall having been transformed into an ice palace. Snow and ice bedecked everything. There were three giant Christmas trees at the head of the Hall which were covered in snow. Of course, the enchanted ceiling had snow falling from it, which disappeared a few feet above everyone's head. The Hall did look nice, even Severus had to admit it. He stood off to the side bedecked in midnight blue dress robes.

The robes were similar to the ones he wore daily, except they were of a finer material. There was just something about the button-down look that he loved, so most of his wardrobe consisted of suit coats that had many buttons. The fabric of these particular robes was a fine silk. The whole ensemble was incredibly comfortable but looked well tailored and fit his build perfectly.

He stood in between Karkaroff and Minerva. Severus watched the students twirl about happily. They did not understand the great danger that was soon to be upon them. His mark had been darkening over the past few months, and he feared that the Dark Lord would resurrect himself soon.

"Would you care to dance, Severus?" Minerva asked him.

He raised an eyebrow to her.

"Well, I know that if I didn't ask, you never would ask me," she said with a smile.

Severus' aversion to dancing was well known among the faculty. Of course, he didn't really have an aversion to dancing, it was just that there was only one woman he wanted to dance with, and she was currently dancing with Viktor Krum.

He took Minerva's hand and led her to the dance floor. They soon were twirling with everyone else.

"Severus, you really dance divinely. I don't know why you don't do it more often," Minerva commented.

He gave her a small smile. "I just would rather watch everyone else dance, to be honest with you."

Minerva clicked her tongue at him. "You're impossible, Severus. Don't think that I don't know you'd rather be dancing with a different Gryffindor tonight."

Severus' eyes wandered over to Hermione. She appeared more like her future self than she normally did. He didn't know what she had done to her hair, but it was beautiful, as was her dress and everything else about her. She literally flowed on the dance floor, the soft layers of her fuchsia dress swaying around her. She was looking raptly into Krum's eyes. She beamed at the young man as he twirled her around in the dance. Severus felt a pang of jealousy but quickly smothered it. He would have his chance with her in the future.

"Minerva, she is not the person who I fell in love with."

"Oh, of course she is, she just doesn't know it yet!"

"And she will not know it for several years. Let her enjoy her youth. She is too young for me now anyway. She seems quite taken with Mr. Krum at any rate."

Minerva patted his shoulder. "She will come to her senses once she returns from the past."

Severus rolled his eyes at Minerva as they continued to twirl on the dance floor. The song ended finally, and Severus made his way back to the sidelines, taking his place next to Karkaroff. Minerva found another dance partner in Albus. Severus watched them twirl about for a few minutes.

After a while the dance ended and many couples left the floor and either headed to tables or to the refreshment table where Severus was standing. Severus heard a familiar laugh and turned his head to see Krum and Hermione behind him. Krum was handing her a glass of punch, and she was beaming at him. Severus felt his stomach begin to be tied in knots. He hadn't realized how painful it would be to see Hermione looking lovingly to someone other than him. He really needed to forget about her, but he couldn't. The young couple stood there making small talk, and Severus tried hard not to listen.

Then the MC took the microphone to make an announcement.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Professor Dumbledore has requested that we have a special student-teacher dance at this time. He invites any student to ask a faculty member to dance with them for this next dance."

Severus closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, hoping against hope that no one would ask him to dance. His thoughts went to all of the possibilities. Luna Lovegood? He shuddered. He could never make small talk with her; she had the strangest things to say. Pansy Parkinson? She would yabber on endlessly about nothing. He couldn't think of a single student he would want to dance with. Suddenly he felt a tap on his shoulder. He opened his eyes and about gasped.

Merlin, no, he thought to himself.

There before him was none other than Hermione Granger, smiling at him.

"Would you care to dance, Professor?" she asked.

Severus arched an eyebrow at her. He should say no... that's what she would be expecting. He opened his mouth to decline.

"Of course, Miss Granger," he uttered.

Umm, that wasn't what he was going to say. Now he was leading her to the dance floor, and they were beginning to dance. Of course, it was a waltz. What had possessed his mouth to utter those words? Now she was holding one of his hands, and his arm was around her waist. He felt his heart begin to hammer in his chest. She was just a girl, for heaven sake, he needed to control himself.

He bravely looked down at her. She was looking up at him with a small smile on her face.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Miss Granger?" he managed to mutter without his voice squeaking.

"Oh, yes. I'm having a wonderful time," she gushed.

He couldn't help but smile at her, simply because she was so overjoyed with everything.

"I'm glad, Miss Granger. You look very nice tonight."

It was the best compliment he could give her, given their circumstances. She would have probably given him a very curious look to say the least if he had said she looked stunning, or beautiful, or ravishing for that matter. *Why, oh, why, had she asked him to dance?*

Hermione beamed at his compliment and added one of her own.

"You are a wonderful dancer, Professor," she commented.

"Thank you," Severus answered.

I dance even better with your head on my shoulder and your arms around my waist he thought and quickly put that out of his mind.

Perhaps he should just excuse himself and return to the sidelines. No, he couldn't do that. Then she would think that she had done something to offend him.

Her closeness was driving him crazy. She may be just a girl, but she was the younger self of the girl he loved. His heart was exploding in his chest at her closeness, yet he wanted her closer still. This situation was impossible! How could he have such feelings for a mere teenager? Why, oh, why, had she asked him to dance, of all people?

"Why, of all people, did you ask me to dance, Miss Granger?"

"I like a challenge, sir," she said plainly.

"A challenge, Miss Granger?"

"Sir, it is widely known throughout the school that you don't dance... ever. I was startled to see you with Professor McGonagall on the dance floor earlier. I wondered if you'd give it a go a second time in...how long has it been since you danced before tonight?"

Severus' breath caught in his throat. "Many years," he whispered. *And only ever with you.*

She was the one to raise an eyebrow this time. "Well, if I were you, I would do it more often. You're quite good at it."

If I could dance with you, I would do it every day, Severus thought.

"Luckily for me, these dances only occur once or twice a year," he stated blandly. "I only have to subject myself to such trials on those occasions."

Hermione laughed at him, and he thought of her laugh in his past. Would this bloody dance never end? He wasn't sure how much longer he could take her closeness. Finally the last chords of the waltz were played, and they were separating.

"Thank you, Professor, for breaking your long standing no-dancing rule for me," she joked to him.

Severus mumbled something under his breath and wandered back to his place on the sidelines. Mr. Krum was readily by Hermione's side again, twirling her at the start of the next dance. She gave him a broad grin. Albus wandered over to Severus as he watched the students dancing.

"I hope you enjoyed your dance, Severus. I just couldn't keep myself from having that special dance just for you."

Severus eyed his boss. "How did you know she would ask me?"

Albus shrugged his shoulders, but his eyes twinkled furiously. "Just a hunch," he said and walked away.

Severus stared after the meddlesome, old coot. The old wizard was always sticking his nose where it didn't belong. Of course, Severus had enjoyed himself with Hermione. Perhaps he should give Albus his thanks after all.

He glared at the retreating form and then glanced out at the merrymakers. All of the students seemed to be having a good time except for Harry, Ron, and their poor dates, the Patil twins. For some reason, neither boy was dancing, nor did they look like they were going to any time soon. The two girls were huffing at each other. He expected they would probably get up and find other young men to dance with if things didn't change soon. Severus shook his head at the stupidity of youth.

At least everyone else seemed to be enjoying themselves. Neville Longbottom and Ginny Weasley were dancing together, as was Dudley Dursley and Susan Bones. Fred Weasley and Angelina Johnson twirled by when he noticed Draco and Pansy Parkinson doing elaborate movements to call attention to themselves. No matter how showy their display was, however, Severus found his eye drifting away from them and to a different couple.

Severus watched Hermione covertly under a curtain of his hair as she danced. She certainly looked radiant. He sighed to himself as he watched her look up at Krum. That was the look she usually reserved for him alone. He found it unsettling for her to be showering it on someone else.

She twirled with Krum over and over again. All at once her glance went to Severus. She gave him a smile as she danced with Krum. Severus' heart melted in his chest.

Severus chided himself. He knew that this was not his Hermione. How could he let himself moon over the young girl, she was only fifteen, for heaven's sake. He shook his head and berated himself for being such a lovesick fool. He thought of his lovely Hermione. It seemed like he still had to wait forever until he could see her again.

Rolling his eyes at his absurd behavior, he decided to go do something productive, like search the halls and coaches for snogging students or something. Getting a little smile on his face at the thought, he turned to head out to the courtyard.

oooOOooo

Severus had been on the prowl for a while now. He had gone out to the courtyard and had found several couples in the middle of a good snog. He had deducted points and had sent them on their way.

He didn't know why enforcing the 'No public displays of affection' rule was one of his favorite pastimes, but it was. He assumed it was probably the stunned looks on the student's faces that made him so giddy. The last couple he had broken up had almost jumped out of their skins. Severus smirked as he recalled their horrified looks. It had

been hilarious.

He had given up on the courtyard, as Karkaroff had been out there badgering him about his Dark Mark growing darker. The man was a pest. He had been loyal to Voldemort to a point but had betrayed him by turning in his compatriots to avoid a lengthy stint in Azkaban. Severus knew that when the Dark Lord returned, Karkaroff was as good as dead.

Severus was now stalking the halls, looking for some more fun. He noticed a couple behind a curtain. Snatching it aside, he found two Hufflepuffs going at it. They looked up in shock as the curtain was pulled away.

Mr. Dursley, Miss Bones, ten points each from Hufflepuff! Now get back to the dance, or return to your Common Room!"

He turned and smirked as he stalked away. Severus rounded the corner and walked silently down the hall, listening for telltale shuffling. He wandered past a suit of arms and thought he heard some movement behind it. Aha! Another chance to scare some students senseless! He quietly snuck up to the suit of arms and shot his head around it. The person behind the knight didn't even flinch. She was sitting against the wall, her head buried in her knees, and she was sobbing. Severus' eyes grew wide as he assessed the situation.

"Miss Granger, are you alright?" he asked.

Hermione's head shot up. "Oh!" she cried.

Severus extended his hand to offer her a help up. She accepted his hand and stood quickly, coming out from behind the knight.

"Miss Granger?"

Hermione quickly wiped her tears away. "Sorry, sir."

"There's nothing to be sorry about, Miss Granger. You have done nothing wrong. Why are you hiding behind a suit of arms? Has Mr. Krum behaved badly?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, no. It's nothing like that. He has been a perfect gentleman."

Severus looked at Hermione curiously. "Then why are you not enjoying yourself with him?"

Hermione's shoulders sagged. "It's Ron! He's a total prat!"

"What did he do?" Severus asked with concern.

Hermione looked up at him with her tear-stained face. If Ron had hurt her, Severus would see that he never got out of detention.

"You don't want to hear my silly problems, sir. I'll just go to bed."

She turned to leave but felt his hand on her forearm stopping her.

"Tell me what happened, Miss Granger."

Hermione looked sadly at Severus. His heart broke within him.

"He said some horrid things to me. That's all."

"What did he say?"

She shook her head. "Nothing important."

"What did he say?"

Anger suddenly gripped her. "He said that I was fraternizing with the enemy by going to the ball with Viktor. He had the nerve to say that after he mooned over him at the Quidditch cup and followed him around half of the semester! Can you believe the nerve of that? He's nothing but a jealous prat! He thought I would just wait around for him to ask me to the dance! Then he got upset because he asked me after I already had a date! You should have heard him, telling Harry that I was lying and no one could possibly want to go to the ball with me. So when no one would go with him, he asked me as a last resort! He treats me like an afterthought and then gets angry when I've already made plans! I should have punched him in the face for what he said!"

Hermione seethed for a minute, then looked at her professor in horror.

"Oh! I shouldn't have said all of that!" she exclaimed.

Severus smirked at her.

"Nonsense. It's better to be angry about other's foolish behavior than to cry about it. He doesn't deserve your tears, Hermione. He's just being a jerk. Don't let him ruin your evening. You should go back to the ball. Mr. Krum probably is wondering where you got off to."

Hermione looked at Severus in wonder at his words. Had he just called her Hermione? And he had called Ron a jerk. She couldn't help but grin at him for his comments.

"You're right, Professor. I'll do that. I won't let that git spoil my night. Thanks." With that she was off.

Severus stared after her. All he wanted to do was envelop her in a hug and comfort her, but this was for the best. He debated whether to go do something about Weasley, he was so infuriated with him, but he decided against it. It was one thing to encourage the girl in an empty corridor, but quite another to give a detention to Weasley for his actions in the middle of a party. Nonetheless, he was furious at the boy's idiocy. He hated to see Hermione upset like that, especially since she deserved nothing but happiness. How could that prat treat her so poorly? His actions had made her feel insignificant and unwanted. He wanted to string Weasley up by his toes and throw curses at him he was so angry. The next few class days for Weasley would not be pleasant ones.

oooOOooo

Harry entered the Room of Requirement for his weekly session with Severus, closely followed by Hermione. Harry's mind was obviously not on dueling. He held the golden egg that he had taken from the dragon during the first task. He had been unable to figure out how to understand it and was seeking help. He and Hermione had been sitting in the Common Room all day yesterday and this morning poring over books. Well, at least Hermione had been pouring over books, looking for some sort of answer. Harry had looked at some books, but spent most of his time staring at the egg, trying to will it to spill its secrets. Nothing had been forthcoming.

Harry noticed his Professor standing off in the corner eyeing a dueling dummy. He cleared his throat, and Severus turned and flashed him a brief smile, which fell away quickly when he saw Hermione standing next to Harry.

"Harry, these sessions are supposed to be secret. That doesn't mean you are to bring your friends along with you whenever you feel like it."

"I need your help, and besides, Hermione figured out what I was doing two years ago. She won't tell anyone, she never has. She hasn't even told Ron." Harry said quickly,

cutting to the chase.

Severus glanced to Hermione who was looking hopeful that he would let her stay. Her baleful eyes about pierced his heart.

"At least you brought the friend who can think on her feet," he muttered.

Severus eyed the golden egg in Harry's hand. "You still haven't been able to get the message from it?"

"No," Harry scowled.

"Have you opened it at all?"

"It screeches when I open it."

"Let me hear it," Severus demanded.

"You won't like it," Harry muttered as he set the egg down on a table and cracked it open.

A shrill shrieking sound emerged from the egg, and Severus immediately clapped his hands over his ears. Harry snapped the egg closed again.

"Ow," Severus grimaced.

Severus looked to Hermione. "What have you found out about it?"

Hermione smiled to herself, glad that her professor recognized her ability to research a topic.

"I have found nothing, sir. There is no reference to such a thing in any textbook that I have searched."

Severus gave her a quick smirk, knowing that if she had said she had gone through textbooks, there was no point in researching more. She had probably checked every possible text in the library.

"I'm sure you did a thorough job, Miss Granger," he remarked.

He went over to the egg and picked it up. It felt heavier than a normal dragon's egg felt. It had no distinguishing features. He cracked it open, and it screeched at him again. He snapped it shut quickly. The sound from the egg sounded somewhat familiar. Severus wracked his brain to think of where he had heard it before.

He looked up at the two students. "Does that sound familiar to either of you at all?"

They both shook their heads.

"I think I have heard something like this before, but I don't know where," he mused.

He cracked it open again, bracing himself for the onslaught of sound. Yes, it sounded familiar, but where had he heard it?

Snapping the egg shut, it suddenly came to him. He had heard it from his enchanted window. It mirrored what was truly passing by in the lake. Once in a while one of the Mer-people would swim by. Even rarer were the times he would catch one surfacing. On those occasions the Mer-person would make this very same sound as he shot into the air. The sound would continue until the being went back below the surface. Then a beautiful song would come from the creature.

Severus looked up to Harry. "It's Mermish; the language of the Mer-people in the lake."

He handed the egg back to Harry. "You must submerge the egg to understand the message."

Harry looked at the egg curiously and then up to his Professor. "Thanks, sir. I would have never figured that out."

"You will have to submerge yourself with it to understand the message, I think."

Harry turned to Hermione. "That must have been what Cedric meant by taking a bath with the egg."

She nodded to him.

"Then that is what you should do, Harry," Severus advised. "However, we have our own work to do right now." He turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger, since you are here already, would you like to duel with us?"

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Yes, sir!" she gushed.

Severus hid his smile. He nodded and waved his wand at the dummy he had been staring at when Harry and Hermione had entered the room. It moved to the center of the room. Harry placed the egg on a low table near the door and turned back to Severus.

"This dummy," Severus explained, "is for training purposes. You can cast spells on it, and it can cast spells back. You will pretend it is a Death Eater, and it will duel with you. Why don't you both attack it at the same time to start?"

Hermione and Harry raised their wands and awaited the dummy's move.

"Stop!" Severus cried. "If this were really an attack, Miss Granger, what is the first thing you would do when you realized a Death Eater was approaching you?"

Hermione thought for a moment and then replied, "I would make a preemptive strike, sir."

"Good. So, what are you waiting for with the dummy?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Treat the dummy like a real opponent. Make a strike before it has a chance to incapacitate you. Once a Death Eater strikes, it is difficult to escape from him. You must take the upper hand and keep the enemy from taking control of the situation."

Hermione and Harry both nodded and got ready again. This time, Hermione shot a stunning spell at the dummy even before Harry had made his stance. The dummy shot back and hit the wall.

"Good, Miss Granger. Let's let Mr. Potter have a chance now."

Harry did much the same thing to the dummy on his turn.

"All right," Severus said. "Hermione, duel with the dummy. Harry, critique her performance."

Harry looked to Severus in incredulity. "You want me to tell her what she does wrong?"

"That's part of a critique, is it not, Harry? I expect you to also tell her what she does right."

"You've never seen Hermione when she's told she's done something wrong, have you?" Harry murmured.

Severus cracked a smile, thinking of some interesting interactions with Hermione in his past when she had been proven wrong.

"This is a teaching situation, Harry. I'm sure Miss Granger will take everything you tell her with grace as long as you are not rude to her."

"Um, I'm standing right here!" Hermione cried. "I think I can answer for myself."

"By all means, Miss Granger, I meant no offense," Severus told her.

"Professor Snape is right, Harry. I know I'm not perfect."

"Could have fooled me," Harry said under his breath.

"What did you say?" Hermione demanded.

"Nothing!" Harry said a little too quickly.

Hermione's eyebrows furrowed. "You think that I think I'm perfect?"

"I didn't say that, Hermione!" Harry retorted.

"You implied it!" she said, a bit miffed with him.

Severus calmly watched the two students fight before him, folding his arms and taking everything in.

"No I didn't. And it's not my fault that you get your nose out-of-whack whenever somebody gives you some advice!"

"I do not get my nose out-of-whack, Harry Potter. Why on earth would you say such a thing?"

"Look, I didn't come here to argue with you!" Harry cried. He stalked over to his egg. "I'm just going to go listen to this message. I don't have time for all of this."

With that he took the egg and stormed out of the room, leaving Hermione glaring after him and Severus looking a tad amused.

"You really are quite feisty, Miss Granger," Severus stated.

She turned to him and narrowed her eyes. Remembering he was a professor, she softened her look.

"I'm sick of him implying that I'm a know-it-all. It's perfectly fine when he needs an essay written or needs someone to pore over books to find an answer to his Golden Egg question!"

"Hermione, calm down. You know you have a hard time with criticism."

Hermione's eyes grew wide.

"Just because you're Muggle-born doesn't mean you have to prove anything to anyone. It's okay to be wrong."

Severus conjured up two chairs, and he motioned her to sit down in one, settling himself in the other. It seemed that he was to play counselor again to one of his students.

Hermione folded her arms in front of her. "I know it's okay to be wrong!"

He smirked at her. Little did she realize he knew her so well.

"Then why do you have such a hard time when someone lets you know that you are wrong?"

"What do you do, follow me around in your spare time? How do you know I act like that?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "The paintings have both eyes and ears, and they use their mouths very often. How do you think the teachers know so much about the students' doings? It's like having a thousand spies working for us."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at his admission. Although his statement was partially true, Severus wished he could tell her the real reason he knew her so well, but he didn't dare. He didn't want to scare her into fearing her future.

"Now would you mind answering my question?" he demanded.

Hermione sighed. "I don't know why I do that. I know I don't know everything, but it just irks me when somebody figures out something before I do. Maybe you're right about it being because I'm Muggle-born. I feel like I came here at a disadvantage, and I constantly have to struggle to keep up."

Severus thought of the time that Narcissa Black had insulted her in Hogsmeade.

"*Why does it always come down to that?*" she had asked, referring to her birth circumstances.

Severus sighed. He assumed it *would* always come down to that with some people. But that did not mean that Hermione had to feel inferior for her entire life.

"Miss Granger, when was the last time you ever struggled in a class?"

Hermione lowered her eyes. "I can't say that I ever have, sir."

"And why is that?"

Hermione shrugged.

"Could it be, Miss Granger, because you're brilliant?"

Hermione looked up at him in shock.

"Professor Snape, I'm not brilliant."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. "I'm not asking you to become a conceited wench, Hermione. There's nothing wrong with recognizing your talents."

Hermione looked to her hands that were in her lap.

"I really don't have many talents, sir."

It was worse than he thought. The girl thought nothing of herself.

"Get up," he commanded.

She rose from her seat, and he vanished the chairs.

"Let's duel," he said simply.

She readied herself, and he shot a spell at her. Hermione easily deflected it and shot one of her own. They moved about quickly, each shooting and deflecting spells. Severus had a great sense of déjà vu with them bounding about the Room of Requirement shooting hexes at each other. After a while, Severus got the upper hand and knocked her against the wall. He rushed over and helped her stand.

"Do you know how long my first duel with Harry was?"

Hermione shrugged.

"Thirty seconds," Severus answered.

"He was a first year."

"He wouldn't have lasted nearly as long as you did in this particular situation without the extra help I have been giving him. You far outclass him, Miss Granger."

Hermione nodded, but looked unconvinced.

Severus blew a piece of hair out of his face. "Who figured out the logic puzzle I created to get to the Sorcerer's Stone in your first year?"

Hermione blushed. "I did, sir."

"Who has never received less than an E on any assignment, ever?"

"That would be me, sir."

"Who will probably receive straight O's on their OWLs next year?"

"I don't think..."

"You will, Miss Granger. Who figured out there was a Basilisk hiding in the Chamber of Secrets before she got herself petrified?"

"I did, sir."

"Who was the only one of my students to understand my clues about Remus Lupin being a Werewolf last year?"

"Me again, sir."

"Who taught Harry the summoning charm so he could escape the dragon for the first task?"

"I did, sir."

"And you say you have no talents, Miss Granger? You are by far the most remarkable witch of your age."

Hermione's mouth dropped open at his statement. She had never heard him compliment anyone like that, not even Draco Malfoy, who was quite bright in his own right, and a fellow Slytherin with a father who was Professor Snape's friend.

"Professor," she finally murmured. "I don't know what to say."

"Just believe in yourself and your abilities, Miss Granger. It will help you to be less offended when someone gives you advice. Your birth status has nothing to do with your abilities. There is no pureblood, half-blood, or any other blooded student in this entire school who could best you at anything."

Before Severus knew it, Hermione had thrown herself at him and given him a great bear hug. Severus stiffened, and his eyes grew wide at the display of affection coming from the younger counterpart to the woman he loved so dearly. He kept his cool and patted her on the back. She pulled away sheepishly.

"I'm sorry, Professor," she said as her cheeks turned red. "I just really needed to hear all of that, and I'm thankful that you were frank with me."

"Let's keep your exuberance down to a handshake from now on, Miss Granger," Severus said as he smiled at her.

"Yes, sir!" Hermione said nervously. "Um, I should be going."

With that, she turned and fled the Room of Requirement, not even looking back to say goodbye. She couldn't believe she had just hugged her teacher. What had she been thinking? It wasn't like he was the cuddly type either. She could see herself hugging Hagrid, or maybe Professor Flitwick, but Professor Snape? He had obviously been incredibly embarrassed too, the way his cheeks had flushed.

oooOOooo

Severus watched Hermione as she made her getaway. She was going to be the death of him, he knew it. How he would contain his feelings for her was beyond him. He knew he would do anything to just see her smile.

A/N: More of fourth year.

Thanks everyone. I know it's been a while since we've seen Severus' Hermione, but now that she's getting a little older, her relationship with Severus is becoming closer. Hopefully, that will contain you until she really returns.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 of 46

The triwizard tournament continues, and Severus spars with his students.

Disclaimer: Anything that seems vaguely familiar in this chapter has been quoted, paraphrased, or just plain old summarized from the Goblet of Fire book or movie.

Chapter 26

Hermione's fourth year continued:

Hermione entered the common room and was surprised to find Harry already sitting down on the couch by the fire. She wandered over to him, unsure of whether to be friendly or to be cold. Her curiosity got the better of her, so she was friendly.

"Did you decipher the message?" she asked hurriedly.

Harry looked up and scowled at her. "Yes."

She sat down next to him with excitement. "What did it say?"

"I'm not sure it's any of your business after the things that we said to each other earlier."

Hermione looked at her hands in her lap. "Harry," she began, "you're right about me, and I'm sorry I got so mad at you. I realize I have an insecurity problem, and I assure you, I will work hard not to act so angrily when I receive criticism from now on."

Harry looked at her as she stared at her hands. "I'm sorry too, Hermione. I shouldn't make fun of something I know is a sore spot for you."

Hermione looked up at Harry finally and grinned at him. "Now will you tell me what that egg was on about?"

Harry laughed. "It says that something important to me will be held under the water and that I have an hour to retrieve it."

"It didn't say what the thing would be?"

Harry shook his head.

"Well, at least you know what the task is. How will you accomplish it?"

"I suppose I'll swim to the object and bring it to the surface," Harry said simply.

"But you have to be under water for an hour, Harry. How can you do that?"

Harry's eyes grew wide. "Oh, I hadn't thought of that. I was just relieved to know what the task was."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry. "It looks like our studying isn't over," she sighed. Getting off the couch, she motioned to Harry. "Let's go back to the library. I'm sure we can find something there."

Harry rolled his eyes then, but got up nonetheless. "You and your books, Hermione. This time, though, I think you're on to something."

Hermione punched him playfully on the arm. "Where's Ron, anyway?"

"Professor Snape's given him detention," Harry explained.

"This is the third time this week!" Hermione exclaimed.

Harry nodded his head. "It seems that Professor Snape has it in for him lately. He's been watching him like a hawk and takes off points for even the simplest of mistakes in class."

"I think Ron's been more nervous because of it, too," Hermione said thoughtfully. "So, when he turned his potion green today, and Professor Snape told him to stay after class, he gave him a detention?"

Harry nodded again.

Hermione thought of the talk she'd had with Professor Snape during the Yule Ball when she had been so upset by Ron. He had looked livid when she had told him what Ron had said and did to her. He couldn't be punishing Ron for that, could he? Hermione shook her head. No, of course not. Professor Snape would have no reason to do such a thing. He wasn't interested in silly teenage relationships. Pushing her musings out of her head, she turned her attention back to Harry.

"Let's go, we've got a lot of work to do," Hermione informed him. They both headed out of the common room, bound for the library.

oooOOOooo

"Miss Granger, a word please," Severus requested as the class was filing out.

Oh, no! I hope he's not going to say anything about that hug the other day! Hermione thought as she went up to his desk.

"Yes, sir?"

"Miss Granger, since you are aware of Mr. Potter's lessons with me, I was wondering if you would like to join us from now on... that is if you and he are on speaking terms."

"We managed to patch things up, Professor. I would be honored to join the two of you."

Severus nodded. "I'll look forward to our Saturdays together then," he said before the next class of students began to file in.

Hermione nodded and left the classroom. Severus chided himself for his stupidity. He was asking for trouble including her in his lessons with Harry. It would only lead to him feeling sorry for himself, but he could not pass up the opportunity to spend time with her, even if it was only on a platonic level.

oooOOOooo

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat in the library again, searching books for a way for Harry to hold his breath for an hour. The trio hadn't come up with anything yet. They were so entrenched in their work they didn't notice Dudley wander up.

"Hermione, Ron, the Headmaster asked me to tell you to report up to his office," Dudley told them.

Harry furrowed his brow. "What could he want from you two? I need your help, hurry back."

"We will, Harry," Ron said. "We'll be back before you know it."

With that the two turned and left. Dudley eyed the stack of books.

"What exactly are you doing, Harry?" Dudley asked.

Harry sighed. "I'm trying to find a way to be able to breathe under water for an hour."

Dudley's eyebrows rose at that. "Have you found anything yet?"

"No! I don't know what I'm going to do."

Dudley sat down and started flipping through the books. The two became silent as they searched every book on the table. After a long while, Harry sat back in his chair in discouragement. He looked over at Dudley.

"So, what's up with you and Susan Bones?" Harry asked him.

Dudley's face flushed a bit. "Nothing," he told Harry.

"Come on, Dud. You guys have been inseparable since the Yule Ball."

"We've always been inseparable, Harry," Dudley argued.

"I saw you two arm in arm when you thought no one was looking."

Dudley pretended to be absorbed in a book.

"Why are you guys being so secretive? I think it's great!"

Dudley shrugged. "I don't know. It's been kind of fun sneaking around," he said, admitting to it finally. "We don't want Jason and Hannah to feel like the odd men out. The four of us spend most of our free time together."

"Maybe you can set those two up?"

Dudley rolled his eyes. "I don't play matchmaker, Harry. I don't think they're interested in each other that way anyway."

"Dudley, they probably know about the two of you already. You should just tell them and stop all of this sneaking around. They'll be happy for you."

Dudley looked to Harry. "I know they will. I just don't want things to be different between the four of us."

"It already is, Dud. You just have to acknowledge it."

Dudley thought about that. "I suppose you're right. Susan tells me much the same thing. She's really smart about things like that."

"She's a great girl, Dudley. I'm glad the two of you finally got together. You make a great pair."

"Thanks," Dudley muttered.

He put the book he was reading down and lifted up another one. The boys continued their search silently into the wee hours of the night. Come morning the two were hunched over their books, fast asleep. Neither had found any solution to Harry's breathing problem. Luckily for them, Dobby appeared, giving Harry Gillyweed and instructing him to take it before plunging into the lake. Harry did as he was instructed and not only completed the task, but saved Fleur Delacour's sister too.

oooOOooo

"Albus, what were you thinking, submerging four students in the depths of the lake for who knows how long?"

"Oh, Severus, they were perfectly safe!" Albus chided.

"They could have drowned!" Severus growled.

"Barty assured me that the task would be harmless to the students. I explained every detail to them, and they all readily agreed to take part in it. You have nothing to gripe about."

"Nonetheless, something could have gone wrong."

"Are you questioning my spell casting abilities?" Albus asked with narrowed eyes.

"Of course not, Albus, it just was an unnecessary risk. The contestants could have gone after some inanimate object. Poor Fleur Delacour almost had a heart attack at the thought that her sister would perish at the bottom of the lake."

"I don't think it's Fleur Delacour's sister you were concerned about, Severus. Rather, I think it was the young Gryffindor that you were worried about, and I'm not referring to the red-headed one."

Severus grimaced at Albus. "I cannot help being concerned when you placed all of them in danger like that."

"Severus, Severus, she is fine. Nothing went awry, and they are all fine. Calm yourself down, for heaven's sake."

Severus narrowed his eyes at Albus. "Do you care for anyone, Albus?"

"I believe that Miss Granger posed that same question to me when you were about to receive your Dark Mark."

Severus looked at him quizzically.

"You mean she didn't tell you how she stormed in here and gave me a piece of her mind for coercing you into being my spy?"

"She never told me about that."

"She even threatened to kill me if any harm came to you."

Severus gave Albus a smirk. His memory of her being so protective of him had faded over the years. It was nice to remember how often she stuck up for him to others.

"You are very lucky to have her affections, Severus, as she is lucky to have yours."

"Neither of us have either one's affections at this time!"

"You know what I mean. There are only a few short years before she returns to you."

"Short for you, perhaps," Severus huffed.

Albus gave Severus a fatherly look. "She will be back before you know it," he assured him.

Severus rolled his eyes. "That's what you've been saying for the past seventeen years. It hasn't gone by any faster because you say it will."

Albus chuckled at him. "It will pass, nonetheless, my boy."

oooOOOooo

Harry and Hermione walked into the Room of Requirement, but Professor Snape wasn't there yet. They didn't have long to wait until the man came through the doors himself with a smirk on his face and a copy of *Witch Weekly* under his arms. He sauntered over to Hermione and held it out to her.

"It would seem, Miss Granger, that you have turned into quite the hussy," he commented as she took the magazine from him.

It was open to an article that had her name emblazoned on the top of it. *Hermione Granger: Two-Timing Witch!* cried the headline. Hermione raised her eyebrows and skimmed the article. She burst out laughing and tossed it over to Harry.

Harry skimmed it too. "Hermione, how could you play me like this? I thought I was the only one you cared for."

Hermione threw her hand to her forehead. "I'm sorry, Harry! I'm not the type to be happy with only one man! Viktor and I never broke up, even though I told you we did."

"Oh, I'll kill that overrated Quidditch player. He can't even speak English."

"Of course he can!" Hermione retorted.

"Hermione, he calls you Hermioninny," Harry said blandly. "Emphasis on the ninny part."

Severus burst out laughing.

"He can't help it if my name is hard to pronounce!" Hermione countered.

"I can say it!" Harry cried.

"So can I," Severus remarked.

"You both are impossible!" Hermione laughed.

Harry went up to her. "That's why you love me! Give up on that foreigner. I'm the one for you!"

"Harry!" Hermione cried, "Cut it out already."

"It's a shame Miss Skeeter isn't here to see you both bickering like this," Severus murmured with a smirk.

Hermione looked puzzled. "I wonder how she knew I had spoken to Viktor about visiting him in Bulgaria."

"Who knows?" Harry cried.

"It does seem that Miss Skeeter has some unnamed source for her information," Severus mused. "Perhaps she employs a fly on the wall?"

"Oh, well, I suppose we'll never know," Harry said.

"Are you two ready to concentrate, or shall I give you another few minutes of bickering time?" Severus queried.

"You're the one who brought in that awful magazine, Professor!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Yeah, Professor, you just wanted us to have a lovers' quarrel!" Harry quipped.

"Mmm hmm, and now I'm sorry I brought the bloody thing to you both."

"You're just sorry Skeeter hasn't written anything about you in here!" Harry told him as he tapped the magazine with his hand.

"Oh, yes," Severus said dryly. "I long for the day I see my name in one of her articles. She's always so spot on with her reporting."

"She'll probably accuse you of having a torrid love affair with Professor Trelawney," Hermione said slyly.

All the color drained from Severus' face. Hermione took one look at him and doubled over laughing. Harry looked over too and began to giggle.

"What's the matter, Professor?" Harry asked. "Did we figure out where you spend your weekends?"

Severus looked at him crossly. "Shudder the thought. That woman has been after me since the day she started here."

Harry and Hermione gave each other dubious looks, hardly believing they had come across this well-kept secret.

Harry couldn't help himself. "So, what's keeping you from going after her, Professor?"

Hermione laughed again, receiving a scowl from Severus. He stared at Hermione for a minute before snapping out of it and turning to Harry.

"She's not my type," was all that he said.

"I'm sure her 'Inner Eye' says differently!" Hermione laughed. "*Are you in the beyond? I think you are!*" she mimicked.

Severus couldn't help himself and snickered at her imitation.

"Hermione hates her, if you haven't gathered that already," Harry explained.

Severus raised an eyebrow at that.

"Oh, she's awful! *You do not possess the spirit for the noble art of divination!*" Hermione imitated. "Shriveled soul my foot!" she said while stamping that very foot.

Severus looked at her quizzically.

"Professor Trelawney told her last year that she doesn't have Divination in her." Harry explained. "She made some remark about her shriveled soul and clinging to the pages of a book or something."

Severus walked over to Hermione and looked her up and down.

"Oh, yes, I can see it now," Severus joked. "Her shriveled soul is practically leaking out of her ears."

Hermione just rolled her eyes.

Harry laughed. "You should have seen Hermione. She glared at Trelawney, stomped out of the class, and never came back."

"As I have said before, Miss Granger, you are quite feisty."

"I don't even know why they offer Divination as a class, it's worthless," Hermione muttered.

"Perhaps you should have a meeting with Professor Trelawney," Severus drawled. "I'm sure she'd be willing to drop the class simply because you feel it is worthless."

"Alright, Professor, you've had your fun," Hermione countered with a roll of her eyes.

"Oh, I assure you, Miss Granger," Severus retorted, "the fun has just begun."

With that he pulled his wand out and sent two hexes at Harry and Hermione, sending them flying into the wall. They both sat up and glared at him.

"Well, get up!" Severus demanded. "Death Eaters aren't going to let you rub your bruises and recuperate after they hex you."

Hermione and Harry jumped up and started sending spells at Severus. It was quite fun for both parties. Harry and Hermione got more shots off than they normally would, and Severus felt he was actually challenged in their sparring. They had fought each other for quite a while when Harry and Hermione both shot stunners at Severus simultaneously. He flew into the wall and was knocked out cold.

The two students rushed over to Severus in fear. They looked at each other and then back down at their Professor, afraid that he was hurt badly and even more afraid of what he'd say when he awoke.

After a minute, Severus moaned and opened his eyes. His first vision was of Hermione looking at him worriedly, and he almost reached up and caressed her face. Luckily, he came to his senses quickly and realized why he was staring up at her from the floor. He suppressed the urge to pull her to him and just blinked at her.

"Are you alright, Professor?" she asked with concern.

His heart constricted within him once again at the look of concern that crossed her face. He pushed the feelings aside and cracked a smile at both Hermione and Harry.

"Now *that* was a duel!" he remarked, making his students grin back at him.

oooOOOooo

Severus stalked quickly through the halls. He pondered the recent events that had occurred during the final challenge of the Triwizard Tournament. The death of Cedric Diggory had shocked them all. The burning in Severus' arm, signaling the return of the Dark Lord had not been as shocking to Severus. He had seen the signs. Both his and Karkaroff's Dark Marks had been becoming more defined as the months had gone on.

He rushed to the Headmaster's office. He had stayed behind to ensure the Aurors had secured and taken Barty Crouch Jr. away. Severus found Harry a crumpled mess in the chair in front of Dumbledore's desk. The Headmaster gave Severus an understanding look as he looked worriedly at Harry.

"Ah, Severus, I'm glad you have arrived. I need to attend to Cedric's father. You wouldn't mind staying with Harry until I return, would you?"

Severus nodded his assent, and Dumbledore rushed out of his office. Severus pulled another chair near Harry and looked at the boy. It seemed he had gone to Hades and back in the short time since he had started the third task.

"Harry, are you alright?"

Harry looked at Severus with fear in his eyes. "He's back! He killed Cedric. I couldn't do anything! I'm useless. After everything we have worked on, I couldn't save anyone!"

Severus moved to the front of his chair and gripped Harry by his arms.

"Harry, stop this. It isn't your fault. None of us could have imagined that the cup was a Portkey. You were taken by surprise. Even the most powerful wizard would probably not have been able to do anything more than you did."

"He's dead. I should have saved him!"

Severus' hands tightened around Harry's arms.

"No, you're wrong. Diggory was dead the minute he touched that Portkey. Harry, you must pull yourself together. All is not lost. The Dark Lord has just returned, and it will take him time to build his armies. We can use that time to further prepare."

"What's the use? I'm worthless!"

Severus shook him slightly.

"You are not worthless. You are essential in our victory because you are connected with the Dark Lord. He will seek you out to destroy you. You must continue to prepare! Leave this useless guilt behind you, and continue with your training. The next time you meet Voldemort, you will be victorious."

"I can't do this, Professor. I can't fight him. He'll win, just like he won tonight."

Severus' demeanor softened. "Harry, he just won one battle, not the war. Take the time you need to mourn, but you cannot think that you will be useless in this battle. Ultimately you will be the key to his defeat."

Harry studied him curiously. "How do you know that?"

Severus pulled back. He had said too much. "I cannot say. I just know it," Severus muttered.

Harry looked down in his lap and said nothing for a long time. Finally he looked back at Severus with determination.

"I'll work twice as hard, Professor. I will never let myself be taken by surprise again."

Severus nodded to Harry. "That's the young man whom I know can defeat the Dark Lord."

Severus looked Harry over. "Will you be alright?" he asked finally.

Harry nodded his head.

"Dumbledore will return soon. I fear if I postpone meeting with the Dark Lord any longer, I will not survive the night."

Harry looked to Severus with shock, then anger in his eyes. "You're going back to him?" he cried furiously.

Severus placed a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"I explained all of this to you already, Harry. I must resume my position as a spy. It is imperative that the Dark Lord think that I'm loyal to him."

Harry relaxed with Severus' words before looking up to him worriedly.

"What if he hurts you? What if he kills you?"

Severus sighed. "That is a chance I have to take. It is part of my work to put myself at the mercy of the Dark Lord and his wand."

Harry could control himself no longer and threw his arms around Severus.

"Be careful, Professor. I don't think I could take another death tonight."

Severus patted him on the back and pulled away.

"Don't worry, Harry. The Dark Lord will find me more useful alive than dead, I assure you."

Harry nodded to him, and Severus rose. He nodded back to Harry and turned and swept from the room. He only hoped that his assurance to Harry wound up being the truth. This first meeting would be the most dangerous one for a while. The Dark Lord would be furious at Severus' late arrival and his clinging to Dumbledore for all of these years. He hoped he would be able to coerce his 'master' into sparing his life.

oooOOOooo

After assuring Potter's safety, Severus Apparated to the Dark Lord's side. He appeared in the cemetery where Voldemort had regained his body and glanced around. Peter Pettigrew stood next to Voldemort, grinning maniacally. The rest of the Death Eaters formed a circle around their newly resurrected master. Bowing low, Severus apologized for his late arrival.

"*Crucio!*" Voldemort cried at Severus.

Severus fell to the ground, gasping in surprise and pain. His body jolted violently from the curse. Severus cried out in anguish as the Unforgivable curse coursed through his body. Voldemort finally lifted it, and Severus' body stilled.

"Rise before me, Severus, and explain your tardiness."

"My Lord, I could not escape Dumbledore's side without raising suspicion. The school was in an upheaval at the death of the youth. If I had disappeared, Dumbledore would have immediately suspected that I had returned to your side. I understand your wrath at my delay, but I believe that I can be more useful to you under the eye of Dumbledore than shunned from the school."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes at Severus. "You have been cozying up to that wizard for all of these years. How am I to believe that you are here for my benefit? *Crucio!*"

Severus fell to the ground again and shook, but the curse was not nearly as strong. Severus hurried back to his kneeling position when it was lifted. He bowed his head again.

"My Lord, the only reason I have stayed at Hogwarts was to gain you a watchful eye when you returned. I have garnered the Headmaster's friendship. He is unaware of my true allegiances. I can keep you updated on Dumbledore's doings, if it pleases you."

Voldemort put his wand up to his chin and thought about what Severus had just told him.

"Look at me!" he demanded of Severus.

Severus looked up, and Voldemort swept through Severus' mind. Severus could feel him searching his mind, seeing his duplicity against Dumbledore, and confirming the truth of what he had said.

"Yes, this is good. This is very good, Severus. I had thought you had turned against me, but now I see that you have been one of the most loyal all of these years, lying low, knowing that I would return. You have made it possible for me to spy on Dumbledore right from the start of my return. This is excellent."

"Thank you, My Lord."

"You may go, Severus. Keep me up to date on what the old man is up to."

"I shall, my Lord."

Severus stood and moved out of the center of the circle so he could Disapparate. He noticed a figure following him as he hastily walked to the edge of the cemetery. Turning, he saw Lucius Malfoy following him, a grim expression on his face.

"Severus, I'm glad you finally showed up. I was beginning to worry about you," Lucius said gravely.

"What did I miss?" Severus asked.

"Only much of what you received yourself. Our master was upset that none of us took the initiative to help him, save Pettigrew."

Severus scoffed. "Pettigrew is watching out for his own backside. He is nothing but a scared coward. He would sell out the Dark Lord himself if he felt his life was in danger from another."

Lucius nodded his head. "I agree. I believe the Dark Lord is aware of that also. He, however, understands Pettigrew's usefulness."

Severus frowned. He wished he could kill the rat right there, but he would need to answer to Voldemort for such a deed, and there was no reason for him to just up and kill the whiny creature that had caused Lily's death.

Lucius continued his conversation, unaware of Severus' musings about the worthless Wormtail.

"I'm glad you came when you did, Severus. I don't think the Dark Lord would have been as merciful had you shown up any later."

"I'm glad I was able to help him to understand my motives. I am eager to prove myself to him again, Lucius."

"As we all are, my friend."

Severus nodded and turned to go.

"You will keep... her... safe, will you not, Severus?" Lucius said quietly.

Severus turned and narrowed his gaze at Lucius.

"Just what are you getting at, Lucius?"

"You won't let Professor Granger's identity slip one of these days, will you, Severus?"

Severus arched an eyebrow at Lucius. "I would worry about my own mind giving up that tidbit of information if I were you, Lucius. You will need to guard those thoughts carefully."

"As will you," Lucius agreed.

Severus gave a quick nod. "She will remain safe if we both keep our wits about us. Now, I must be getting back, before Dumbledore notices I have gone."

Lucius bowed his head and smiled at Severus. "Travel safely, my friend."

"Give my regards to Narcissa, Lucius. I will see you again soon."

Severus twirled on the spot and Disapparated. He reappeared at the Hogwarts gates and started for the safety of the school. He shook his head. He knew his Occlumency was strong enough to keep Hermione's identity hidden from his master. He also knew that Lucius had studied Occlumency and should have no problem keeping such old information hidden from the Dark Lord. He just hoped that his master's ignorance of Hermione would remain that way.

If the Dark Lord remembered Hermione from the past and asked about the girl with exactly the same name, Severus would be forced to cover for her. The only logical story would be that Hermione was the daughter of the old Hogwarts professor. Severus' mind whirled with the creation of the story. It had to be close enough to the truth that if the Dark Lord sent other Death Eaters to investigate her background, they wouldn't come up with anything that would concern them.

Suddenly an idea came to him. If asked about her, he would make it sound as if he had thoroughly investigated Hermione when she had first attended Hogwarts. The story would be that Hermione Granger, the professor, had died in childbirth, and her Muggle brother and sister-in-law had adopted Hermione as a baby. They had never divulged this secret to Hermione, as her birth mother had left strict instructions that she was to be kept in the dark about her Wizarding parentage.

Severus sighed in relief at the lie. If anyone wanted to investigate the girl, they would only find her true story, which would seem to certify Severus' tale about her not knowing her true parentage. The Dark Lord would then have no reason to be interested in her.

Severus hoped he would never have to use the diversionary tale. He hoped that Voldemort would be too busy rebuilding his army to even connect the name of a single student with the young teacher who had become an enemy to him twenty five years in the past.

Severus shook his head. Already the lies were beginning. His life had become incredibly more complicated in the last several hours. He was back in the middle of things again and no longer had the luxury of waiting to see what would happen. He was a spy once more. Even *his* brain had a hard time sorting out who he was really working for sometimes.

A/N: Next up: The arrival of the Pink Tittering Monster.

I hope you had as much fun with that chapter as I did. :) Happy reading, and don't forget to review. You guys are the greatest.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 of 46

A date, a pink hippo, and a trip into Harry's mind.

Disclaimer: JKR owns these characters. Anything that seems vaguely familiar in this chapter has been quoted, paraphrased, or just plain old summarized from The Order of the Phoenix book or movie.

Chapter 27

Hermione's fifth year part 1:

Harry sat down at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall. He reflected on all of the things that had happened in the last couple of weeks. The Dementor attack on Dudley and him in the middle of Little Whinging had set off a series of events. He had been brought up on charges of underage wizardry and had to appear in front of the Wizengamot. Dudley, not having known how to conjure a Patronus Charm, had been left alone, as he hadn't used any magic. He had been present at Harry's trial, and he and their Squib neighbor, Mrs. Figg, had testified about what they had seen and what had happened.

His Aunt Petunia had sat on the sidelines and had watched the proceedings calmly. Dumbledore had shown up to defend Harry, vehemently supporting him in his need to cast the Patronus. Harry had found it odd that Dumbledore had not spoken to him. It had made Harry wonder if he had done something wrong.

In the end, the evidence had weighed heavily in Harry's favor. The testimonies of Dudley and Mrs. Figg had assured most of the jurors that Harry definitely had a real reason for casting his Patronus and using underage magic. The Wizengamot had cleared Harry of all charges, but the decision hadn't been totally unanimous.

Harry stared up at the teacher's table and was surprised to see one of the main dissenters at his trial sitting in one of the seats. She was a small, toad-like woman adorned in pink. If she didn't look so stern, Harry would have thought she looked like a Pygmy Puff, but instead she looked like a crazed pink hippo. He narrowed his eyes at her, wondering why she would have a place at that table.

All was answered soon enough when Dumbledore announced her as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Dolores Umbridge. Harry and Hermione frowned at her. Dumbledore went on with the announcements but was interrupted by the pink hippo's high pitched "Ahem, ahem." Dumbledore's annoyance showed on his face as Umbridge made the most obnoxious speech in the history of Hogwarts. If the Sorting Hat hadn't already sung its song, Harry was sure it would have been filled with verses about the pink blob who wanted to destroy the school.

Harry glanced over at Professor Snape as Umbridge went back to her seat, and he almost burst out laughing. He had the most pathetic look on his face as he rolled his eyes. He was frowning and looked at Umbridge in disgust. Even the other professors were watching Umbridge with disdain. It seemed that she was not welcome at the school, whether she thought she was or not.

Harry turned to Hermione. "She was at my trial," he whispered to her. "She voted against me."

"She looks like the type who would," Hermione commented.

"All I know is she's not to be trusted."

"She looks like she eats children for breakfast," Hermione said as she looked crossly at the woman.

"I think she resembles a pink hippo," Harry muttered.

Hermione laughed. Becoming serious again, she whispered to Harry, "Well, one thing is for certain, the Ministry is trying to take over Hogwarts."

Harry looked at her with dread. Given the Ministry's past performance, that meant nothing good for their beloved school.

oooOOoooo

It was the first weekend after the start of school, and Severus made his way down to the gates of Hogwarts, en route to the Malfoy Mansion. He kept wondering why he was letting Lucius do this to him. He should have just declined the dinner invitation. At least once a year he would get such an invitation to dinner at the Manor. Every time he arrived, he would find a beautiful, unattached woman as the fourth guest. This had happened more times than he could count over the years since Lucius and Narcissa had been married. It seemed that Lucius Malfoy liked to play Cupid, and Narcissa enjoyed playing matchmaker right along with him. He could just imagine the two of them plotting to find the perfect mate for him.

No matter how much he complained, they were relentless. It didn't matter to them that he was uninterested in dating at this time. It didn't matter to them that all of the previous encounters had fallen flat, they continued their plotting. He just hoped that whomever they chose this time could converse normally. The last lady they had invited to dinner could hardly put the words together to form a complete thought. Lucius had apologized profusely after that dinner, promising to research future guests better before inviting them.

Severus had encouraged him to drop the whole matter but had been met with a dubious glare. Lucius was bound and determined to see Severus paired off with someone. The only person Severus wanted to be paired off with was Hermione, but that wasn't going to happen any time soon. So, he grudgingly accepted yet another dinner date. He hoped the evening would move along quickly. He had reading to do and essays to grade.

Appearing before the Manor, Severus made his way to the door and knocked. He was greeted by one of the Malfoy house-elves, who directed him to the dining room. Severus walked past the large reception room and down the hall. He entered the first door on the left. This room had always been his favorite in the mansion. It was quite large and floored in marble with a sand colored grain. The walls were painted a darker variation of the sand color and white wainscoting rimmed the base of the walls. Usually a large rectangular dining table adorned the length of the room. It could seat fifty people if necessary. But it had been transfigured to a circular table that made a cozy seating area for four.

As Severus entered the dining room, he realized that he was the last to arrive, for the other dinner guest, a pretty woman with wavy dark blonde hair that fell a little past her shoulders, was already seated and talking with Lucius and Narcissa. The three turned and looked to him as he approached the table.

"Good evening, Severus. It's so good of you to make it tonight!" Lucius gushed. "I would like to introduce our other guest. This is Miss..."

"Nat Kensington," Severus said with a raised brow.

Nat smiled up at him, happy that he had remembered her from school. She extended her hand, and Severus shook it politely. Severus then settled himself into the seat next to her and looked to his old friend for the real introduction.

"I see you remember Miss Kensington from school, Severus," Lucius drawled. "It was quite funny our chance meeting. I bumped into her at the Ministry when I was headed for a meeting with the Hogwarts board. We had quite a bit of fun catching up with one another."

Severus looked over at Nat, who was smiling softly. Her hazel eyes were complemented by a jade green dress that accented her form nicely.

"So, Miss Kensington, what have you been up to all of these years?" Severus asked finally.

Nat's smile got wider. "Well," she said, "after leaving school, my whole family moved to France. I lived with them for a little while until I was finally able to afford my own place in Paris. I now own a wand shop right off of the Champs Elysees."

"Do you mean the wand shop next to Lambeaux's Apothecary?" Severus asked.

"Yes! That's it. I've been running it now for ten years."

"I had no idea that you owned that shop!" Severus exclaimed in surprise. "I was just in there last summer looking for a second wand. Your selection is impeccable."

Nat smiled broadly. "Thank you. I pride myself on having the best selection in France, if not in all of Europe. We carry all of the well known craftsmen's products."

They chatted all through dinner, not even noticing the looks that Narcissa and Lucius were giving to each other as they excitedly went from one topic to the next. Lucius watched them eagerly, hopeful that he had finally found someone who had piqued Severus' interest. Narcissa just smiled at them and hoped for the best. She wasn't particularly fond of Nat Kensington, she not being a pureblood, but of course, neither was Severus a pureblood. She did have a soft spot in her heart for him, nonetheless. Narcissa glanced at the two as they chatted away. The couple seemed to be a match made in heaven.

With dinner now finished, they moved into the study and sat in the comfortable brown leather easy chairs that circled the fireplace.

"So," Lucius chimed in. "Nat, you're only in town for this week?"

"Oh, yes. I'm here on business. I need to restock my Ollivander wands, and I'm looking for new wand talent. There are rumors that a new wand maker is situated in Godric's Hollow. I wanted to search him out and find out if he'd like to do business with me. I'll be heading back to Paris this Friday."

"Where are you staying?" Severus asked her.

"At the Kensington Arms on Diagon Alley, of course. My father owns that hotel."

Narcissa's eyebrows shot up, and she suddenly looked interested. "You're one of *those* Kensingtons?" she asked eagerly.

"Please forgive my wife, Nat, she is always on the look out for important people she can rub shoulders with."

Nat laughed. "Yes, I'm one of those Kensingtons. My father still runs the hotel from Paris, but he isn't involved in the day-to-day workings of it. I stay there on my frequent trips here, mostly to check up on it and make sure that the on site owners are keeping it at the five-cauldron rating it has always been noted for."

Narcissa smiled warmly at Nat. "Darling, you must let me know whenever you're here in London. You're always welcome in our home."

Severus watched the transformation that Narcissa had made. She had been personable at dinner, but somewhat aloof. Now it seemed that she would lick Nat's shoes if given the chance. Severus rolled his eyes. He enjoyed Narcissa's company, but sometimes she was just too much.

Feeling he had bantered long enough, he rose from his chair.

"I had a wonderful time tonight, Lucius. Thank you for inviting me; however, I must be off. I have essays to grade before tomorrow."

Lucius looked at Severus with furrowed brows. "Now, Severus, can't you stay just a tad later?"

"No, Lucius, I have already stayed longer than I had planned."

Nat rose too. "I should be going also. I have to get up early tomorrow to travel to Godric's Hollow."

Lucius' eyebrows now rose. "Perhaps you could be a gentleman and see that Miss Kensington makes it safely to her hotel?"

Severus looked a bit apprehensive, and Nat protested that she could find her own way back to her hotel.

"Nonsense!" Lucius cried. "It is only a short Apparition away. Severus has the time to do that. Don't you, Severus?"

Severus eyed Lucius. He knew what the man was up to. He had trapped him into escorting Nat home.

"Alright, Miss Kensington, I will see you home."

He turned for the door, assuming Nat was following him. As he approached the entryway, he realized that she was not right behind him and stopped to wait for her, his arms folded in front of him.

She came out of the study a minute later.

"Sorry, I was just saying good night," she explained.

Severus gave her a quick nod, and they left the Manor. Several minutes later, they were making their way through the Leaky Cauldron to the entry point to Diagon Alley. Tapping his wand on the brick wall, Severus made the entryway appear, and they went through it.

Even at this late time of night, the street was crowded with happy shoppers and partiers. Severus pulled Nat closer to him so they wouldn't get lost in the crowd. They slowly made their way down the street toward the Kensington Arms, which was just past Gringotts.

They chatted amiably as they walked down the street. Nat occasionally stopped and pointed out something in one of the shop windows.

"Look at that!" she cried, stopping in front of one window. "Can you believe the robe styles they are coming out with nowadays?" she cried.

She was motioning to some dress robes in the window at Madam Malkin's. The robes were a bright fuchsia color with pleats running lengthwise down the fabric. They were cinched right above the waist, and again low below the knee. It made the robes look more like a clown's outfit than actual dress robes.

"I think that's the most hideous outfit I have ever seen," Nat remarked.

"Yes, I must agree," Severus said in horror.

They laughed and continued down the street. Finally, they were standing in front of the Kensington Arms, and Severus found himself being thanked profusely by Miss Kensington for taking her home even though he had much to do this evening.

"I assure you, Miss Kensington, if it had been a problem, I would have declined in the first place."

Smiling up at him, Nat placed a hand on his shoulder and reached up and kissed him. Severus' eyes grew wide in surprise. She released him from the kiss and looked at him sultrily.

"You know, I had a crush on you back in our seventh year," she whispered in his ear.

"Nat..."

"I could have a crush on you again very easily."

Severus felt his heart clench within him. She was lovely, and her kiss had not been unpleasant, but she wasn't what he wanted. The moment her lips had touched his, he had known it. A jolt had run through his body, and he had longed for Hermione to be standing in front of him instead of her. He had enjoyed their evening together and had found her company to be quite pleasant, but she wasn't what he was looking for or waiting for.

"I'm sorry, Nat. I didn't mean to give you the wrong impression. Lucius likes to try and set me up with various women, but I'm not really looking for a relationship right now."

Nat backed off a bit and looked hurt.

"Well, when will you be looking for a relationship?" she asked haughtily.

"Not for a while," he told her matter-of-factly.

Nat sighed. "Oh, well. I knew it was too good to be true."

She looked back at Severus and gave him a wan smile. She extended her hand, and he shook it again.

"It was a nice evening anyway," she told him. "Thank you for taking me home."

And with that she turned and went into the hotel. Severus watched her disappear. He needed to have a talk with Lucius. These little dates were getting out of hand. He would never want anyone but Hermione. There was no reason to string other women along, thinking they might have a chance with him. He was not for sale.

oooOOOooo

Fred and George Weasley snuck through the halls under Harry's invisibility cloak. When Harry had found out what they were up to, he had gladly let them borrow the cloak. He had served his week of detentions with Umbridge and was looking forward to the prank that the twins had prepared.

Fred and George came to the door of the Defense classroom and tried to enter. Of course it was locked and warded.

"Not to worry," George said to Fred.

He removed a small blob of something that looked like silly putty. He formed it around the door handle, and the two stood back and waited. The twins heard a small click, and the door swung open.

"That was too easy," Fred said.

George nodded.

They crept into the classroom and quickly went to the back of it, ascending the stairs up to Umbridge's office. This door had been foolishly left unlocked. George smiled to Fred under the cloak. They entered the office and pulled the cloak over their heads.

"How long will it take you to set up the yapper?" George asked.

"Just a few minutes," Fred said as he pulled an octagonal wooden box out of his pocket. He set it on the desk and opened it. Inside there were a lot of mechanical knobs and gears. It looked something like the innards of a music box. Fred took his wand out and waved it over the box.

"*Canis Multiplico*," Fred murmured.

The box began to grind. George and Fred took a step back as it trembled on the desk. After a minute, a great light shot to all corners of the office. Then everything was dark and quiet again. But the quiet only lasted for a few seconds.

Fred and George stared around the room with wide eyes. All of Umbridge's plates and pictures of cats now had a new inhabitant. Each now held a dog as well as a cat. The cats were obviously not pleased. Hissing, spitting, and caterwauling became mixed with barking and snarling. The twins watched as fights erupted in almost all of the plates. They both looked at each other worriedly.

"We'd best be off," they said in unison.

They threw the Cloak over them and hurriedly left the scene of the crime. Their escape came just in time, as the noise from her office had sent Dolores Umbridge scuttling to see what the hubbub was about. Imagine her horror when she saw all of her prized pussy cats being terrorized by horrible, terrible, ferocious, mongrel dogs! Oh, the injustice!

She screamed. She screamed so loud, Albus Dumbledore heard her three floors down and came rushing up to see what had caused the stout hippo to utter such a sound. By the time Dumbledore had ascended the stairs and burst into her office, Dolores Umbridge was a tattered mess. She had tried to extricate some of the tamer looking beasts from the pictures but had been attacked unmercifully. As Dumbledore stood and looked on helplessly, Umbridge was fighting off two toy poodles and a Chihuahua. The dogs certainly had the upper hand.

Albus knew that his appearance hadn't been detected by Umbridge, so he let her fight off the maniacal midget-dogs for a few minutes. A white toy poodle was making what seemed to be a nest in her hair while a black toy poodle had a grip of the arm of her pink coat. The Chihuahua simply was nipping at her ankles. Umbridge was batting at the tiny dog on the floor with her wand, but every spell she threw at it simply bounced off the doggie and hit Umbridge instead. Albus stifled a laugh and raised his own wand.

"*Canis defluo*," he said with a flick of his wand, and the three tiny dogs disappeared.

"Dolores, what on earth has happened here?" he asked.

Umbridge turned to him in fury.

"One of those student brats has sabotaged my office!" She pointed to her walls. "Just look at what they've done! My little darlings are fighting for their lives!"

Dumbledore looked seriously at the walls, trying hard not to burst into fits of laughter. He could barely contain himself, but he did, which was a miracle. His eyes fell to the octagonal box on the desk.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "This seems to be your problem, Dolores. I believe this box is the key to your uninvited guests."

Albus waved his wand over the box, and it exploded, making all of the dogs in the pictures disappear. Albus was sorry to see them leave, but he didn't relay his feelings to Dolores.

"There you go, all better," he twinkled.

"All better! My babies are traumatized, and some are seriously hurt. I swear, Albus, when I find the little culprits who did this, they will be sent to Azkaban!"

Albus finally couldn't hold back his laughter. He chuckled at Umbridge, but only a little.

"Now, now, Dolores, that is not an offence worthy of Azkaban! A few good detentions should keep whoever did this on the straight and narrow."

Umbridge sputtered at him, not knowing what to say for the first time in her life. Albus patted her on the shoulder.

"There, there. I'm sure your kitties will be fine. I'll leave you to settle them down."

And with that, Albus Dumbledore was gone. He'd never moved so fast as to get to his office, where he fell into his desk chair and had one of the most enjoyable laughs of his entire life.

oooOOOooo

The next morning word had gotten around the whole school about the disturbance in Umbridge's office. No one knew who did it, but rumors were flying as to who the culprits might be. Rumors were also flying about Umbridge getting chased down the hall by a bulldog, being bitten on the backside by a pit bull, and being defecated on by a collie. Even the teachers were participating in the jocularity, as Umbridge had decided to take her breakfast in her room. Albus was relaying the picture of Delores Umbridge with a tiny poodle sitting on her head, one on her arm, and another dog at her heels to everyone at the large table. There were gasps and guffaws all along the length of the faculty table. Severus sat back and smirked as he pictured Umbridge swatting at her hair and screaming bloody murder as she tried to pull the dogs off of her. Finally there was something to laugh and celebrate about.

Of course, the culprits were never found.

oooOOOooo

"You sent for me, Headmaster?" Severus crooned as he entered Dumbledore's office.

"Oh, yes, Severus, there's no time to waste!"

Severus glanced at Harry, who was looking scared. Looking back to Albus, he made sure he understood what was to be done.

"You wish me to give Mr. Potter those extra lessons we spoke about?"

"Yes, yes, Severus. Please begin tonight!"

Severus looked to Harry. "Follow me, Mr. Potter."

Soon they had descended all the way to the dungeons. Harry had explained his dream as they went down the long staircases, describing how he had seen through Nagini's eyes and had witnessed the attack of Arthur Weasley. Severus listened worriedly as Harry spoke. They had reached the Potions classroom, and he opened the door and hurried Harry into the room.

"Sir," Harry said, "I felt something...evil...when I had that dream, and later in the Headmaster's office. My scar burned, and I felt this intense hatred toward Dumbledore."

Severus regarded him with a frown. "I believe you have formed a connection with the Dark Lord that he can exploit in the future if he realizes it exists. The art of Occlumency will help you to block out the Dark Lord's influences."

"Occlumency?"

"It is a way to block your thoughts from Legilimency, which is the ability to see into another's mind and read his thoughts... to direct them... even to use them against him."

"You mean Voldemort will try and use this connection to control me?"

"Once he realizes the connection exists. That's why it's imperative for you to master Occlumency. Professor Dumbledore wants me to teach it to you, as I have become adept at it through my spy work for the Order."

Severus extracted his wand and turned to Harry. "I will attempt to penetrate your mind; you will attempt to keep me out."

Harry looked at him in puzzlement. "How do I do that, Professor?"

"You must clear your mind, Harry. When you feel me enter it, try to push me out. Keep your thoughts simple, or think of nothing at all, or something mundane. It is a form of discipline that will keep the Dark Lord out of your mind. Are you ready?"

Harry nodded.

Severus pointed his wand at Harry. "*Legilimens!*" he cried.

Harry felt the onslaught hit him, and he could do nothing about it. Memories came unbidden to the forefront of his mind. His parents were smiling and embracing. He was laughing with Ron and Hermione. He kissed Cho Chang. He caught the Snitch in his first Quidditch match.

Severus pulled out of Harry's mind. "You must concentrate, Harry. Focus on emptying your mind."

Harry concentrated. "Okay," he said, "I'm ready."

"*Legilimens*"

Harry fought to keep his mind clear. It was hopeless. Severus penetrated his mind again. Voldemort stared at him from the train station. He was the snake attacking Arthur Weasley. Ginny lay unconscious on the floor of the Chamber of Secrets. Cedric Diggory stared at him with lifeless eyes.

Severus pulled out again. "When I penetrate your mind, fight to clear it again. Your goal is to stop me, even if I gain access. You should not let me wander in your thoughts like that."

"*Legilimens*"

Harry lasted about a minute before Severus was in his mind. Harry worked hard to expel him and clear his mind, but it was much harder than it seemed. He pushed Severus out once, but the effort was exhausting. Severus crashed through again, and Harry was unable to stop him. Severus withdrew after a minute, and Harry fell to his knees.

Severus went up to him and helped him to stand.

"That wasn't bad," Severus said to Harry. "Now you know what it feels like to push me out. It will be easier the next time."

Harry was panting. "This is exhausting. How do you do it, Professor?"

Severus grinned at him. "I have had years of practice, Harry."

"How do you keep him out?"

"I not only keep him out, I can show him what I want him to see. That will be your ultimate goal."

"How can I do that, when I can't even keep you out of my head for thirty seconds?"

"We will practice, just like we practice dueling. It will get easier with time. Are you ready to continue?"

Harry nodded, and Severus began again. They worked for another hour before Severus told him to get some rest. In that hour Harry managed to keep Severus out of his mind for an entire minute at a time. Harry was discouraged, but Severus assured him he would get better with time.

oooOOOooo

Severus growled as Dolores Umbridge left his office. She had been quizzing him on his position and lack of appointment as the Defense Professor. She had tittered at him when she had asked him about that. Severus knew that she disliked him because of his Death Eater status and the fact that he had never gone to Azkaban for it. He felt he should be careful around her, but there was just something about the woman that made him want to strangle her. Umbridge was an insufferable beast, strutting around in all of that pink like a fat flamingo.

Severus let his imagination take over as he pictured Umbridge's neck wrapped in his hand. He squeezed her neck tightly and watched the toad's eyes bulge. Suddenly she turned into a real flamingo, and his grip tightened even more around the thin neck of the bird as he lifted it off the ground. It squawked wildly, flapping its wings, hitting Severus' arms in its gyrations. It's long, spindly legs bent up and down furiously. Severus extracted his wand, and with a flick, the flamingo turned into a giant warty toad. It resembled Neville Longbottom's, only it was uglier. It still wore the little pink hat that usually adorned Umbridge's head. He let the toad jump to the floor and watched it hop away with a satisfied smirk on his face. Ahh, if only dreams would come true!

oooOOOooo

Months of training had gone by, but Harry still wasn't getting anywhere with his Occlumency lessons. He couldn't seem to clear his mind. Severus had all but given up. He had no delusions that Harry would ever be able to direct his thoughts, but he still held out hope that Harry would be able to at least block his thoughts effectively. He pulled out of Harry's mind and checked his watch.

"Nine minutes," he said sourly. "That's one minute better than last time."

"It's hopeless, Professor. I'm never going to be able to do this right."

Severus studied Harry. "I'm not sure what the problem is. Why is it so hard for you to discipline your mind?"

"I don't know, Professor. I'm just ready to give up entirely."

"That could mean your utter downfall, Harry. We must keep at it. Your ability to keep the Dark Lord out could be the difference between victory and defeat."

Harry glanced over to the Pensieve where Severus always deposited some memories.

"What do you put in there?" Harry asked with interest.

"If I wanted you to know, I'd leave those memories in my head," Severus responded tartly.

Harry just stared at him, waiting for a credible answer.

Severus looked at Harry crossly. "They are mostly disturbing images of my time as a Death Eater. You do not need to see such nastiness should you get into my head."

Little did Harry know that the Pensieve was really filled with memories of his best friend, Hermione.

oooOOOooo

Hermione and Harry were walking to their meeting with Professor Snape.

"I think that our DA meeting went well last night," Harry mused absently.

"Yes, it did. You really are an excellent teacher, Harry, just like I said you would be."

"Thanks, Hermione."

They knocked on the door and entered when they heard Snape's voice calling to them. He turned as they entered and bowed his head slightly in a welcome.

They looked around the room. It was exactly the way they had left it the previous night. It seemed that Professor Snape had found out about Dumbledore's Army.

"I really like your setup here, Harry," Severus said, "although I think it's a bit lacking in padded walls. I'm sure all of your friends must be slamming into the walls quite a bit."

Harry and Hermione didn't say anything.

"I was going to come in last night, but I thought you might think I was Professor Toad and hex me as I walked through the door."

"Professor Toad, sir?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, you know, the woman who wears pink and struts around as if she owns the place?"

Harry and Hermione's mouths dropped open.

"How long have you known, sir?" Harry asked when he had regained his composure.

"I have been keeping a close eye on your organization since its inception. You have been quite clever in your attempts to keep Mr. Filch from finding the entrance to this room."

"Are you going to tell Umbridge, sir?" Hermione asked.

"What exactly is Professor Umbridge teaching you in her class?" Severus queried.

"Nothing at all!" Hermione snorted. "All we do is read out of the book. She won't even let us take our wands out. It's the biggest waste of time!"

"So, you decided to take matters into your own hands and run a Defense class yourselves?"

The students nodded.

"That's very enterprising of you," Severus told them. "Of course, you realize that Professor Umbridge has forbidden clubs of any kind?"

Harry and Hermione nodded again, afraid of what he would say next.

"Yet you insist on meeting anyway?"

"Professor, how are we supposed to be prepared to fight against Voldemort if Umbridge won't even let us practice simple spells?" Harry asked plaintively.

"Professor Umbridge cares nothing for your level of preparedness," Severus explained. "She only cares about herself and how she can gain power in this school. She and Minister Fudge are paranoid to the extent of it being detrimental to the students of this school."

"Then you see our plight, Professor?" Hermione asked.

Severus looked to Hermione. "Indeed I do," he said plainly.

"So, you won't let Umbridge know about our group?" Hermione pleaded.

"As far as I'm concerned, Miss Granger, what goes on in the Room of Requirement is none of my business. I just wanted you to know that Professor Umbridge is aware that

something is going on, and Mr. Filch is determined to expose you. Umbridge is doubling the efforts of the Inquisitorial Squad."

Harry gave Severus a determined look. "She won't find us, Professor."

Severus nodded his head to Harry.

"Perhaps you could come to one of our meetings and teach us some dueling techniques?" Harry asked.

"No, Harry, I will not be engaging in such activities. Umbridge already is watching me closely, as I am a former Death Eater. It would not be wise for me to indulge in teaching your secret society. She, however, will not stand in the way of me teaching the two of you. I'm sure you can pass along anything that you learn with me to your friends."

Harry and Hermione smiled at him. "We will, sir," they said together.

Severus nodded to them, and they began their lessons.

A/N: Next up: Umbridge accosts Hermione, and Sirius Black doesn't know when to stay hidden.

I find it telling that the name Dolores in Spanish means 'pains'. She's certainly full of those. I own a little black toy poodle and couldn't resist having him attack Umbridge in this chapter. He's psycho as it is. I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 of 46

Umbridge's reign continues, and Harry and friends battle at the Ministry.

Disclaimer: Anything that seems vaguely familiar in this chapter has been quoted, paraphrased, or just plain old summarized from The Order of the Phoenix book or movie.

The scene with Snape, Umbridge, Harry and the DA is quoted directly from the OOTP movie. I couldn't have said it better.

Chapter 28

Hermione's fifth year continued:

"Ahem, ahem, Miss Granger, might I have a word with you?" Dolores Umbridge said as she stopped Hermione in the hallway.

Hermione looked to her professor with disdain, but answered her respectfully. "Of course, Professor, what did you need?"

"Miss Granger, it seems to me that a bright child like yourself would understand the necessity of *rules*."

Hermione bristled at being called a child. "Of course, Professor," she uttered, barely keeping the anger from her voice.

"Well, I was wondering if you would like to become a member of my Inquisitorial Squad. I think you would be an invaluable asset to my group," Umbridge said, her voice dripping with false pleasantness.

Hermione's eyes widened. "Oh!" she exclaimed. She thought quickly. "While I appreciate your invitation, Professor Umbridge, I really have no desire to belong to that group."

Umbridge lost a little of her politeness. "And why is that... Miss Granger?"

"Umm, I have too much to do already, Professor. I don't have the time."

"My dear, you can make the time."

"No, thank you," Hermione said nervously.

"But I insist! You would make a great member of the squad."

"No, Professor Umbridge. I have no desire to be a part of your squad!"

All pleasantness left Umbridge, who got very close to Hermione.

"Tell me where your little group meets, Miss Granger, if you know what's good for you!"

"Professor Umbridge, whatever are you talking about?" Hermione feigned innocence.

"Don't play dumb with me, young lady. I know you're one of the gang leaders!"

Hermione bit back her anger and tried to be civil. "Professor Umbridge, I haven't any idea what gang you're talking about. If you mean my friends Harry and Ron, then..."

Umbridge's hands grabbed Hermione's arms in a viselike grip. Her face transformed from its normal toad-like expression to an evil sneer. She put her face directly into Hermione's face.

"You will tell me where to find your little group, or you will be very sorry!" she screamed at Hermione.

"Professor Umbridge, why are you threatening a student?" a voice asked sternly.

It was Severus. He had turned the corner to find the Umbridge-toad snarling at Hermione. Anger had filled him as he had approached the two, bellowing out his question.

"Ah, Professor Snape, I need some of your Veritaserum, please." Umbridge's voice was back to its usual patronizing, high-pitched, sugary tone.

"Professor Umbridge," Severus answered as his face showed a mask of boredom. "I am fresh out. I was planning on brewing some tonight. Now please unhand that student."

"She was just going to tell me something very interesting," Umbridge sneered while looking at Hermione.

Hermione cringed and took a step to the side.

"Well, I'm sorry to interrupt your gossiping session, Dolores, but I was coming to search for Miss Granger myself. I was planning on tutoring her in a particularly difficult potion, and this is the time I have to devote to such a project."

Umbridge's hands fell from Hermione's arms. She looked at Hermione menacingly.

"Don't think that our conversation is over, Miss Granger," she sneered.

"Come along, Miss Granger, we have little time to brew," Severus said as he took her arm and led her away from the seething, pink hippo.

When they were safely out of earshot, Hermione heaved a huge sigh.

"Thank you for rescuing me, Professor Snape. I thought she was going to poison me with her breath she was so close to my face."

Severus snickered. "You will have to be more careful not to be alone from now on, Miss Granger. Surely Professor Toad will search you out again."

"Ugh! I felt like spitting in her face! She's horrid."

"I'm sure, Miss Granger, that when you are older and do not have to follow school rules, you will not let anyone walk all over you like that," Severus assured her.

Hermione laughed. "During that whole thing, I was just picturing myself punching her in the face."

"So violent, Miss Granger. You will find that words are more hurtful than fists in the end, I believe."

Hermione regarded him with a lifted brow. "It still would have ended up with a lifetime's worth of detentions either way. My hand would have probably been carved off by the time she was done with me."

Severus looked at her oddly. "What do you mean by that?"

"Hasn't Harry shown you his hand?"

"No, he hasn't."

"She's awful, Professor! She uses an enchanted quill that carves the lines Harry writes directly into his hand. There's horrible scarring from it. I'm surprised you haven't noticed."

Severus was furious. "That woman should have been a Death Eater, for Merlin's sake. Before we know it she will be throwing Unforgivables around when the students don't act as she would have them!"

Hermione looked at him with pleading eyes. "Isn't there anything you or Professor Dumbledore can do?"

"All of the teachers' hands are tied. If anything is said to the woman that she doesn't like, we are immediately threatened with dismissal, or worse yet, a report to the Ministry. She has taken over the school, and the Headmaster is little more than a figurehead."

Severus watched Hermione's stature deflate a bit at his revelations.

"Perhaps, however," he continued. "I can do something secretly to keep Umbridge's detentions more along the lines of a normal detention."

Hermione's head snapped up, and she grinned at Severus. In that instant she became the exact image of his Hermione. How he longed to scoop her up and hold her in his arms.

"You're amazing, Professor Snape. Thank you!"

Severus' heart stood still at her compliment. *I think you are the one who is amazing*, he thought. He cleared his throat before he continued speaking to her.

"You had best come down to the dungeons with me, or Professor Toad will know that I was just keeping you away from her. If you'd like, we can work on a potion, or we can duel or something."

Her eyes lit up as she turned and headed for the dungeons.

"Actually, sir, I had found this potion in a text in the library that I was wondering about. I was looking through *Advanced Potion-Making* just to get an idea of what we'll be doing in the future. I came across the Draught of Living Death. It's quite an intriguing potion. I was wondering how to extract the juice from the sopophorous beans. All it says is to cut the beans, but I can't see how that would produce much juice."

Severus was amused by her enthusiasm. *You always ramble when you get excited. You'll never know how endearing that is to me.* Severus pulled out of his thoughts and fixed Hermione with a curious look.

"You do ramble on, don't you, Miss Granger?"

She turned red. Severus thoroughly enjoyed her embarrassment. By this time they had arrived at his classroom.

"Come in, I'll show you how to juice the beans. It is rather simple...once you know what to do."

Severus went to the back of the classroom and into his storeroom. He emerged seconds later with a jar filled with sopophorous beans. He twisted the lid from the jar and poured a couple of the shriveled beans onto the table. He looked up at Hermione.

"What did the text say to do with these?"

"It said to cut them up, but I can't see how cutting these would extract their juices," Hermione mused as she fingered a dried up bean.

Severus nodded his head. "Go get your silver knife," he instructed.

She went to get it and returned to the table with it in her hand.

"Try cutting one," Severus advised.

She cut one into three pieces. A small amount of juice escaped from the bean.

Severus looked up at her. "Can you think of any other ways to get the juice out?"

"Well, I suppose if it were crushed, that would get more juice out of it."

Severus wanted to grin, but he stayed stoic. "Very good, Miss Granger. Take the flat edge of your knife and crush the next one."

She did as instructed and was amazed to see the liquid gush from the bean. Her eyes grew wide before she looked up to Severus with a huge smile on her face.

"Who would have thought there was that much liquid in that emaciated bean!" she gushed.

Severus couldn't help but smile at her. *You truly are adorable in the throes of discovery.* Straightening, he *Accio'd* a cauldron to the table.

"We have enough time to brew the entire potion," Severus mused. "Go get some valerian root and slice it up, I'll get the cauldron started."

They worked silently for a few minutes while Hermione prepared the valerian root and dropped it into the cauldron.

"All right, now add the juice from the sopophorous beans," Severus coached.

She poured it in and saw the color change from dark purple to lilac.

Handing his stirrer to Hermione, he advised her to give it seven stirs counter clockwise with one stir clockwise until the potion became clear.

"I thought the book said to just stir it counterclockwise," Hermione countered.

"Are you contradicting your Professor, Miss Granger?"

She looked up at him in horror. "No, sir, of course not."

She stirred and stirred until finally it turned clear as water. Smiling to herself, she removed the stirrer and admired the crystal snake head that was carved into it.

"This is such a unique stirrer, Professor. I really like it."

"Thank you," he said as he looked at her intently. "It was given to me by someone very dear to me. It is my most prized possession."

Hermione carefully placed it on the table next to the cauldron. "It's beautiful," she murmured.

Not as beautiful as you, Severus thought.

"I agree. I have never seen another like it," he mused aloud.

Hermione glanced back to him. "Thank you, Professor. That was really fun. I appreciate you taking time to help me brew."

Giving her a lopsided grin, he nodded. *One day, we will be able to brew together constantly, creating and discovering side by side.*

"Alright, Miss Granger, you'd best get along. I'm sure you have another class lined up at some time today."

Hermione glanced at the time. "Oh! It's gotten quite late. I'll be just in time for Charms. Thanks again, Professor," she said as she scooped up her backpack and hurried from the room.

Severus vanished the potion and sent the cauldron back to its place on the shelf. He frowned intensely as he pictured his Hermione in his head. The younger Hermione stood next to her, smiling at him. The young Hermione looked to him with respect while his Hermione looked to him with devotion. The younger Hermione gazed at him with limited understanding because of their formality with one another while his Hermione reached out to him, wanting to embrace him and take him into herself. The two women hovered side by side for an instant and then melded together into one. She smiled ruefully and waved to him as she dissolved into nothingness. Severus stared at the spot where she had been for a while before moving on to continue cleaning the lab.

oooOOOooo

The next morning Professor Umbridge interrupted a calm breakfast to make an announcement. As the High Inquisitor, she felt she had the right to make any announcements she liked. She stood in front of the center of the teacher's table and put her wand to her throat.

"Ahem, ahem," she said. "A very unfortunate incident happened some time last night. It seems that someone entered my office uninvited and destroyed some very valuable quills that I had stored in there. I assure you that the culprit will be found and punished! As the High Inquisitor, I will not put up with such childish antics. Rest assured there is a replacement shipment of those quills speeding toward us as we speak!"

With that she returned to her seat. Hermione looked up to Severus, who was staring at her. She raised an eyebrow at him, and he returned the gesture. He went back to his breakfast as if nothing had transpired. Severus had not even spared Umbridge a glance during her speech, but now he turned and looked at her.

"Dolores, do you have any idea who could have done such a thing?" he asked.

"I assure you, Severus, I know exactly who did it!" she said rather importantly.

"Who did it then?" Severus asked sagely.

"That is my business," she told him.

"Well, I hope you catch them quickly. I would hate for my office to be broken into."

With that Severus went back to his breakfast, and Umbridge began to eat too, ignoring the man beside her. Little did she know that he was the culprit who had broken in and destroyed every one of her enchanted detention quills. Neither did she know that he had already placed a spell over the castle to be alerted if any such quills ever entered the school again. Umbridge's new shipment of quills would never reach her hands, nor would any other shipment that she ordered. Severus smiled to himself and spooned porridge into his mouth without another glance at Professor Toad.

oooOOOooo

Severus and Harry were working on Occlumency once again. Harry had not improved by much in all of the time they had been working. Severus was at a loss as to what to tell him to be able to improve. They just kept working, hoping that with experience, Harry would be able to block Severus out longer and longer. Unfortunately, Harry had

not passed the ten minute mark in keeping Severus out of his head. Severus put his wand down and studied Harry for a minute.

"Maybe you should try Legilimency on me," Severus mused. "Perhaps if you can see how it works, you'll be better able to counteract it."

Harry shrugged. "I'm open to anything at this point," he said.

"You must keep eye contact with me as you say the spell," Severus instructed. "Saying the incantation will guide you into my mind."

Harry nodded and got ready. He looked into Professor Snape's eyes and lifted his wand.

"*Legilimens!*" Harry cried.

Immediately he could see bits and pieces of his professor's memories. A boy crying in the corner while his parents fought... his own father stringing Severus up in a tree and removing his trousers... Severus and his mother, Lily, as children playing together... four boys, including his father throwing hexes at him... Hermione standing in front of a classroom teaching while Severus sat in the back taking notes.

Suddenly, Severus' walls snapped up, and Harry was thrown from his mind. Severus cursed himself. He thought he had gotten all of his memories of Hermione into the Pensieve, but this one was so innocuous that he had overlooked it. Severus looked over at Harry, who was regarding him with a strange expression.

"Wasn't that Hermione I just saw teaching a class?" Harry asked.

Severus looked away and scowled.

"And you were a student, only a little older than me. How can that be, Professor?"

Severus grimaced. "Harry, I really can't talk about that," he said.

"My best friend was your teacher at some point, and you can't talk about that?"

"That's what I said."

"She seemed older. How old was she?"

"I can't say, Harry!"

"She traveled back in time at some point in the future, didn't she? Why? What did she want to change?"

Severus walked to the door and opened it. "You need to leave... Now!"

Harry walked over to the door and shut it again.

"I'm not leaving until you're straight with me. Was that or wasn't that Hermione from the future in your past?"

"Potter, you cannot speak of this to anyone! She must not know that she will go back in time. Do you understand me?"

Severus gripped Harry's robes and shook him slightly.

"Why can't she know?" Harry asked in befuddlement.

"Would you want to know your future? Would you want to know that in a few years you would go back to the past?" Severus grilled, desperation filling his voice. "She doesn't need that kind of pressure, Harry. You must never tell her about this, do you understand?"

"Yes, I guess I do. Why did she go back?"

Severus let go of Harry's robes. "I cannot tell you. Suffice it to say that she went back and accomplished what it was she went back for. She then returned to her present, which will be in several years."

"Did I go back too?" Harry asked.

"No, only she did."

"Tell me what she was like back then! What did she teach? Were you friends?"

Severus heaved a huge sigh. "Harry, the less you know the better. If you slip up and say something, she could find out. Really, I will not speak of this with you again... ever!"

"You must have been surprised to see her when she came here at age eleven!"

"Yes, of course I was," Severus lied.

"How can you not let it slip that you knew her back then?"

Severus got a faraway look in his eyes. "It is for her protection. I will not compromise her future just to reveal such secrets."

Harry thought he saw something in Severus' face. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

"You really respect her, don't you?"

Severus grimaced. "She was my professor at one point. Of course I respect her."

Harry shook his head. "I really can't get around the idea of Hermione being a Hogwarts teacher!"

"I'm sure when the time comes, it will seem like the most normal course of events that could be imagined," Severus said drolly. "You should go. It's almost dinner time," Severus said, trying to end the conversation and get rid of his nosy student.

Harry checked his watch. "Oh, right. Well, I'll see you then," Harry said.

Severus thanked heaven for teenage boys' stomachs as he watched Harry disappear from the room.

oooOOOooo

Harry sat at dinner, his brows furrowed, as he stared down into his plate. He glanced up at Hermione when she wasn't looking. She was speaking matter-of-factly to Ron about Charms. Harry watched as she rolled her eyes while she argued a point with his friend.

I can't believe she traveled to the past. Why did she do it? What did she learn? How close was she to Professor Snape?

"So, how was your thing with Snape?" Ron asked Harry, his mouth filled with mashed potatoes as he spoke.

"Professor Snape," Hermione corrected and looked to Harry to hear his reply.

Harry turned his attention to Ron. Looking a bit hesitant, he finally said, "It was pretty much the same as usual. He wandered around in my head while I tried to shove him out."

"I'm sorry it isn't going well," Hermione said before popping a piece of chicken in her mouth.

"Well, we're still working. Hopefully I'll have a breakthrough any time now."

"You need to, Harry," Hermione advised. "If Voldemort takes control of your mind, he could make you think anything."

Suddenly Harry saw the older Hermione standing in front of a classroom teaching. Perhaps it wasn't so odd to think of Hermione as a teacher. She surely told everybody what was best for them. He smirked to himself as he watched his two friends. Hermione had returned to her harping at Ron. All the while, he nodded while shoveling huge amounts of food into his mouth at a rapid pace. Glancing up at the teacher's table, he saw Professor Snape's eyes on him. Harry gave him an innocent look as Severus glared at him, daring him to say something stupid to Hermione. He wouldn't. He understood his professor's reasons for not telling her anything. At least he thought he did.

oooOOOooo

Professor Umbridge walked along the grounds, humming to herself. The humming stopped as soon as she neared the entryway of the school. On the left side of the entryway sat a huge swamp. Dolores saw red. Oh, that swamp! It appeared everywhere! No matter what they tried, it wouldn't go away! Then she saw it. In the middle of the swamp sat a tiny white kitten, looking wet and dejected. Someone's familiar must have gotten loose and trapped itself in the swamp.

"Oh!" cried Dolores. "That poor, little kitty!"

She examined the situation. If she were careful, she could reach the kitten and rescue it.

"Don't worry, little one, I'll save you!" she cried to the kitten, which mewed at her plaintively as it turned in circles.

Dolores gingerly stepped on the not-so-swampy parts of the swamp. Even with her care, her shoes had already turned an ugly brown. She didn't think mud brown went with glittery pink, but she could clean them once that poor little animal was safe and sound.

Slowly she came up to the little cat, agonizing over its predicament as she gingerly stepped closer and closer to it. The kitten's green eyes shone at her with intelligence as it mewed at her again.

"Now, now," she muttered. "I'll have you free in no time," she soothed the tiny creature.

Bending over, she reached for the little fur ball. Her hands surrounded its small body, and she began to lift it. At her touch, something mysterious happened. The little cat began to writhe. It struggled in Umbridge's hands and grew and grew. Before Dolores had even realized it, the tiny kitten that had been secured in her hands was now a huge brown and black Great Dane. The dog stood on its hind legs and put its front legs on Umbridge's shoulders. It looked at her with an open mouth and lolling tongue. Dolores screamed.

The dog tilted its head curiously before its enormous tongue came out and licked the entirety of Dolores Umbridge's face. Umbridge grimaced and shrieked some more as she was covered in dog slime.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake! Get off me, you brute!" she demanded of the dog.

The dog, seemingly unwilling to take orders from the big, pink hippo, continued to lap at Umbridge's face as she struggled to get out from its huge paws. Dolores backed up a few steps, lost her footing in the marshy swamp, and went hurtling backwards right into the largest muddy puddle there was. The dog tottered and swung itself back and forth before crashing down on top of the trapped professor. Its huge tongue surrounded Dolores' face, leaving large, pale skin trails on her mud-splattered cheeks.

A little ways away, Fred and George Weasley had been innocently sitting on the stone guardrail of one of the outer halls... 'studying.' They watched the entire spectacle while trying to keep from laughing out loud. Fred grinned maniacally, and George even emitted a guffaw.

Fred looked to his twin. "We'd better get out of here before we give ourselves away!" he said while barely able to contain himself.

"But, Fred," George chuckled. "It's just getting good."

"But her punishment, if she finds out that we did this, will definitely not be good."

George frowned, but his frown never took shape as a guffaw left his mouth.

"You're right, of course," he told Fred.

"Let's go," they said in unison.

They got up and quickly left a mud-covered, struggling Dolores Umbridge trying to get herself out from under a very overly-friendly Great Dane.

oooOOOooo

Severus entered the Headmistress' office. A few weeks earlier, Harry's 'club' had been found out, and Dumbledore had taken responsibility. He had disappeared, and Dolores Umbridge had taken over as Headmistress. Severus had glowered at her as she had sat in Albus' seat in the Great Hall like some peacock. She had been so full of herself, crooning about her new position, that Severus had been surprised she didn't lay an egg right there. First Voldemort, then Umbridge...could the people who controlled his life be any more horrid?

He looked at the toad-like face of Dolores Umbridge. She was covered in soot from the Weasley twins' latest escapade. Severus repressed the smirk that wanted to appear on his face at the thought of how they had humiliated Umbridge. Their display had truly been remarkable.

"You sent for me, Headmistress?"

"Oh, yes, Snape, the time has come for answers, whether he wants to give them to me or not. Have you brought the Veritaserum?"

Severus glanced around at the occupants of the room. Potter sat in a chair next to Umbridge. Neville Longbottom, Hermione, Ron Weasley, Dudley, Ginny, and Luna Lovegood were all behind the desk, each being held by a member of Umbridge's illustrious Inquisitorial Squad. Harry's friends all appeared to be frightened.

"I am sorry, Headmistress, but I'm afraid you have used all of my stores of Veritaserum interrogating students. Unless you wish to poison him, then I assure you I would have the greatest sympathy if you did, I cannot help you."

"He's got Padfoot," Harry called out. "He's got Padfoot at the place where it's hidden."

Severus turned and looked at Harry with trepidation.

"Padfoot, what is Padfoot, what is he talking about, Snape?" Umbridge demanded.

Severus gave Umbridge a curious look. "I've no idea," he said darkly, then turned and left the office.

oooOOOooo

Severus had hurried back to his room and quickly Flooed to Sirius. Finding Sirius at Grimmauld Place, he quickly told him what Harry had said. He urged him to stay where he was and told Black that he would alert the Order. Unbeknownst to him, Sirius Black did not listen to his warning and went to the Ministry himself.

Meanwhile, the DA members had outwitted Umbridge and her Inquisitorial squad and were racing to the Ministry on a few borrowed Thestrals. They hurried to save Sirius, unaware that Voldemort had used the connection he had with Harry to place a false vision in his head.

Severus sent his Patronus to alert the Order that Voldemort had set a trap for Harry and his friends, causing the Order members to race to the scene. Severus, of course, was forced to stay behind. He could not risk his cover being blown.

oooOOOooo

Harry stood grasping the prophecy as Bellatrix Lestrange pointed her wand at him. He glanced around at his friends. Every one had a wand pointed in their face and strong arms wrapped around their torsos. *This is all my fault. I got them into this mess. They're helpless, and it's my fault!* His eyes fell back onto Lestrange. Her face was filled with hatred as she lifted her wand slightly to aim directly into his face.

"Just give me the prophecy, Potter, and I'll let your little friends go," she crooned.

"Don't do it, Harry!" Dudley shouted.

"Don't give it to her!" Neville cried.

Buoyed up by his friends, Harry gave Bellatrix a determined look. "I will never give the prophecy to you! I would rather that I never know what it says than have Voldemort have it in his hands!"

"You dare speak his name again!" Bellatrix screamed and pulled her wand back to curse the boy in front of her.

At that moment, Harry threw the prophecy to the floor, and it shattered into a thousand pieces. Little wisps of smoke rose from the shattered orb, and a ghoulish groan came from it. The smoke seemed to form a human shape as it curled up, swirled around, and finally dissipated into thin air.

"No!" Bellatrix screamed insanely and looked maniacally at Potter.

She sneered at him and shot a spell his way. Before Harry had a chance to react, *Protego* was shouted from behind him, and the spell shot by Bellatrix disappeared into the shield that had blocked it. Harry looked behind him to see Sirius standing in a dueling stance. Sirius sent a Stupefy spell at Bellatrix, and Harry watched her fly off the raised podium they were standing on.

"Sirius!" Harry yelled happily.

Before Sirius had a chance to reply, the other Death Eaters started to shoot spells at the two of them. Suddenly, Order members were everywhere in the room, fighting off the attackers and saving the students. Harry hugged Sirius as they had a second to spare in-between fighting.

"I thought Voldemort had taken you!" Harry told Sirius.

"Snape explained everything to me. That was clever to send him a message the way you did." Sirius said as he shot a spell at a masked Death Eater. The Death Eater collapsed to the ground.

Harry and Sirius stood side by side and fought bravely. Spells left their wands at lightning speed as the Death Eaters around them either crashed to the ground or sent their own spells speeding toward the pair. Sirius congratulated Harry on his fighting abilities as Harry felled two Death Eaters with one hex. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Harry spotted Bellatrix Lestrange stumble to a standing position and aim at Sirius.

"Sirius, Bellatrix!" was all that Harry was able to get out, he was so taken aback.

Sirius barely had a chance to turn toward Bellatrix when a Petrificus Totalus spell was shot from behind her, and the crazed woman froze in mid-spell-casting and fell to the floor. Neville Longbottom lowered his wand and looked at the felled woman smugly. Sirius smiled.

"That was amazing, Neville!" Harry shouted.

Neville blushed and looked to the floor. By this time the Order had subdued the Death Eaters in the hall. Sirius walked up to Bellatrix's frozen form and looked down at her contorted face. A wide grin crossed his face as he glared at the female Death Eater.

"The Ministry will be eager to send that one back to Azkaban!" Sirius exclaimed to Harry and Neville.

"Hopefully she'll never get out this time," Harry said as he patted Neville on the back.

Harry watched as Neville looked down at the woman who had destroyed his parent's minds. He knew the young man had finally gotten a bit of retribution for all that she had done to his family.

oooOOOooo

Severus sat at his desk, pondering the battle that had happened in the Ministry the previous night. The Order had been able to subdue all of the Death Eaters, who were now sojourning in Azkaban, awaiting trial. Dumbledore had arrived towards the end and had battled Voldemort, during which time Voldemort had tried to possess Harry's body. To the Dark Lord's surprise, intense pain had enveloped his spirit as he'd entered Harry. Severus smirked at the thought of his master being subject to a small part of the pain he'd subjected onto others. The Dark Lord had retreated from Harry with haste to escape the agonizing torture of being one with the boy.

Instead, he'd chosen to fight against Albus. From what Albus had told him, the battle had been intense, but neither wizard had gained much ground, each being thwarted by the other repeatedly. Finally, the Ministry had arrived, effectively breaking up the battle. Apparently, the look on Minister Fudge's face at the sight of Voldemort had been priceless. At long last, Dumbledore had exposed Voldemort's return to Fudge, the most paranoid man in all of Britain.

Surprisingly, Lucius had not led the raid. Severus marveled at Lucius' eagerness to please his master. He volunteered for every possible assignment and made sure that word always got to Voldemort about his doings. Somehow, though, he had been overlooked for this assignment. Bellatrix had led the raid, and Lucius had not even been present. The Dark Lord had sent him on another errand. That had turned out to be a lucky break for his friend, as all of the Death Eaters had been caught, and Narcissa didn't need to be husbandless for who knew how long.

Severus shook his head at the turn of events. Potter and his friends had been incredibly brave to race off to help Sirius, but in the long run, it had almost cost them their

lives. If the Order hadn't shown up when they'd had, the seven friends might possibly be dead now.

Unfortunately, the Prophecy had been destroyed. Dumbledore had been the one to hear it, however, so he had shown his memory of it to Harry. Severus didn't know why the old wizard hadn't shown it to him years prior. The old coot had always been so secretive about everything.

There were several good things that had come of the entire event. Voldemort was exposed, and Umbridge had been taken away after a bout with the Centaurs. They had dragged her to their settlement, strung her up to a pole and were about to burn her at the stake when Ministry officials arrived and negotiated a release. Too bad the Ministry hadn't arrived fifteen minutes later. The thought of the charred remains of Dolores Umbridge tied to a stake were too much for Severus. He chuckled out loud to himself.

There would be a new Minister appointed, Severus was sure of it, as the press had torn Fudge apart at his denial of the return of the Dark Lord. Thankfully, when it came to Hogwarts, everything had returned to normal. Dumbledore was reinstated as the Headmaster, and every trace of Dolores Umbridge had been taken away and destroyed.

Severus' thoughts once again turned to Hermione. His chest clenched as he thought of her fighting against the Death Eaters. She was brave and capable, but he could not stop the worry that was filling his head. This was only the beginning of the war. There would be many more battles, which she was sure to take part in. He tensed as he pictured her fighting and possibly being hurt. She had come away unharmed this time, like all of her friends had, but that was no guarantee for the future.

Severus bent low and pulled open his lowest desk drawer. Pulling out a small box, he set it atop his desk and stared at it for a while. Tentatively, he lifted the lid and peered inside. A small figurine of Hermione smiled up at him. He smiled down at it and lifted the little doll out of its home. As usual, the doll hugged his thumb. A small jolt ran through his body as desire filled his heart.

This little treasure had been a Christmas gift from Hermione to help him remember her. Severus pulled the doll out at least once a week to see his love in miniature form. He watched as the tiny woman blew him a kiss.

"You're alive," he told the doll. "You were back then, which means you will be all right. No matter what happens, you will survive, won't you? You will live to be with me again, right?"

The tiny doll smiled and nodded. He smiled back, a flicker of doubt crossing his face before it was replaced with hope. Sticking out his hand, he let the doll climb onto it and lifted her up to his face.

"Don't stay away too long, Hermione. Life is wasted without you in it."

A/N: Next up: Sirius Black, death plots, and a flock of birdies.

Hello all. Were you surprised with the saving of Sirius Black? I always thought Neville should have gotten a shot at Bellatrix, so here's his time to shine. Thank you again for reading and dropping me a line about how you're feeling about where the plot is going.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 of 46

Sixth year begins and the birds are singing.

Disclaimer: Anything that seems vaguely familiar in this chapter has been quoted, paraphrased, or just plain old summarized from The Half Blood Prince.

Chapter 29

Hermione's sixth year:

Sirius Black sat in front of the Wizengamot in chains. The new Minister, Rufus Scrimgeour, sat at the head of the group listening to Albus Dumbledore.

"And so, Peter Pettigrew was actually the one who told You-Know-Who about the location of the Potter home. It was he who indirectly caused their deaths. It was he who blew up the Muggle street, severing his own finger to frame Sirius Black. Mr. Black has been imprisoned wrongly, and I must request the court to find him innocent and make him a free man."

Minister Scrimgeour regarded Dumbledore thoughtfully.

"You have provided a compelling case, Professor Dumbledore. Wizengamot, what say you? If you find the defendant guilty, raise your hands."

Several hands shot up, including that of Dolores Umbridge. Harry rolled his eyes. He was sitting on the sidelines, watching the proceedings. He had testified earlier on Sirius' behalf about seeing Pettigrew. Severus sat next to him. He had also testified as to what he had witnessed, including Pettigrew's escape.

"Those in favor of dropping all charges and labeling the defendant innocent raise your hands," Scrimgeour directed.

Most of the hands in the hall rose.

Rufus Scrimgeour banged his gavel on the podium.

"We, the Wizengamot, find the defendant, Sirius Black, innocent of all charges. He is to be released immediately."

With that, all of the Wizengamot stood and began to file out of the room. Harry rose and raced down to Sirius. The chains had automatically fallen from him at the pronouncement of the sentence, so he was standing with his arms open wide as Harry rushed up to him. They embraced.

"I knew you would be proven innocent, Sirius!"

"I have you and Dumbledore to thank for that." He looked toward Snape. "I even owe something to Snape... shudder the thought."

Severus gave him a terse smile, bowed his head and left the room.

"He's always full of wise things to say, isn't he, Harry?" Sirius quipped.

Harry's hackles prickled a bit. "He just saved your life, the least you could do is not taunt him!"

Sirius looked down in shock at Harry. "You're right," he said finally. "It just comes so naturally to me."

"Well, I wish you would make an effort not to be so nasty," Harry demanded.

Sirius looked Harry up and down. "You are more mature than your father ever was at this age, Harry. And of course, you are right. Now is not the time for childish name calling. There is a war going on, and we need all of our allies beside us."

"Thank you, Sirius. Professor Snape is my friend, and you are my godfather. I would like it if you two would get along."

"I will do my best, Harry."

Harry hugged Sirius again. "I'm glad you are free now," he said, changing the subject.

Sirius' eyes lit up. "Why don't you spend the rest of the summer with me?"

Harry looked hesitantly at Sirius. "I would like that, but I'm not sure my aunt would."

"Well, let's Apparate over to her and ask, shall we?"

Harry brightened. "Okay. The worst she can say is no."

"And hopefully she'll say yes." Sirius grinned conspiratorially at his godson as they both turned to leave the courtroom.

They left the Ministry and Apparated straight away to Privet Drive. Harry burst in calling his aunt's name. She bound down the stairs with a smile on her face. She stopped short at the base of the stairs when she caught sight of Sirius.

"Aunt Petunia, this is Sirius Black. Sirius, this is my Aunt Petunia."

Petunia extended her hand, and Sirius raised it to his mouth and gave it a kiss.

"My pleasure, madam," he drawled.

Petunia tittered at his chivalry. "I suppose the Wizengamot set you free, or you would not be standing in my hallway?"

"With Harry's help, they had no choice but to set me free."

Petunia smiled at him. "Well, I'm glad they saw the truth finally. Harry has explained everything to me. I think it's awful that that Pettigrew rat framed you like he did."

"Well, I believe he'll get his in the end."

"Oh! Where are my manners? Do come in for a spot of lunch, would you?"

"I would be delighted, madam."

She smiled at him and led the two men to the kitchen. Before long there was a giant plate of sandwiches set before them, and three glasses of pumpkin juice appeared. Sirius' eyes grew wide at the bounty, not having eaten well in months.

"Ms. Dursley, you really have outdone yourself," Sirius complimented as he reached for a sandwich.

"Oh, it was nothing," Petunia said as she blushed. "And call me Petunia, please."

Sirius grinned coyly at her.

Harry grabbed a sandwich and stuffed some in his mouth. Dudley appeared out of nowhere, somehow having a sixth-sense that there was food to be had. He sat down too and grabbed a sandwich.

"Hey, Sirius, did you get off?" Dudley asked with his mouth full.

"I did," Sirius said simply.

The four conversed about the trial for a while before Harry got up the nerve to bring up staying with Sirius for the rest of the summer.

"Aunt Petunia?"

"Yes, dear?" Petunia asked.

"Would it be okay if I spent the rest of the summer with Sirius?"

Petunia frowned and looked over at Sirius.

"The entire summer, Harry? That's almost an entire month! I hardly see you during the school year!"

"I know. It's just that I haven't been able to spend much time with Sirius since I found out he is my godfather. Please?"

"Petunia, Dudley and you are welcome in my home anytime," Sirius offered. "You could even come and stay for a while. The house is large, and there's plenty of room."

Harry looked at his aunt with pleading eyes. Petunia regarded him for a minute and then smiled at him.

"You know when you give me those eyes, Harry Potter, I can deny you nothing!"

Harry smiled devilishly. "Is that a yes, then?"

Petunia narrowed her eyes at him slyly. "Yes, you may, as long as we can visit."

"How about you all come right away and stay a week at least!" Sirius insisted.

"Well," Petunia said as she looked to him, "if you're sure it won't be an imposition."

"It will not be, I assure you," Sirius responded.

Petunia smiled at him, and they started planning their vacation.

oooOOOooo

"Petunia, if you feel so strongly against Voldemort, you should join the Order," Sirius told her.

Petunia thought about that. They were all sitting in the Grimmauld Place study with mugs of hot chocolate in their hands. Even though it was the middle of the summer, Harry and Dudley had begged that they have some, so they were indulging in the delicious hot drink while in the midst of a heat wave.

"What good can I be for the Order?" Petunia asked curiously.

"We need every able witch and wizard in this fight. When there is a battle, you will be alerted and can join in it," Sirius explained.

"I would like to be of some service. I was so negative against magic for so long..." Petunia knit her eyebrows together as she considered Sirius' proposal. "I almost feel that I owe the Wizarding world something of an apology."

"I wasn't implying that, Petunia!" Sirius cried.

"No, Sirius, I didn't think you were. I was merely thinking out loud. What do I have to do to join?"

"You need to take an oath of secrecy never to divulge the meeting place of the Order or any of its members or secrets. In the oath, you also pledge your allegiance to the Order."

"That seems simple enough. Okay, I'll do it!" Petunia said.

She was met with three smiles.

Harry looked to Sirius. "Are you sure we can't join, Sirius? We are both sixteen."

"I'm sorry, Harry, Dudley. You must be an adult to join. I'm sure you will both do your own part in this war, nonetheless."

Harry and Dudley both looked disappointed.

"Perk up, you two," Petunia said. "At least you know I'm in it up to my neck now."

The boys grinned at her, and the four continued to chat until it was very late.

oooOOOooo

Severus sat in the Headmaster's office, staring at Albus. Albus was staring at him with the same look of dread on his face.

"So, you say that Draco Malfoy has been ordered to kill me?" Albus asked him, not really seeming surprised at all.

Severus only nodded.

"Well, we can't have that, my boy. He is not so far gone yet as to destroy his soul in such a way. He is only a Death Eater because his father has pushed him into the position. He wishes to see his son with as much power as he himself has; perhaps more."

"I believe Lucius urged Voldemort to give Draco this task. He wants Draco to be glorified. I'm not sure that will be the eventual outcome, however. Draco himself seems eager to please. I'm not sure the full meaning of his task has occurred to him yet." Severus was silent for a moment. Finally, he looked up to Albus. "What do you suggest be done, Headmaster?" he asked with trepidation, sure of what the answer would be.

"Perhaps you should kill me," Albus remarked absently.

Severus rose from his chair and leaned across the desk looking into Albus' eyes.

"You would spare Malfoy ruining his soul, yet you would have me ruin my life and soul? How dare you ask me such a thing, Albus! I will not be your murderer."

Albus gave him a fatherly look. "Severus, perhaps we can do it in a way that everyone will benefit."

"How can anyone benefit from your death?" Severus asked through clenched teeth. "This is ludicrous, Albus. There must be another way."

"Have you any suggestions, my boy?"

Severus sat in the chair suddenly. He knew what Hermione had said would happen. Did he want this bit of history to repeat itself? If it did, he would be forced into hiding for who knew how long. In the long run, of course, it would be better than having to actually kill the old man.

"We could fake your death," he said finally in defeat.

Albus looked at him curiously. "Do go on, Severus."

"We could come up with some sort of hex I could throw at you that would make it appear you were dead, but only incapacitate you for a time, so that everyone thought you were dead. Then we could hide Draco, so he wouldn't be punished by the Dark Lord for not being the one to kill you in the first place."

Albus brightened. "That would give you an opportunity to get deeper into the Death Eater organization!" he sputtered.

Severus gave Dumbledore a quick nod. "Yes, if the Dark Lord believes that I truly wanted to murder you, but something went awry with the spell."

"But are you willing to have the world think of you as a murderer, Severus?"

"I would rather they think that than to actually become a murderer, Headmaster."

Albus nodded his head. "Let's move along with this plan, Severus. We can accomplish much with it."

oooOOOooo

Severus was once again in the Headmaster's Office.

"It seems that I have committed myself to your murder, Albus," he said gravely.

"What do you mean, my boy?"

"I was visited late last night by Narcissa Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange. Narcissa begged me to help her son to accomplish his task. Bellatrix, who has always been

suspicious of my motives, suggested an Unbreakable Vow. I agreed in order to keep up pretenses and knowing what our plan would be."

Albus sat quietly across from Severus, mulling over everything he said.

"What did you agree to in the Unbreakable Vow?" he asked finally.

"To do Draco's job for him."

"But that would mean you would really have to kill me."

"I was hoping you could come up with an alternative. You are well versed in Unbreakable Vows and how they can be accomplished. If we can figure out a way to make the hex fulfill the Vow, I believe we can go ahead as planned."

Albus stroked his beard. "Well, the hex is supposed to feign death. I think the fact that I will be 'dead', even though not actually dead, will fulfill the Vow."

"Are you sure?"

Severus pictured himself perishing because he had not completed his Vow to kill Dumbledore. That would definitely be the ultimate irony.

Albus got up and went to his bookshelf. He took down a book and returned to his desk. *Unbreakable Vows and their Fulfillment* was the title. He flipped through the book until he found what he was looking for. After a minute, he looked back up at Severus.

"What exactly did you promise?"

"To watch over Draco, and carry out the deed the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform."

"And the Dark Lord has asked him to kill me," Albus mused.

Severus nodded.

Albus shut the book. "I think the act of attempting to kill me will fulfill the Vow as long as your intention is to kill me."

"But it is not."

"You must believe that it is."

"Even though I know that you will survive in the end?"

"Yes, Severus. It is imperative that you believe that you are killing me. That is the only way the Vow will be fulfilled."

Severus sighed. "We'll need to make sure that my believing I'm killing you does not enhance the spell so that it actually kills you."

"I trust you, Severus. You will be ready when the time comes, and I will not die."

"Hopefully you are right."

"Once the deed is done, you may admit to yourself your true intentions, and the Vow will be fulfilled. There will be no repercussions."

Severus only nodded. "I despise this plan," he said plainly.

"It is the only way to save everyone involved, Severus."

"Must I always suffer to help everyone else?"

Albus regarded him with a sad look. "I wish it could be different, Severus. You knew what you were getting into when you volunteered to be my spy."

Severus sighed. "Yes, but I didn't realize how much pain and horror I would live through at the time."

"I doubt you would have declined my invitation even if you did know what was to come."

Severus gave Albus a small smirk at his assurances. "Thank you for your trust, Headmaster."

He rose and bowed his head slightly as a goodbye and left the room.

oooOOOooo

Hermione headed toward the Gryffindor Common Room. She was feeling a little embarrassed for accusing Harry of giving Ron Felix Felicis. She had been cross now for over a week. First it had been that book that Harry had with all of the hints and cheats in it. It frustrated her to no end that she would work her hardest only to be overshadowed by Harry who was just cheating the whole time. She calmed herself inwardly. She was supposed to not let things like that upset her. She had worked hard to be more even keeled and not so insecure about herself, but it was times like this that tested her to the point of frustration.

Then of course there was this morning with the potion. Harry had wound up duping both

Ron and her into believing that he had slipped the Felix Felicis potion into Ron's drink. But all had been explained, and there was now a celebratory party for the Gryffindor win in the common room. She was looking forward to a little fun.

Her week had continued on its terrible run with Ron giving her the cold shoulder. Hermione shook her head. She had kissed Viktor Krum over two years ago. What was Ron's problem? Why couldn't he just come out and ask her out? If he was going to be jealous, there should at least be a reason for it. If he liked her, he should just tell her so. She had wanted him to ask her out for ages now, but he never did. She did not understand what the problem was. Was he really that shy?

She entered the common room with a little smile on her face, hoping to enjoy herself. She glanced around, but Harry had not arrived yet. She searched for Ron, but did not immediately see him. She grabbed a butterbeer and took a sip. That was when she noticed him. Ron sat in the corner with Lavender Brown. She was sitting on his lap, and they were snogging. Hermione almost dropped her butterbeer. She quickly placed it on a table to avoid an accident and looked back at Ron. It was like her eyes were glued to him. He passionately kissed Lavender. She was returning the favor with just as much fervor.

Hermione's heart clenched within her. Ron hadn't liked her at all! Or was he just doing this to make her jealous? That would be Ron's style... the git. She watched him for another minute or so as a mixture of grief and anger grew within her. Suddenly she turned and fled from the common room. She ran down the hall and found an empty classroom. Running over to the teacher's desk, she sat down on it. Her thoughts were black.

She removed her wand and said "Avis."

A flock of birds came out of her wand and started circling her head. She eyed them, thinking they were a little too chipper for her mood, but she let them fly about anyway.

They represented well the emotions that were swirling around in her. She mulled over the last few minutes of her life. Was Ron trying to make her jealous, or had he never liked her at all? Either way, he was a total jerk. She shook her head, making the birds move in a more elliptical pattern rather than circular for the moment. Why did she care about that prat, anyway?

Suddenly the door burst open, and none other than Ron and Lavender came in, laughing together. Hermione narrowed her eyes at Ron as Lavender giggled and backed out of the room.

"Oh, sorry," Ron said, smirking at Hermione.

It was as if she were a Legilimens. She could read his thoughts. She could tell he was thinking, *Ha ha, I showed you. Now I'm the one who's snogging someone else.*

Filled with fury, she cried, "*Oppugno!*" The flock of birds around her head went straight for Ron. He shielded himself and backed out of the room, bombarded by the small flock of birds.

oooOOOooo

Given the Gryffindor victory, Severus was feeling a bit glum. He thought that perhaps a stroll around the school would be helpful. He had headed straight for the Gryffindor tower, hoping to find some snogging students around the entry to the common room. He was walking down the hall when a strange sight came into view. Lavender Brown was backing away from Ron Weasley, who was shielding his face from a flock of small birds.

"Gittemoffme!" Ron cried as the birds assaulted him.

Severus pulled out his wand and in an instant the birds disappeared. Ron put his arms down in relief.

"Mr. Weasley, what is the meaning of this?"

Ron pointed to the door from whence he came. "She's mental, that's what the meaning of this is. She set those birds out to kill me!"

"Who are you speaking about?" Severus asked tersely.

"Hermione. Who else would be such a crazy loon?" Ron said indignantly.

Severus reigned in the urge to punch Weasley in the face. "What did you do to her, Mr. Weasley?"

"I just walked in there with Lavender, and the next thing I knew she was sending a flock of birds at me! I'm telling you, she needs a trip to St. Mungo's."

Severus seethed inwardly. He wanted to give Weasley a detention, but he had no excuse. Not yet, at least.

"Mr. Weasley, did you say something stupid to her?" Severus taunted.

"I didn't say a word to her, Snape!"

Severus raised an eyebrow at him. That had been all too easy.

"Detention, Mr. Weasley, for disrespecting a teacher. Tonight. I suggest you take your girlfriend and get out of my sight before I bestow more on you."

"Come on, Lavender," Ron said as he grabbed her elbow and pulled her back toward the common room entrance.

Severus watched him as he led the girl away. He then eyed the classroom in which Hermione had holed herself up. He debated whether to leave her to her misery, but he couldn't. He stepped to the door and peered in. Hermione was sitting at the teacher's desk, sobbing with her head lying down, enveloped by her arms. *I should have given Weasley ten detentions*, he thought.

Severus silently entered the classroom and warded the door. He glided over to Hermione and stooped down, placing his hand on her shoulder. She glanced up and immediately put her head down again sobbing louder.

"Miss Granger?"

"Please, just leave me alone!" she wailed.

"That was some fine spell work you did with those birds. If I had known you had cast the spell at the time, I would have let them eat at Mr. Weasley a bit longer."

Hermione's crying stopped. She picked her head up and looked at him curiously. Scrunching up her eyebrows in disbelief, she burst out laughing. She shook her head as she laughed.

"You never cease to amaze me, Professor," she exclaimed.

"Neither do you, Miss Granger. How you can be so feisty in the midst of adversity is beyond me."

Hermione stared straight ahead and said nothing.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Severus asked.

"You must be sick of me burdening you with my problems."

"Miss Granger, if I were sick of it, I wouldn't have come in here. What I'm sick of is Mr. Weasley constantly upsetting you."

"He doesn't constantly upset me," she murmured.

"It seems to me he does more than his share of it," Severus scoffed. "Why do you put up with him?"

"Professor Snape, I just sent a flock of birds to attack him! I hardly call that putting up with him."

Severus smirked. "Why then, do you put up with him for so long that it causes you to hex him when you can take it no longer?"

Tears formed in Hermione's eyes again. "I thought... I thought... oh, never mind. You don't care what I thought."

Severus wanted to pull her toward him and comfort her. He wanted to make Weasley disappear off the face of the Earth so he wouldn't make her so upset. But he only put his hand on her shoulder.

"What did you think, Miss Granger?"

She looked over at him tentatively. She couldn't discuss her love life with her professor; it was just too weird, no matter how nice he was to her.

"Nothing, Professor," she said and looked down.

"You thought he had feelings for you?"

She nodded.

"But he is now seeing Miss Brown?"

She nodded again.

"Have you ever heard the quote 'A lovesick fool is foolish indeed'?" Severus asked her.

She shook her head.

"I believe Mr. Weasley is suffering from the effects of that quote. Is it possible he's trying to make you jealous?"

"The thought has crossed my mind," Hermione admitted.

"I believe it is more than likely."

"That really doesn't make me feel any better. He's either not interested or a total prat."

"Perhaps you should count yourself lucky to find this out before anything started between the two of you."

Hermione scoffed. "I already thought things had started between the two of us. The way he has been acting towards me lately. Running when he sees me... screaming his head off because I kissed Viktor Krum *two years ago!*"

She looked angrily at Severus and pointed at the door.

"That's what all of *this* is about, you know. I saw it in his beady little eyes. He's throwing Lavender in my face!"

"Miss Granger, someday you will find someone who cares for you truly, and you will be happy. *Someday we will fall in love, and you will have someone who respects you, not someone who does everything he can to spite you.* Forget about Mr. Weasley. He's not good enough for you."

Whoops, he hadn't meant to say that last part aloud.

oooOOOooo

Hermione's big eyes stared at him for a while. She wished for a fleeting moment that he was twenty years younger. She could see that he would be the type of man who respected anyone he was interested in. *He's your professor, Hermione, knock it off,* she thought to herself. Pushing those thoughts deep within her, she looked down at the desk and smiled at his comments.

"Anyone who can send a flock of birds as an attack weapon is worthy of the finest companion," Severus confided in her.

Hermione laughed out loud. She looked gratefully at Severus.

"How do you always know the right things to say to cheer me up?" she asked him.

Severus stood and looked down at her. "It's part of being a Knight in Shining Armor, Miss Granger. It comes with the job."

Hermione laughed as Severus drew his cape around him, turned, and made his way out of the room and disappeared from sight.

oooOOOooo

Severus made his way slowly to his room. He was deep in thought. He had known that Hermione had dated Ron Weasley in her past, but he had not counted on their eventual hook up to hurt so much. She had told him that Ron had been jealous, and that was the reason she had broken up with him, but he had not realized that that jealousy had started way before they had even officially dated. Severus truly did not see what Hermione saw in Ron. He was selfish and spiteful. Of course, she had seen deep within Severus himself to see the good within him, she would look deep and see the good in Weasley also.

As she matured, he knew that Ron and her joining would be inevitable. He hated to think of Hermione being touched by someone else and to have strong feelings for anyone but him, but he would have to steel himself for the coming of such a relationship. Perhaps he could move out of the country or something when they started dating. Then he wouldn't have to watch them, only wishing that it were him she was looking at so lovingly.

oooOOOooo

Harry knocked on Professor Snape's door.

"Enter," Harry heard from within and swung the door open with a smile on his face.

"Hi, Professor," he said to Severus.

Severus looked up from his cauldron to nod politely to Harry and went back to his stirring.

"Professor, could I ask you a question, or is this a bad time?"

"Go ahead, Harry, I can pay attention to you and this cauldron."

"Could we include Ron in our Saturday sessions? He's getting a bit curious as to why Hermione and I both disappear at the same time. I think he'd benefit from everything you're teaching us too."

Severus frowned deeply. The last thing he wanted to do was spend more time with Ron Weasley. He looked up at Harry.

"The next thing I know, you'll be inviting all of Dumbledore's Army in on our little sessions."

"No, I promise I won't, although that's a great idea," Harry said with a grin.

"I suppose I should be glad we kept it as private as we did for so long?" Severus said with an arch of his eyebrow.

"That's how I'm choosing to look at it. Anyway, he's my best mate. I hate lying to him all the time."

Severus looked crossly into his cauldron and then back up to Harry.

"Okay, but he'd better not say anything stupid," Severus relinquished.

"Thanks, Professor!" Harry said and ran out of the classroom.

"Good talking to you, Harry," Severus muttered under his breath.

oooOOOooo

It wasn't nearly as bad as Severus was supposing it would be. The three students arrived, and to his delight, Hermione and Ron were speaking civilly to each other.

"Mr. Weasley, you can thank Harry for your inclusion in our exclusive group. I was only coaching Harry, and that was my only intent until Miss Granger and her stunning intellect figured out where Mr. Potter was heading to every week. And now, you too are involved, thanks to the whining of your best friend."

"Hey, I didn't whine!" Harry exclaimed.

Severus raised an eyebrow at him, which shut him up. Severus smirked.

"All right, Mr. Weasley, shall we begin by seeing what you already know?"

Ron nodded his head and got into his dueling stance. Severus did the same. He shot a spell at Ron, who blocked it easily. Ron sent his own spell at Severus, who jumped out of the way, giving him an advantage as he shot another spell towards Ron. Ron rolled on the ground to avoid it. Severus pointed his wand in the air, signaling a ceasefire.

"Very nice, Mr. Weasley; you defended yourself well. Let's see how you do against Miss Granger."

"No way! She always hexes me into the wall!" Ron cried.

Harry laughed.

"I believe the purpose of these lessons is to learn to not be hexed into a wall, even by a formidable opponent," Severus said dryly.

Ron nodded his head and got ready. Hermione was too fast for him, though. Sure enough, into the wall he crashed.

"Ow!" Ron cried.

Severus went over and helped him up. "What do you think you did wrong, Mr. Weasley?"

"I dueled with Hermione," Ron whined.

Severus smiled at him. "Well, that probably was your first mistake, but how could you improve your performance?"

Ron shrugged.

"You must assume that the enemy will attack before you are ready. The second you see that person, you must be ready to throw up your shield or else you will be passed out or dead before you know what hit you. It has to almost happen before you're even aware that the enemy is in front of you. You must make it second nature to be able to throw up a shield at a moment's notice."

Ron gave Severus a determined look. "I understand, sir," he told Severus.

"Good, let's try it again."

Ron and Hermione readied themselves, and this time when Hermione sent her spell, Ron shielded it perfectly. He sent a spell of his own, catching Hermione off guard, and she was the one to slam into the wall. All three of the men rushed to her side to make sure she was all right, as it was not often that she went flying.

"Sorry, Hermione," Ron said as he extended his hand to her.

She sat up and rubbed her head.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I just slammed my head when I hit the wall."

"Let me see," Severus offered.

He examined her head and waved his wand over it. The pain subsided.

"Thank you," Hermione muttered.

She took Ron's hand and got up.

"That was a good move, Ron," she admitted. "You really caught me off guard."

Ron beamed. "Thanks, Hermione!"

"All right, let's pair off. Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, you two are together. Mr. Weasley, you are with me."

They worked for an hour, trading partners until everyone had worked with everyone else. At the end, they were all laughing at the things that had happened and the way they had all hit the wall at the same time during one exercise. The three students said goodbye to their professor and left the room.

"Snape's not as bad as I thought he would be," Ron commented.

"Professor Snape," Hermione corrected.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Anyway, that was fun. Thanks for finally including me in your little secret society."

"Oh, Ron! We would have said something if we could have," Hermione cried.

"Yeah, Ron, I wanted to tell you, I just couldn't."

Ron nodded his head in agreement. "I understand. I wouldn't want Professor Snape mad at me either for spilling the beans. Speaking of beans, it's close to lunch, isn't it?"

Oh, Ron, you're impossible!" Hermione told him in no uncertain words as they headed for the Great Hall and a plentiful lunch.

oooOOOooo

Petunia waited in the *Leaky Cauldron* with a soda in front of her. Tom, the barkeep, had looked at her strangely when she had asked for the Muggle drink. She was sure that not many wizards had taken a liking to the beverage and was glad that he even had some on hand for her. She took a sip and looked around. The bar was crowded with midday clientele chatting away about their days.

Her eyes drew to the door as it opened, and a tall dark haired man walked through. Petunia smiled. Sirius Black smiled back at her and sauntered over.

"Imagine finding such a flower in this dark, dingy place!" Sirius drawled.

Petunia giggled. "Sirius, you're too much."

"I know. That's why you're so enamored with me," Sirius replied as he sat down.

Petunia scoffed. "You are way too full of yourself, sir."

Sirius flashed his patented grin at her. She smiled back, despite herself.

"Shall we be off?" he asked.

"Don't you want a drink or something?" Petunia asked him.

"I'm not thirsty. Let's go."

Petunia stood along with Sirius. They made their way to the back of the pub and entered Diagon Alley. They strolled along the street taking in the shop windows. Finally, Petunia spoke.

"I can't believe you've taken this long to replace your dress robes," she mused.

"I have really not had need for it. I have been on the run for quite some time."

"Well, yes, but you've been a free man for several months now."

Sirius gave her an amused look. "Sorry, Petunia, it wasn't on the top of my list of things to do."

Petunia laughed. "I guess I can understand you wanting to do other things."

Sirius became serious. "I'm glad you let Harry spend his summer with me. I was a bit scared at first that you would say no."

"I wouldn't have. I understood his need to get to know you better."

Sirius glanced at Petunia with admiration. She was quite a bit deeper than she appeared on the surface. He saw her look up and realized they had made it to Madam Malkin's.

"So, do you know what you want?" she asked him.

"Of course not, that's why I brought you along."

She grinned as they entered the store. They were accosted by Madam Malkin herself immediately, as the shop was uncharacteristically empty.

"How can I help you both?" Madam Malkin asked.

Sirius spoke up. "I am looking for a new set of dress robes."

Madam Malkin's eyes lit up. "Oh, sir, we have some wonderful new styles that just arrived last week!"

She grasped Sirius' arm and led him over to the rack of new robes. They perused the styles for a minute while Petunia stood back and let them rifle through the rack. Sirius pulled out a couple, but replaced them quickly. Finally, he found a set that was a charcoal grey. The suit coat was long and stood open. Sirius liked them. He looked over at Petunia. She smiled and nodded.

"Try it on," she encouraged.

He disappeared for a few minutes and then emerged from the dressing room bedecked in the robes. Petunia caught her breath at the sight of him. The suit fit perfectly. The pants were slimming and framed him nicely. The suit coat was open and revealed a pure white ribbed shirt underneath. The whole outfit made Sirius look incredibly handsome. At least, that was what Petunia thought.

"They're perfect, Sirius," she commented.

"Do you think so?" he asked while looking at himself in a mirror.

Madam Malkin piped in. "Oh, it's as if they were made for you! They just need a tiny bit of tailoring."

Sirius stared at his reflection for a few minutes. He turned and looked to Petunia again. She only nodded.

"Okay. I'll take it."

"Wonderful!" Madam Malkin exclaimed and began making the alterations.

A little while later Petunia and Sirius were heading out of the store and walking down the alley. Sirius led her across the street.

"Are you hungry?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said simply.

"This café is the best in Diagon Alley."

Petunia noticed they were next to a small café that was bustling with business. The sign atop it read *Pomegranates*. All of the tables outside were filled. Sirius led her inside, and they luckily got the last table available. They spent a couple of minutes studying their menus and ordered a couple of sandwiches. Petunia looked to Sirius, and he flashed a smile.

"What else do you want to do today?" she asked him.

"Whatever you would like to do," Sirius said.

"I don't get here too often. I'd just like to look around a bit, if that's okay with you."

"Of course, Petunia. I would be honored to accompany you while you 'look around'."

Their sandwiches arrived soon after that. Petunia stared down at hers in disbelief.

"They don't expect us to eat all of this, do they?" she exclaimed.

The sandwich was piled high with corned beef. It was at least three times the size of any sandwich she had ever seen. Sirius' was the same, except his was piled with roast beef.

"I told you this was the best place in town," Sirius replied as he carefully grabbed his sandwich and took a large bite from it.

"I don't even know how to pick this up!" Petunia remarked.

She made an attempt, but some of her corned beef fell out of the sandwich. Sirius laughed.

"It's supposed to do that. That's the beauty of the sandwich."

Petunia smirked and took a bite.

"Mmm, that's good," she mused.

"Told you," Sirius gloated.

Petunia nodded her head at him, and they continued eating.

A good while later they had left the café and were strolling along the street, 'looking around.' They chatted and laughed. Petunia was startled when Sirius' hand went to her back and he directed her along the street.

"I appreciate you coming along with me today, Petunia. I probably would have debated which robe to buy for a while had you not been there to give your approval."

"Oh, Sirius, those robes are perfect for you."

Sirius stopped and looked at Petunia. His flirtatious demeanor fell away, and he suddenly looked shy.

"You're perfect for me too," he said tentatively.

Petunia's eyes widened at his remark. She realized he was being serious, and she was quite taken aback. After Vernon, she had not expected to date anyone again. She'd had it with love. But Sirius was different. He made her laugh, and he was kind and respectful. She enjoyed his company. They had seen quite a bit of one another through visits with Harry. She secretly had wanted to get to know him a lot better and had been excited when he had asked her to come with him to Diagon Alley. Sirius suddenly stepped closer to her.

"I have wanted to be closer to you for weeks now, Petunia. Do you have any feelings for me at all?"

Petunia smiled at him. "Sirius, I find you incredibly attractive, and yes, I do have feelings for you."

She was surprised by his lips meeting hers. His kiss was not faint and unemotional like Vernon's was. It was wild and passionate. She got caught up in it and kissed him back furiously, unaware of anything around her but him. After a little while they separated.

"Remind me to thank Harry for introducing us," Petunia whispered to Sirius.

"It seems I owe him more than my life."

oooOOoooo

Hermione quickly moved through the mostly deserted halls. Once again she had spent all night in the library. Between her Transfiguration essay, her Potions essay, and the need to research color changing charms, she had spent every hour after dinner with her nose in a book. Finally looking up at the clock, she had amazed herself to find that she'd spent the entire evening in the library and had only twenty minutes until curfew. She had packed her books away and left the room quickly. She had left her Arithmancy book in the Great Hall at dinner and needed to get it before curfew. She hurried down the stairs and got to the third floor, where she stopped suddenly.

From the stairwell, she could see down the third floor hall. A black mass lay crumpled on the floor near the doors to the hospital wing. Hermione took in a sharp breath. The mass was large enough to be a person. She ran from the stairs and down the hall to what she now recognized as a pile of black robes. Reaching the robes, she got down on her knees next to them. Reaching out, she felt a body and saw some blood smeared on the floor.

Hermione told herself to breathe as she rolled the still form onto its back. It was Professor Snape. She couldn't help herself; she gasped loudly as her hand came to her mouth. His face was covered in blood from a gash on his forehead. His arm stuck out at an odd angle. There were tears and gashes in his usually impeccable robes and blood seeped from each gash. Hermione stifled a sob as she got up and rushed to the infirmary doors.

Bursting through, she shouted as loud as she could.

"Madam Pomfrey! Madam Pomfrey?!"

"What is it child?" Madam Pomfrey demanded as she stuck her head out of her office.

"Oh! Come quickly! Professor Snape is unconscious and bleeding in the hall!" Hermione shouted to her from across the room.

Madam Pomfrey disappeared for a second, then came bounding to Hermione's side with her wand in her hand. She raced past Hermione and burst through the doors. Hermione followed quickly behind.

Poppy bent low and took a look at Severus. She deemed he was able to be moved and levitated him into the infirmary, settling him into a bed. Hermione watched helplessly as Madam Pomfrey went to work healing her Potions professor. A tear escaped her eye as she saw just how wounded he was.

Who could have done this to him? It had to be the Death Eaters. The poor man risks his life every time he meets with them. Hopefully they didn't find out he's on our side.

Madam Pomfrey looked up at that moment. "Miss Granger, thank you. I can take it from here. Return to your common room and go to bed."

"But, Madam Pomfrey, I thought..."

"No, young lady. He needs many spells and potions, and he won't be awake anytime soon. You can stop by tomorrow if you're concerned about him. He'll be alright."

Hermione nodded and left. She couldn't help herself, more tears flowed down her face. She didn't want to think of what might have happened to Professor Snape if she hadn't come across him when she had. Would he have bled to death? At least she had found him and Madam Pomfrey could heal him. He was a good man and didn't deserve such horrid treatment from those who were supposed to be his allies.

oooOOOooo

At lunchtime the next day, Hermione snuck into the infirmary to check on her professor. She closed the door quietly behind her and tiptoed up to Severus' bed. His eyes were closed, and she didn't want to wake him, so she just stood quietly by his bedside, examining every inch of him to make sure he was okay.

Feeling a presence, Severus cracked an eye open.

"You found me last night?" he asked Hermione.

She jumped, not realizing he was awake and certainly not expecting him to speak. She gave a quick nod.

"Thank you," Severus said. "I was expecting to bleed to death on that floor. Imagine my surprise when I awoke here instead."

Hermione went to the side of the bed and looked down at Severus. "I'm glad I came by when I did, Professor. The halls were pretty empty, and I'm not sure if anyone else would have seen you. Are you feeling all right?"

Severus put his hand up to his head and rubbed his forehead. "I have felt better," he admitted.

Hermione bent low. "Did they find out you're a spy, sir?"

Severus saw the concern in her eyes. Why did everything have to be so difficult? "No, Hermione, they didn't. The Dark Lord only thought I needed a little reminder of who was in charge. He set his fiends on me. Believe me... it could have been much worse."

Hermione straightened and looked at him haughtily. "How could that be? You were bleeding from so many parts of your body last night that I didn't even know what was really injured and what wasn't. Did they set out to kill you?"

Severus opened his mouth to respond, but hesitated. Hermione seemed almost frantic. He wished he could pull her to him and cradle her in his arms. *Stop thinking about that, you lovesick fool*, he berated himself. *She would think me mad if I did something like that.*

"They had no intention to kill me. They wanted me to have a long recovery so I could 'treasure' every cut and broken bone. That way, I will remember who my master is and not desire to usurp his position."

Hermione put her hand to her mouth. "How can they do this to you, sir?"

"It is simply a game."

"They are all animals!"

Severus closed his eyes. "Yes, they are."

Hermione bristled. "How long must you do this, sir? Certainly there's another way?"

Severus looked to the window. "There may be, but this is the best way for now. I have made a commitment, and I will continue with it. I am not one to shirk my responsibilities because of some minor inconveniences."

"Minor inconveniences! They almost killed you! Surely there's someone else who can do this?"

"And who would you have do it, Hermione? I am a Death Eater. I am the perfect mole. No one else could get the information that I am privy to. I will see this war out and do what I have to."

Hermione fought back the tears. "Even if it kills you?" she spat violently.

Severus' eyes moved toward her once again. "Even then," he said sadly.

"Well, it's not fair!" she cried. "You don't deserve any of this!"

"Miss Granger, get a hold of yourself!" Severus demanded.

Hermione's chest heaved as she tried to calm her shattered nerves. "... I'm sorry, sir," she said finally.

"It's all right. I appreciate your concern. I have long known this time would come and that my life would be in grave danger. I have come to terms with my possible death."

Hermione nodded stiffly. "Is there anything I can get you to make you more comfortable?"

Severus smirked at her. "I think you finding me this bed was more than enough."

Hermione gave him a quick nod. "I'd better be going. Harry and Ron will be wondering where I wandered off to. Get better quickly, Professor."

"Thank you... Miss Granger," Severus told her before she turned and left the infirmary.

He stared after her for a long time. Her caring for her friends had not changed. She still fought for them with all she had. He'd missed that from her for all these years. His heart swelled as he admitted that it was nice to have her fighting for him, even if there was nothing she could do. He loved her even more knowing how upset she'd become simply at the thought of an injustice done to her professor and friend. She was truly a remarkable woman, in any time and place.

oooOOOooo

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat in the common room. Harry told the other two of his latest meeting with Dumbledore. At long last, he had finally gotten the memory he sought from Professor Slughorn.

"It seems Riddle quizzed Slughorn on Horcruxes," Harry began. "He wanted to know if it were possible to make more than one."

"So, Riddle made more than one Horcrux?" Ron asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Dumbledore thinks he made six, splitting his soul into seven parts," Harry explained.

"How can he even be alive?" Hermione asked.

"I guess as long as a piece of your spirit exists in your body, you are alive, but look at what he's become." Harry mused.

"So, Professor Slughorn gave him the information he needed about the multiple Horcruxes?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. "To be honest," he said, "I don't think he told Riddle anything he didn't already know. He simply confirmed what Riddle was assuming. I think Slughorn was more embarrassed than anything about that memory, and that's why he chose to hide it."

"So what? Who cares how many Horcruxes he made?" Ron asked.

"They keep him alive, Ron," Harry explained. "So, even if one is destroyed, the others still work. I destroyed the diary and Dumbledore destroyed the Gaunt ring. But if we killed Voldemort today, he'd find a way to come back because his soul would remain alive and on the Earth because of the Horcruxes that remain."

"So, we need to destroy all of the Horcruxes?" Hermione asked. She was always one step ahead of everybody.

"Yes," Harry said solemnly. "But it will just be Professor Dumbledore and me. You both don't need to get yourselves involved with this."

Hermione and Ron both gave him caustic looks.

"Harry," Hermione said, "how many times do we have to have this conversation? We are in this for the long haul."

"Yeah, mate. We're in this together. You can't get rid of us," Ron agreed.

Harry looked at his two friends. He didn't know whether to feel grateful or worried by their constant desire to help him.

"I just don't want you guys to get hurt is all," he muttered.

"We won't, Harry. We know how to defend ourselves and get out of tight spots just as much as you do," Hermione reassured.

Harry smiled at her. "Thanks. I don't know what I'd do without the two of you."

oooOOOooo

Severus ran to the top of the Astronomy Tower and stopped short. Draco was with two other Death Eaters, pointing his wand at an obviously injured and disarmed Dumbledore.

"What's going on?" Severus asked.

"It seems that little Draco is having a problem with his assignment," came the response from one of the Death Eaters.

Severus rolled his eyes and pointed his wand at Dumbledore. *Sopor Curtus*, he chanted, and the spell left his wand. It hit Dumbledore in the chest, and he fell to the ground, his eyes staring up, fixed and lifeless. Severus lowered his wand and ran from the Astronomy tower pulling Draco Malfoy with him. As they quickly descended the stairs, Severus instructed Draco on what he must do.

"Go to the Headmaster's office. The password is lollipop. Wait there. Professor McGonagall will get there eventually. Tell her what you were supposed to do and that you need to be hidden away because you did not fulfill your mission and your life is in danger. She will know what to do."

"No!" cried Draco. "If I go into hiding, the Dark Lord will kill my parents!"

Severus stopped for a moment. "Draco, I will make sure that no harm comes to your parents. You must go into hiding, or you yourself will be killed."

Draco gave a slight nod, and they resumed their descent. Draco broke off when he reached the floor where the Headmaster's Office was. The two separated, and Severus increased his pace so he could escape from the school before anyone knew what had happened.

oooOOOooo

Harry Potter had seen everything from underneath his Invisibility Cloak. He had been frozen in place with the *Petrificus Totalus* spell that Dumbledore had placed on him, but as Dumbledore had crashed to the ground, the spell had been lifted. He rushed to Dumbledore and peered down at his friend. The older wizard's eyes stared blankly into the sky. There was no breath that came from the old man. Harry stifled an anguished cry. Still underneath the Invisibility Cloak, he bounded after Severus as tears began to course down his cheeks.

He quickly caught sight of Snape and rushed to catch up with him. He watched him escape the halls and head for the gates of Hogwarts. Harry snarled at him. It would be up to him to avenge Dumbledore's death. He needed to be fast if he was going to catch up with Snape before he Disapparated.

A/N: Next up: Reactions to attempted murder.

Well, this chapter just kept getting longer and longer and covering more and more characters and situations. Sirius and Petunia, yay or nay? Oh, yes, a cliffie. We haven't had one of those in a while. Thanks for your enthusiasm for this tale. I love hearing from you.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 of 46

Reactions to Snape's attempted murder.

Chapter 30

Severus finally reached the gates of the school and went through them. Turning to Disapparate, he felt a weight attach itself to his body as he spinned, but he saw nothing there. As he appeared in the woods where his safe house was, he was knocked to the ground by the weight. Suddenly Harry Potter's head appeared above him.

"Harry! What are you doing here? You should be at Hogwarts!"

Harry sneered at Severus. "He was your friend! He trusted you! I trusted you, and you killed him!" Harry said as he beat his fists into Severus' chest.

The cloak fell away, revealing all of Harry Potter straddled over Severus Snape, who was lying prone on the ground. Harry continued to beat at Severus, who tried to subdue the boy by grabbing his wrists.

"Harry, things are not what they seem," Severus shouted.

"I saw it all! I was there!" Harry screamed. "You killed him! You didn't even care, you just killed him!"

"Harry, I did not kill him!"

Harry stopped for a minute and looked at Snape. Snape was a trusted friend and mentor, but how could he trust him now? Snape had killed Dumbledore, and now he was trying to deny it.

"I saw him. He was dead!" Harry yelled furiously.

"He will survive, Harry! You must believe me."

Harry's entire body was tensed. He glared at Severus, not sure what to do. Finally, he relaxed a little bit and got off Severus. Severus sat up and rubbed his chest where most of Harry's punches had been aimed. Harry pulled out his wand and trained it directly at Severus' chest.

"You will tell me what you're on about. I will then decide for myself what to do with you," he said warily.

Severus closed his eyes for a moment. "What I tell you must be kept between the two of us. Even your friends must not know of these details. You were not to be aware of them either, but I see I have no choice but to inform you of Dumbledore's plan. Do I have your agreement on keeping this a secret from everyone?"

Harry gave a short nod and flicked his wand at Severus, motioning that he continue. Severus explained the plan to Harry, including Severus' part to go deep within the Death Eaters and spy on them.

"The spell that I hit the Headmaster with has only put him into a coma that appears to the onlooker as death. Anyone who examines him very closely will see that his heart still beats. He will come out of the coma in time. Meanwhile, I hope that the Dark Lord will think that my attempted murder will be worthy of more responsibility within the organization."

"How will you explain Dumbledore still being alive to Voldemort?" Harry asked shrewdly.

Severus cringed at Harry's use of the Dark Lord's name. "I will tell him that the spell I cast was something I created that I had hoped would not only kill Dumbledore, but also destroy his spirit. In death, he would never go to the beyond, he would just cease to exist. The Dark Lord will find that idea most intriguing. Being a new spell, he will be somewhat understanding of its failure."

"What about Draco. You left with him in tow. Won't the other Death Eaters tell Voldemort. He'll know you helped him escape."

"He will know nothing," Severus said haughtily. "I will tell him that Draco hit me from behind on the stairs and got away from me before I could bring him before the Dark Lord."

Harry stared silently at Severus for some time. His nostrils flared, and he breathed heavily. His wand trembled in his hand, still pointing at Severus, but quivering with every breath that Harry took.

"Harry, if I had truly wanted to kill him, I would have used the Killing Curse itself. Surely you can understand that?"

It took a great deal of time, but Harry finally lowered his wand. A long, slow sigh escaped his lips.

"I believe you, Professor," Harry said eventually.

The two men sat in silence for a while, not even looking at one another. Harry glanced around him and noticed a small run down cabin behind them.

"Where are we?"

Severus frowned. "This is an old cabin that has been owned by the Snape family for years. No one knows anything about it so I thought it would be a good place to hide out, now that I have no job. My home at Spinner's End will be the first place the authorities look for me. You must keep the location of this cabin a secret also, Harry, or I will be found and imprisoned."

"Do the Death Eaters know about this place?"

"No, but I'm not sure how long I can keep it a secret. They will eventually wonder where I wander off to every day."

"Can't you just make it Unplottable?"

"I think that the Dark Lord would be a tad suspicious if I lived in an Unplottable home, unless of course he was the secret keeper. No, it will remain as it is."

"Sir, can I speak to Dumbledore of all of this when he awakens?"

Severus thought about it for a while. "Let's just keep this between the two of us. Dumbledore tends to get upset when things don't go exactly as planned. There's no real reason for him to know anything about our little meeting." He looked at Harry sternly.

"You must be careful not to let your mind wander to this topic. Your Occlumency skills are not perfect and someone could break your defenses. That would be a death sentence for me, Harry, you understand that, right?"

Harry looked at Severus for a long time. They had continued to work on Occlumency together. He was able to block his mind most of the time, but Harry was never able to completely keep his mind occluded. Severus had broken into his thoughts on most of their lessons; although toward the end of their study, it had taken quite a while to get past the walls that Harry had constructed.

"I understand, Professor. I will keep working on keeping my mind blank. I will not let your secret out."

Severus gave him a quick nod. "You should go back to the school. People will wonder at your whereabouts."

"Professor, may I come to visit you sometime?"

"No, Harry, you must not be seen with me again."

"Can I at least tell Ron and Hermione about this?"

"They must not know about any of this, Harry."

"But they will think you've betrayed us!"

"It is what must happen, Harry. The more people who know, the more danger I'm in. No one else must know about this."

Harry looked at Severus with sadness. "All right, I'll keep this a secret, but it's against my better judgment."

Severus nodded to him. "Thank you, Harry."

Harry stood and gave Severus a little smile. With a turn he had disappeared, leaving Severus to himself. Severus somehow didn't think that this had been part of Hermione's past, or she would have mentioned it. Somehow, a little bit of history had changed. He hoped that that little bit wouldn't spell the ending of his life.

oooOOOooo

Severus' Dark Mark burned. He wondered what the Dark Lord wanted. He had already reported the events of the night before almost immediately after Potter had left him. The Dark Lord had been extremely pleased at the 'death' of Albus Dumbledore, but furious that Draco Malfoy had escaped.

"I will kill his parents in his place!" Voldemort hissed.

"My Lord, that, of course, is very wise, but may I offer an alternative?" Severus asked with his head bowed.

"Go ahead," Voldemort said.

"Send them to find Draco themselves. They know the boy better than anyone. They will be able to find him, although it might take some time. It will be torture for them to hunt down their own child. Then when they find him, you can take revenge on the one who truly deserves it."

Voldemort thought about Severus' suggestion.

"All right. I would much rather see the young boy wither before me anyway. I have grown fond of Lucius and his abilities."

Severus bowed low. "You are very wise, Master."

Now his mark burned again. He quickly Apparated to Malfoy Manor and the Dark Lord's side.

"Severus," the Dark Lord hissed.

Severus bowed low. "You sent for me, my Lord?"

"I have just heard something... disturbing."

"What is it, my Lord?"

"Dumbledore has somehow survived."

Severus feigned surprise. "My Lord, I had tested the spell on animals, it worked on them!" he said anxiously.

"Did you test it on a wizard?"

"No, my Lord!"

"You fool! How were you to know if the spell worked, unless you tested it on a human?" Voldemort screamed.

"My Lord, I had just perfected it a little more than a week ago, there was no time..."

"There's always time, Severus! Now because of your stupidity, Dumbledore lives. He is in a coma, but he will probably regain consciousness."

"My Lord, forgive me for my ignorance." Severus bowed even lower, his hand over his heart.

"Crucio!"

Severus fell to the ground in pain. He winced and cried out sharply. He hoped this would be enough punishment for him, but the Dark Lord could do anything to him at this point. He would have to take it stoically. Voldemort finally lifted the curse. Severus struggled to get up quickly.

"Your spell was innovative, but in the end, it failed. Crucio!"

A minute later, Severus was picking himself up off the floor again. He kept his head bowed and did not make eye contact with his master.

"Now I will need to wait to make another attempt on his life as both you and Malfoy have fled the school. Crucio!"

Severus rose again when the curse was lifted.

"Severus, look at me."

Voldemort swept into his mind, seeing him creating the spell and using it on animals. He saw the desire in Severus' mind to destroy not only the body of Dumbledore, but his soul also. He was appeased.

"It's unfortunate that your spell didn't work, Severus. You may go."

"Thank you, my Lord," Severus said deferentially.

oooOOOooo

There was a loud rap on Petunia's door. She rushed to answer it and found an agitated Sirius Black on the other side of it. He rushed into the house.

"Have you seen *The Prophet* yet?" he asked her.

"It hasn't been delivered," she told him.

Sirius brandished his copy for her to see. She looked at the front page headline and gave a gasp.

Attempted Murder of Albus Dumbledore

Petunia quickly read the article, gasping again when she came to the part that told of Severus' part in the affair. She looked up to Sirius.

"This can't be right."

"It is. I just came from Hogwarts. Dumbledore is in a coma. Poppy says he will be alright in a couple of days, but she confirmed that it was done at Snape's hand. Harry saw the whole thing."

Petunia went over to the couch and sat down, deep in thought.

"This doesn't make any sense," she muttered.

"Of course it does!" Sirius cried. "He's been on their side all this time. He is the same sniveling bat James and I thought he was."

Petunia looked at Sirius crossly. "How can you say that after all he has done?"

"He just tried to kill Dumbledore, that's how."

"There's something more to this," Petunia mused. "This isn't like him. Sirius, he was a witness at your trial. His testimony helped to free you. Look at what he did for me and what he has been doing with Harry. This isn't right. He wouldn't turn against us like this."

Sirius pulled her close to him. "I know he seemed to be on our side, but why would he kill Albus if he truly were on our side?"

Petunia shook her head as she cuddled closer to Sirius.

"I don't know, Sirius, I just have a feeling that things aren't what they seem."

oooOOOooo

Hermione sat up in her room on her bed. She had cast a *Muffliato* spell and pulled her curtains so no one knew she was up there. She thought about the events of the night before. Professor Snape, a man she considered to be her friend, had betrayed them all and tried to kill Headmaster Dumbledore. Thank heavens whatever spell he used backfired and Dumbledore was only in a coma.

Only! she thought; as if that was something pleasant. But of course, it was better than being dead. Somehow, she knew that Professor Dumbledore would wake up. She was at least thankful for that, but her heart ached within her.

The thought that Professor Snape had tried to kill the Headmaster was almost impossible for her to fathom. Had he been playing them all along? How could she have been such a fool to believe him all of this time? How he must have laughed at their stupidity.

Suddenly she was angry. She had trusted him, admired him! But there was nothing to admire now, he was a murderer. Well, an attempted murderer if she was to label it correctly. How could she have been so foolish? She had not been the only one, however. Severus Snape had duped them all.

Hermione sat in a fog, berating herself for being so stupid. She couldn't believe she had fallen for his act. She went over all of the times they had met to train. He had seemed to be concerned for their wellbeing. He had worked hard to train them. The whole thing just didn't make sense. Why would he work so hard to help them defeat You-Know-Who if he was just going to go back to serving him? It didn't add up. She wished she could make him appear here, right in front of her, so she could ask him what on earth he was thinking. Then suddenly it came to her. Something she read in a textbook in the library. Hermione got up and raced out of her room to find the book and research her idea.

oooOOOooo

There it was! The book Hermione was looking for. *The Magic of Memory* sat on the shelf between *Memory Reading* and *Using Memories to Predict the Future*. She pulled the book from the shelf and sat down at a table to find what she had read long ago.

It took her a few minutes to locate, but soon she was reading furiously.

When viewing memories in a Pensieve, it is possible to converse with the people in the memory, but only if the viewer has a close relationship to the subjects. Mere acquaintances will not be able to communicate in this way. By using the spell Memoria Pare the action in the memory will stop. This will give the viewer the opportunity to converse with anyone in the memory with whom they are acquainted. Memoria Parla will give the subject the ability to speak with the viewer and any questions may be asked at this time. The feelings and thoughts of the subject will be readily available to the viewer. This can be a useful tool when someone is not available to answer questions about a situation. To end the conversation and return the memory to normal, use the incantation Memoria Restora.

Hermione snapped the book closed, deep in thought. She would get her answers from Professor Snape, whether he liked it or not.

oooOOOooo

"Harry, can I ask you a favor?" Hermione questioned.

Harry looked up. "What is it, Hermione?"

"Can I see your memories of Professor Snape trying to kill Professor Dumbledore?"

Harry blanched. "Why would you want to see those?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know." She looked down and appeared troubled. "I've just had a hard time believing that Professor Snape would do such a thing. I think if I saw it for myself, I would have an easier time accepting it."

"Hermione, you don't need to see that. It was disturbing. You're fine however you feel about it."

"Please, Harry. I need to see it for myself!"

Harry studied her for a few minutes. He wished he could just tell her the truth, but Snape had sworn him to secrecy. Maybe seeing his memories would help her to come to terms with everything anyway.

"Do you have a bottle?" he asked her with a sigh.

She produced one with her wand and handed it over to him.

Harry took his own wand and extracted the memories, placing them into the vial. He handed it to Hermione.

"Do you want me to watch them with you?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I think I want to see them and work through them by myself," she replied. "Thank you, Harry. I know these memories are private, and I will treat them with respect."

"I know you will, Hermione."

With that, she turned and headed for the Headmaster's office and his Pensieve.

oooOOOooo

Hermione gave the password to the Gargoyle, hoping it hadn't been changed since Dumbledore was injured. With all of the commotion, she wasn't sure that Professor McGonagall would have alerted the Prefects to the change. Much to Hermione's relief, the Gargoyle swung open, and she ascended the stairs. She closed the door behind her and warded it so she wouldn't be disturbed. Opening the doors to the cabinet where the Pensieve sat, she pulled the cork out of the bottle and poured the memories into the Pensieve. She dipped her face low to the memories and soon found herself on the roof of the Astronomy Tower, witnessing the horrible events of the previous evening herself.

She watched the whole scene through once as tears streamed down her face. Gasping, she watched Dumbledore crash to the ground, his eyes staring vacantly at the sky. She watched as Professor Snape quickly put his wand away, grabbed Draco by the robe sleeve and rushed off the roof. The memory ended with his departure. She emerged from the Pensieve, but dipped right back in. This time she watched and waited until Snape chanted the incantation. It was a spell she had never heard before. She wondered why he just hadn't used the Killing Curse.

Pulling her wand out, she said her own spell...*Memoria Pare*. Suddenly all action stopped in the memory. She walked up to Professor Snape and studied his features. He was grimacing as he cast the spell. Was this a reaction to be expected from a cold-blooded killer? There was only one way to find out.

"*Memoria Parla!*" she chanted.

Severus Snape snapped out of his frozen state and glared at Hermione.

"Miss Granger, what are you doing here?" he barked.

"Professor Snape, you are part of a memory. Everything that you are doing has already happened. I am just observing."

"How is it that you are talking to me?"

"I found a spell in a book that would make me able to speak with you. I have several questions."

"I am afraid I can answer none of them," he replied. His tone was aloof. His stance betrayed no feeling about what he had just done.

"But you haven't even heard them," she said angrily.

"Nonetheless, I refuse to answer anything," he responded in a clipped voice.

Hermione balled her fists up. "We trusted you! How could you do this to Professor Dumbledore? After all he has done for you, after he has been your friend, you try and kill him?"

Severus gave her a bored look. "I'm doing what I have to do."

Hermione lost all control at that point. "I trusted you! Harry trusted you! I admired you! Now I find you're just a filthy, murdering Death Eater! How could you be so callous? I thought you were my friend! I thought you were on our side!"

Tears glistened in her eyes and finally spilled down her cheeks. Hermione wrapped her arms around herself and looked down. She tried to bite back the tears, but it was no use. All of her pent up frustration, grief, and puzzlement that had been building up since the attempted murder burst forth from her. She crashed to the ground in a fit of sobs.

oooOOOooo

Severus knelt beside her and held her in his arms. She struggled for a minute, but he was too strong for her.

"Shh, it's all right," Severus soothed.

"No, it's not all right! You tried to kill him!" she cried between sobs. "You played us all. I trusted you." Her voice became deadly quiet. "You're nothing but a liar."

Although just a memory, Severus' heart broke to see Hermione so distraught because of him. He could not let her go on believing him to be so horrible.

"Hermione," he whispered and pulled her closer.

"Don't touch me," she croaked through her tears.

Again she began to struggle, but Severus tightened his grasp, pulling her flush with him. His mouth was poised at her ear.

"This memory is not what it seems."

Hermione pulled away from him and studied his face through her tears.

"What do you mean?"

"Dumbledore is not dead."

"I know that. Your spell didn't work. He's only in a coma." Suddenly realization showed in her face. "How did you know he wasn't dead? You just tried to kill him in this memory."

"I didn't try to kill him. He and I planned this. The spell I used was meant to put him in a coma that would appear to be death to the onlooker. He will revive in a few days."

"Why on earth would you two plan such a thing?"

"This was the only option to save Draco. He was commissioned by the Dark Lord to kill Dumbledore. The Dark Lord will reward me for my attempt, even if it didn't work. It will give me the opportunity to become the right hand of the Dark Lord and to find out his most intimate secrets."

Hermione searched his face, her eyes roving over it, looking for deception. She found none. "So, you're still on our side? You weren't just pretending to be spying against Voldemort all this time?"

"No, Hermione, I wasn't just pretending. I have been a spy for the Order and will remain one."

Hermione threw her arms around him in an embrace.

"Oh! Thank heavens! I... I was thinking horrible things. I'm sorry I doubted you."

"Hermione, you were supposed to doubt me. That was part of the plan. You must tell no one of our conversation. It is dangerous for even you to know about my duplicity. Will you keep this to yourself?"

Hermione pulled back and dropped her arms to her sides. "I can't even tell Ron or Harry? They are as heartbroken as I was."

Severus shook his head. "No one must know, Hermione. Please, honor my wishes in this."

"All right, Professor, I will keep your secret, no matter how difficult it will be."

Wanting to stroke her cheek, he chose to put his hand on her arm instead.

"Thank you, Hermione. You may have just saved my life."

"I know your real self will never hear this, sir, but please be careful. I value our friendship and would hate to lose you."

Severus' chest felt tight at her words. "I value our friendship too, Hermione. I will be careful. I have every intention of coming out of this war alive." ... *And ready for your return to me.*

Hermione smiled and stood up. Severus followed suit.

"I'm going to return the memory back to its original state now."

Severus nodded to her and stood back in the place where he had originated. Hermione stared at him for a second before waving her wand and saying the spell *Memoria Restora* to restore the memory. Everything suddenly was back in motion, and the memory played to the end. She watched as Severus Snape disappeared from view and knew he was the bravest man she had ever met.

A/N: Next up: Hiding away.

Thanks again for some great input from everybody. I enjoy hearing your takes on what's going on. Seventh year is finally here. I know you're all counting down the return of His Hermione. ;)

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 of 46

What would happen if Severus found out what his life would be like as a Death Eater before he got the Dark Mark?
What would happen if Hermione was the one to tell him. AU SSHG A time turner fic.

Disclaimer: I don't own these characters. I do enjoy manipulating them, though. If it's familiar, it's probably referenced from Deathly Hallows.

Chapter 31

Hermione's seventh year:

Harry sat in Dumbledore's office. The school term had not started yet, but he had sought out his Headmaster to discuss the horrible things that had occurred during the summer.

"Sir, I can't come back here. The Death Eaters will be looking for me."

Albus nodded his head. "Yes, they will be. The Ministry is making me hire two of them. It's a travesty that Death Eaters will actually be teaching here at Hogwarts. It is unsafe for any of you to return and for Hermione especially. She must go into hiding, or she will be taken by the Ministry."

"I'll make sure she's safe, and we will find the Horcruxes, sir."

"I know you will, Harry. You must find the true locket and find the other Horcruxes."

"I have a lead on the locket. It was in Grimmauld Place. Mundungus Fletcher stole it and sold it. We will find out who has it, sir."

"Good."

"Will it be safe to come to see you, sir? I can't imagine doing this all by myself."

"You can, but you must not come often, Harry. When you do, use your invisibility cloak. I will set a special password for you with the Gargoyle. Use the password 'deception'. I cannot help you much, Harry, but you should come to see me occasionally."

"I will, sir. Do you have any other leads on the other Horcruxes?"

Albus opened his drawer and pulled out a bag. He handed it to Harry. Harry opened it and found a shrunken book, a snitch, and Dumbledore's lighter. Albus said he wanted Harry, Ron, and Hermione to have those and explained which was for whom. Harry lifted the snitch and looked at it.

"If you pop it in your mouth, it will give you a message," Albus told him, smiling all the while.

Harry followed Dumbledore's orders. *I open at the close.* Harry looked curiously at Dumbledore.

"What does that mean?"

"Ah, that is the mystery," Albus told him.

Harry placed the snitch back in the bag.

"Well, thanks anyway, Professor," he said, somewhat puzzled, as he rose to leave. *Why does Dumbledore always have to be so cryptic about everything? Wouldn't it just be easier if he'd tell me what these things are for?*

"Good luck, Harry. I know you'll figure everything out."

Harry nodded and placed the Invisibility Cloak over him. He took the opportunity of being shrouded to roll his eyes at Dumbledore. Sometimes, Harry wondered if the old wizard ever wanted this war to end. He took his sweet time to reveal anything and usually let Harry flounder for a while before even attempting to aid him. He noticed Dumbledore's eyebrows rise and once again thought that the other wizard could see through the Invisibility Cloak. Harry shook his head and left the office.

oooOOOooo

Once again Severus was in Malfoy Manor standing in the Death Eater circle and listening to a crazed Voldemort.

"We must find Harry Potter! Have none of you the brains to locate a mere boy?" the snake-like man yelled.

All of the Death Eaters bowed their heads.

"My Lord," Mulciber dared to speak. "We have been watching the home at Grimmauld Place, but we have seen nothing! There are Death Eaters outside it every hour of the day. We are sure they will show up there eventually."

Voldemort snarled at his minion. "Your assumptions do me no good! *Crucio!*"

Mulciber fell to the ground and screamed in pain.

"You will find the boy instead of speculating where he is or is not. Do you all understand?" Voldemort yelled.

"Yes, my Lord," came the cry in unison.

"Get out of my sight!" Voldemort cried.

All of the Death Eaters quickly escaped the hall where Voldemort continued to sit. As Severus made his way to the door, he felt a hand on his arm. He turned to find Bellatrix removing her mask to speak with him. He did the same.

"Where have you been hiding, Snape?" she cackled.

"Where I always hide, Bellatrix," he said in a bored tone.

"I bet you know where the Potter brat is. I still think you're working against us."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Bellatrix, how many times must we go over the same information? I am a loyal follower of the Dark Lord, and I would think that his trust in me would convince you of the truth."

Bellatrix cackled again. "The Dark Lord seems to be blind when it comes to you!"

"Bellatrix, I would watch what I say if I were you," Severus sneered as he got close to her face. "You would not want the Dark Lord to think that you felt he was... incompetent."

"That's... that's not what I meant," she stumbled.

"What did you mean then?"

"You are up to no good, and I will find out what it is, Snape."

"Do what you must, Bellatrix, but I assure you, there will be no duplicity found on my part." Severus sneered at her. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a pot of stew simmering on my stove."

With that Severus turned and in a sweep of robes was gone. Antonin Dolohov wandered up behind Bella as she watched Severus disappear.

"Keep an eye on him," she whispered to Dolohov and turned, disappearing upstairs to her room.

oooOOOooo

Harry sat in the tent watching an unconscious Ron. Their adventure had been a disaster. They could no longer return to Grimmauld Place as it had been discovered, and Ron had been splinched and hadn't regained consciousness since they'd Apparated to this wood. Harry himself was unable to contact Dumbledore for fear that the school was being doubly watched for him. They were on their own. At least they had found the real locket. *What to do with it now? How can I destroy the Horcrux?*

oooOOOooo

Dumbledore sat in his office, eyeing the Sword of Gryffindor. He had read in the paper about the break in at the Ministry a few weeks ago. There had been an all out manhunt for Potter and his friends since then, but no one had been successful in finding them. Albus instinctively knew they'd been after a Horcrux, probably the locket. He'd figured they had succeeded as he had not heard from the boy in all of that time until now.

He sighed. Driving the affairs of the universe was a tough job.

It was time for Harry to have the Sword so he could accomplish his mission. He unfolded the small slip of paper that had been delivered by a pigeon less than fifteen minutes ago. Albus was unsure how Harry had coerced a pigeon to carry the note to Hogwarts, but he had somehow succeeded. He glanced down at the paper once again. There were only three words on it...*Forest of Dean*. Dumbledore stood and threw the small paper into the fireplace. He watched it smolder and then burst into flames. Turning, he took the Sword from off his desk and hid it in his robes. He left his office, with the determination to get the Sword to Harry one way or another.

oooOOOooo

Severus left his cabin, holding the sword of Gryffindor in his hand. He had been visited by Dumbledore just an hour before. Albus had given the sword to Severus and told him to deliver it to Harry Potter. He would not tell him why, but thanks to Hermione, Severus knew all about the Horcruxes and the role the sword would play in destroying them. He glanced around quickly before Apparating away but didn't notice the two Death Eaters who were hiding behind some thick bushes, watching his every move.

oooOOOooo

Severus appeared in the forest and found a good hiding place for the sword. Albus said the sword needed to be gained heroically. He supposed that having to break through an iced-over water hole to retrieve it would be heroic enough. Hiding himself, he waited. Soon afterward, he saw Harry leave the tent. He wished he could go up to him and encourage him, but that was not his duty tonight. He sent his Patronus to lure Harry to the sword. A mighty shimmering falcon soared over Harry's head and landed a few feet away from him. Harry looked around for the owner of the Falcon Patronus, but saw no one. The falcon took to the air again, and landed a few yards away. He slowly led Harry through the woods until he was standing almost above the sword. The falcon disappeared.

Severus watched from his hiding place. He was so absorbed in watching Harry that he was surprised to feel a hand on his shoulder. In a flash, his wand was extended and under the chin of the interloper. Hermione Granger stood at the end of his wand, looking as if she had just dropped dead from fear. Severus lowered his wand, but clapped a hand over Hermione's mouth. He cursed his bad luck. This was just what he needed... to be found out. He flicked his head to the left, signaling for her to go with him deeper into the woods. He kept his hand securely over her mouth until they were out of earshot of the tent and Harry. Finally he removed his hand, but cast a *Muffliato* spell, just to be safe.

"Professor Snape, how did you find us?"

"That is none of your concern," he snarled. Pointing his wand at her, he continued, "You must not tell Harry that you saw me, is that understood?"

"All right," she said confusedly.

"As you know, I have no qualms about killing and will not hesitate to kill you if you cannot keep this secret," Severus sneered.

"Please don't snap at me, and you don't need to pretend you're against us, I know the truth."

Severus was stunned. He was expecting her to accuse him of all sorts of terrible things, but she just stood there and said she knew everything.

"Potter told you!" he cried.

"Harry? He doesn't know anything... or does he?" she looked to Severus quizzically.

"What exactly do you think you know, Miss Granger?" Severus snarled.

"I know that you and Professor Dumbledore planned his attempted murder, and you are still spying for the Order."

Severus lowered his wand and gaped at her. "How do you know such things, if Harry didn't tell you?"

"You mean he knows? All this time we've been dancing around each other when it comes to you when he has known all along! You made me swear not to tell anybody!"

"I assure you, Miss Granger, I swore you to nothing."

"Oh, right. Let me explain."

Hermione told him about her trip into Harry's memory and her quizzing of his memory self.

"You found that bit of information in a book?"

She nodded.

Severus shook his head. "I should have known you would have figured out a way to find out the truth."

She smiled at his recognition of her skills. Severus' heart leapt at that smile.

"But why did Harry get to know and not anyone else?" she asked after a moment. She looked a bit upset to not have been in on the loop.

"Harry decided to follow me after I left the tower and Hogwarts. He attacked me, and I was forced to divulge the truth."

Hermione perked up considerably. "So, now I can talk to him about this?"

"No! If he knows I was here, that will ruin everything."

"Why?"

"I just delivered the Sword of Gryffindor to him secretly. He had to get it through heroics. If he knows I left it for him, I'm not sure what will happen; Dumbledore only said it would be bad."

"Does that man ever make sense?" Hermione mused.

Severus laughed out loud. "I thought I was the only one who thought that."

"Professor, are you alright?"

"I am fine, Miss Granger," Severus said as he straightened himself out.

"You-know-Who doesn't suspect you?"

"He does not."

Hermione visibly sighed. "I have worried about you ever since I entered Harry's dream. You must be careful, Professor. I would hate to lose you and your friendship."

Severus smiled thinly at her as his heart exploded within him. If only she knew what her words meant to him, but she would not. He would keep it a secret that would help him to make it through his lonely and dangerous days.

"I must be going," he told her.

"Good luck, Professor," Hermione said in a hushed voice.

She smiled at him, which made him want to grab her and hold her to him. He restrained himself, but found her not as reserved. She closed the distance and hugged him fiercely. Severus closed his eyes as his arms went around her. All too soon, she was pulling away from him.

"Take care of yourself," Hermione admonished.

Severus stared into her eyes for a long moment before nodding. As he turned away, there was a huge lump in his throat. He did not look at her again before Disapparating.

oooOOOooo

Severus appeared back at his cabin. Looking around, he thought he saw something move in the woods. He extended his wand and went to investigate. Two Death Eaters emerged from a thick brush and pointed their wands at Severus.

"So, where did you go with that sword, Severus?" Antonin Dolohov asked.

"What sword?" Severus asked simply.

"The sword of Gryffindor that Dumbledore dropped off a little while ago."

Severus knew he would have to fight to the death to get out of this. He struck the first blow, sending Dolohov flying. The other Death Eater, Crabbe Sr. by the look of it, shot a curse at Severus. He ducked and shot one at Crabbe. Incompetent as the Death Eater was, he was able to block the curse and send one of his own as he dodged around like a lumbering ox. Severus turned and blocked the hex easily. The two wizards locked onto each other with their wands. Crabbe Sr. sent a hex at Severus. Just then Dolohov rose and sent another curse at Severus' back. Not even seeing Dolohov or his curse, he blocked Crabbe's, but was struck unconscious by Dolohov's. The two Death Eaters laughed and picked up Severus, Disapparating away with him.

oooOOOooo

They brought him back to Malfoy Manor and dragged him to the Dungeons. Bellatrix appeared out of nowhere, a huge smile on her face. She looked down at the still unconscious Snape as the other two filled her in on what they saw.

"Not so haughty now, are you?" she asked Severus.

She pointed her wand at him and sent a Crucio curse at him. His body shook uncontrollably as he lay there unconscious. She released the curse and looked at Snape sadly.

"It's just not any fun if you're not going to scream, Snape. Oh, but we'll see you scream alright. When the Dark Lord gets a hold of you, you will scream and scream and scream."

She turned and looked to Dolohov and Crabbe. "He's all yours," she said maniacally as she turned and left the dungeon.

oooOOOooo

Severus didn't know how long he had been unconscious, but when he awoke he found himself in a cell, chained to a wall. He could feel welts along his torso and knew he had been beaten while unconscious. They had left his clothes on, but they were torn and dirtied. How long would he have to remain in this prison before they brought him before Voldemort? He knew that when they did, his life would be forfeit. His cover had been blown, and he was as good as dead.

A/N: Next up: Can Severus survive the wrath of Voldemort?

Thanks for your support and reviews. You all probably aren't fond of what happened to Severus in this chapter, right? Sorry for the cliffie. Happy reading and reviewing. :)

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 of 46

What would happen if Severus found out what his life would be like as a Death Eater before he got the Dark Mark?
What would happen if Hermione was the one to tell him. AU SSHG A time turner fic.

Chapter 32

Severus heard the creaking of his cell and opened his eyes. Lucius Malfoy was coming up to him. He looked pityingly upon Severus, who was still chained to the wall, and waved his wand. The chains fell off Severus' wrists and he collapsed to his knees.

"Severus, I consider you my friend. Little did I know you were going behind the Dark Lord's back and helping Dumbledore."

"Lucius!" Severus moaned.

"You know I can do nothing for you, my friend. You have dug your own grave."

"Why are you here?" Severus managed to say through his parched mouth.

"I am here to tell you that you will appear before the Dark Lord tomorrow. You should prepare as you see fit for your death."

Severus straightened his body up. He struggled to his feet, pulling himself up with the chains that had bound him to the wall for so long. His entire body screamed at him. Stumbling, he finally was able to straighten up. He winced in pain but refused to give Lucius the satisfaction of crying out.

"So, you came here to mock me?" Severus spat bitterly.

"I came here to give you some advice."

"Why would I need advice from you?"

"Because, Severus, I am not the one in a cell."

Severus glowered at him.

"Tell the Dark Lord what he wants to hear, and I'm sure he'll make your death a quick one."

"How very thoughtful of you, Lucius," Severus muttered.

He was trying to keep Lucius talking while he slipped his hand into the pocket of his robes, but what he wanted was no longer there.

"Are you looking for this?" Lucius said as he brandished a small vial in front of Severus' face.

Severus blanched inwardly. His Strengthening Solution, which he carried on him at all times, was now in the hands of Lucius Malfoy. It would do him no good there.

"What is this, Severus?" Lucius asked while turning the vial in the light.

"It's just a Healing Solution. I think some of my ribs are broken. I'm having trouble breathing."

"It's better to have trouble breathing than to not breathe at all, is it not?" Lucius asked with a smile.

Severus narrowed his eyes at Lucius.

Lucius brought his wand to the small vial.

"*Evanesco*," he chanted. The bottle disappeared.

"Sorry, Sev. If the Dark Lord found out I had helped you, he might not give me your place by his side. No hard feelings, right? We're still friends?"

Severus sneered at Lucius. "You call yourself my friend when you leave me to die?"

"You know as well as I that if the tables were turned, you would do the same to me. We all have that self-preservation buried deep in our veins. I truly am... sorry."

There were footsteps coming toward the cell. Bellatrix turned the corner and sneered at Severus.

"I see you let him have a good rest, Lucius. Is he properly grateful?"

"Bellatrix, even if he was, you would not refrain from torturing him, I'm sure. I will not stay and watch you amuse yourself."

He turned to go but halted instead and turned back to Severus.

"I will miss you, my friend," he said to Severus and then left him to Bellatrix and her wand.

oooOOOooo

It had been a full week of imprisonment before a malnourished and beaten Snape was brought before Voldemort and the Death Eaters. His robes were tattered and hung like rags on him. His hands were tied tightly behind his back. He could barely walk or stand, so he was supported by a Death Eater on either side of him.

They took him out in the woods, where they were meeting, so as not to be discovered. Severus had been mercilessly shoved into the center of the circle that the Death Eaters had formed. He stumbled and fell to the ground but quickly struggled to his feet, grimacing with the effort it took. The two Death Eaters strode up and supported his weight, each hooking a hand under his armpits. Voldemort glared at him.

"It seems, Severus, that you have not been the loyal subject that I thought you were after all!" Voldemort cried.

Severus said nothing. He would not speak during this session. He knew his cover was blown. Anything he said would not appease the Dark Lord. It would simply cause him to be more enraged. He just hoped that the Killing Curse would come quickly. His only regret was that he would never see his Hermione again.

"Severus! Where did you take that sword?" Voldemort demanded.

Severus was silent.

"Answer me!"

Silence.

"*Crucio!*"

Severus collapsed to the ground, his hands still secured behind his back, and shuddered silently. Finally unable to take the pain, his mouth opened in a blood-curdling scream.

"Get up," Voldemort demanded.

He was wrenched up from the ground by the two Death Eaters who waited alongside of him, one of whom was Lucius.

"Where did you take it?" Voldemort demanded again.

Again silence.

"*Crucio!*"

The torture went on for at least an hour. Severus would collapse to the ground, screaming in pain, his body shuddering with the torment. Then he would be hoisted up for the same procedure to take place again. Voldemort knew exactly what he was doing. He never held the Unforgivable long enough to cause insanity, just excruciating agony. By the end of the hour, Voldemort was livid.

"You will answer me!" he screamed at Severus.

Severus just looked at him weakly and continued to say nothing.

Voldemort regarded him with narrowed eyes.

"Fine," he said nastily. "I was going to make your death a quick one, but for your continued insolence, I will let my Death Eaters deal with you. Enjoy the last hours of your life, Severus. Know that your dishonor is complete as you lie dying on the ground."

With that, Voldemort rose and Apparated away, leaving the dirty job of killing to his minions. The group laughed to themselves as they descended on Severus, releasing his hands and knocking him to the ground again. They knew he was too weak to fight back, and they wanted his full body accessible to them. They kicked, punched, and pelted him over and over again. They broke his ribs and legs and arms. They battered his face until it was unrecognizable. He finally could hold it in no longer and screamed in pain repeatedly as they beat him senseless. After a long while, they finally decided they were tired of their game as Severus had been unconscious for quite some time now. They all Disapparated in unison, leaving Severus to bleed to death on the forest floor.

oooOOOooo

Severus finally regained consciousness, unsure as to how long he had lain on the ground slowly bleeding to death. He was surprised he was still alive. He didn't think there was a bone in his body that wasn't broken. He lay there on his side and cursed himself. He had no wand, and he knew he would be unable to stand to Apparate somewhere. He couldn't move at all, let alone get to a standing position. He was trapped on the forest floor awaiting death.

He lapsed in and out of consciousness as his imminent death filled his mind. His body was in excruciating pain. It was a miracle that he was even awake sporadically. He should be dead already.

His thoughts groggily turned to Hermione. She hadn't foreseen this turn of events. Perhaps she had felt it, and that's why she had been so adamant about him not joining Voldemort all those years ago. Too late now... he was close to death, and there was no going back. There would be no reunion for Hermione and him. She would return and find that he had died, never able to hold her in his arms again. He bemoaned his fate. It seemed that no matter what he did, he would never be truly happy.

oooOOOooo

Severus opened his eyes and squinted around. He had lapsed into unconsciousness again. Pain seared through him once again. He felt weaker than before and knew it wouldn't be much longer. His swollen eyes thought they saw something. Two forms were coming toward him. Were they from the beyond? Had they come to usher him to his death? He almost welcomed the relief death would bring from the agony that was torturing his body.

As they neared him, he thought he made out the form of Albus Dumbledore. The figure came closer and knelt down besides Severus' broken form. Yes, it was Dumbledore all right. How on Earth had he found him? Severus concentrated on the other form, which had come close with Albus. Narcissa Malfoy.

"Thank you, Narcissa," Dumbledore said softly, "for leading me to him."

Albus waved his wand over Severus body, placing a Stasis Spell on him so he could Apparate with him back to Hogwarts.

"I had to help, Professor," Narcissa responded. "He saved my son's life. I could not stand to see him beaten like this. I just hope we are in time to save his life."

Albus looked up at Narcissa. "I believe he will survive, thanks to you, Narcissa. You should go, in case someone comes back to check on him."

Narcissa nodded and Disapparated. Albus turned back to Severus. He gently lifted the other man up and readied himself for Apparition.

"Don't worry, Severus," he murmured. "Poppy will have you fixed up in no time."

Even if the Stasis Spell hadn't been cast on him, Severus only had the strength to groan. Albus turned on the spot and found himself back at Hogwarts. He hurried to the castle and up to the infirmary. He yelled to Poppy as he entered.

"Quick, Poppy, he's near death. We need somewhere to heal him where he won't be discovered."

Poppy motioned for Albus to bring Severus towards the back of the infirmary. She waved her wand over the back wall, and a door suddenly appeared. She opened it to reveal a private hospital room equipped with everything she would need to heal Severus.

Albus rushed in and placed Severus on the bed. Poppy waved her wand over him and frowned.

"All of his limbs are broken, most of his ribs are cracked, he has a ruptured intestine and stomach, and there's lots of internal bleeding. Both of his cheekbones and his nose are broken also. Curse those evil men! I just hope I can get him stabilized!"

Albus put his hand gently on Poppy's arm. "I know you can, Madam Pomfrey. You will save him."

Poppy frowned again and went to work trying to save her patient. As Severus lapsed into unconsciousness, he saw his Hermione caress his face and kiss his lips.

oooOOOooo

That evening, Harry appeared in Albus' office.

"Professor Dumbledore, Last week, the Sword of Gryffindor appeared out of nowhere. Ron destroyed the locket with it. We are one step closer to ending all of this."

Albus smiled at him. "Well done, Harry. Now we just have to find the other Horcruxes."

"Do you have any idea where they are?"

"No, but at least we know one of them is the Hufflepuff cup. The other obviously has to be something from Ravenclaw or Gryffindor."

Harry nodded. At that moment Madam Pomfrey stepped through the fireplace. She seemed surprised to see Harry sitting there. She seemed unsure as to how to go about reporting on Severus.

"I just wanted to give you an update on my patient, Headmaster."

Albus looked at Harry carefully.

"You are aware that Professor Snape attempted to kill me at my own orders, correct?"

Harry stammered—in shock that Dumbledore knew his secret.

"I... I... he told me... not to speak of it."

Albus nodded. "He has been discovered. His true allegiances will be public knowledge soon. He was beaten last night to within an inch of his life. Madam Pomfrey has been struggling to keep him alive ever since."

Harry turned to Madam Pomfrey. "Will he be all right?" he asked with concern.

Poppy looked back to the Headmaster. "He will survive, but he has not regained consciousness, and I don't expect him to for several days. It will take him a long while to recover fully. He will not be able to leave his room for some weeks."

"What can we do, Poppy?" Albus asked.

"We can only watch and wait. I'm sure a visit now and then once he's conscious would be helpful also."

"Of course, Poppy, thank you," Albus replied.

Madam Pomfrey turned and disappeared in the fireplace.

Harry frowned at Dumbledore.

"May I visit him?" he asked the Headmaster.

"I think you should," Albus told him. "He is hidden in a secret room in the back of the infirmary. You should bring Ron and Hermione also."

"But they won't want to see him. They hate him for what he tried to do to you."

"You must tell them the truth. Now that Severus' cover is blown, it doesn't matter who knows what. They are his friends and will be a comfort to him."

They spent the rest of their meeting planning the visit to Severus.

oooOOOooo

Six days later the trio snuck into Hogwarts under the Invisibility Cloak. They had arranged to meet Dumbledore in the infirmary at exactly six o'clock. They made their way into the room and found Dumbledore alone and in the back of the infirmary. They came up to the Headmaster.

"We're here, Professor," Harry whispered from under the Invisibility Cloak.

"Shh, I already knew that," Dumbledore said quietly.

He waved his wand, and a door appeared. Albus brought down the wards on the door and stepped in, holding the door open long enough for the three teenagers to enter. They pulled the cloak off themselves once they were in the room and the door was securely shut. All three rushed to Severus' bedside. He seemed to be asleep. He looked somewhat peaceful.

"Is he still unconscious?" Harry asked Dumbledore.

Severus' eyes snapped open, and he regarded the sight before him. His three favorite students were all surrounding his bed, leaning toward him with looks of concern on their faces.

"No," he rasped out.

"Professor, thank Merlin you're all right," Harry exclaimed.

Hermione grasped his hand. "I asked you to be careful!" she reprimanded him.

Severus cracked a small smile at her.

"Bloody hell, you look like death warmed over," cried Ron.

"Very astute, Mr. Weasley," Severus croaked.

"Is there something we can do?" Hermione asked.

"You shouldn't be here... too dangerous," he murmured.

"Dumbledore is watching out for us, we are safe," Harry told him.

"But if they find Hermione... they are doing awful things to Muggle-borns."

"Severus," Dumbledore interrupted. "She is safe."

"We're concerned about *you*," Ron said.

"I will recover," Severus whispered. "Albus tells me I look much better than when he found me."

Tears formed in Hermione's eyes. "You could have died," she told him.

"I would have if Albus hadn't come when he did. I could feel my life force leaving me."

Hermione bent low and gave him a light hug, trying not to hurt him as she did it. Severus was shocked by her show of affection.

"We're glad you didn't," she said as she pulled away.

Harry looked at Severus thoughtfully. "I know it wasn't brewed for this, Professor, but would your Strengthening Solution help you to recover?"

Severus closed his eyes and thought about it. "It will not mend bones, but it will help to give me back the energy I lost, yes."

"I'll go get some, then," Harry said quickly. Before anyone could say a word, he had tossed the Invisibility Cloak over himself and left the room.

"Impetuous as ever, isn't he?" Severus mused.

"At least he didn't walk into a Death Eater trap!" Ron mused.

"That was not one of my better spying days, I will admit."

Hermione looked at him gravely. "Shh, don't talk like that. I'm sure you were as cautious as you always are."

"Not cautious enough," Severus mused.

It had been true. He had been so worked up about the sword and how he could get it to Harry secretly that he had just gone blindly on his merry way. He was sure that the possibility of seeing Hermione after so long perhaps... maybe... possibly... had been a distraction as well.

He knew better. He knew not to let his personal life interfere with his spy work. Of course the one time he let his guard down, he had proven himself right, almost losing his life for his folly.

"Professor, don't berate yourself. What happened, happened, and thank Merlin you're all right," Hermione mused.

"I almost lost everything," Severus said as he watched Hermione look at him worriedly.

"But you didn't," she said finally.

Just then the door swung open and closed again. Harry emerged from the Cloak and handed a small vial to Dumbledore. Albus went over to Severus and propped his head

up, helping him down the potion. Placing his head back down, they all waited for the Strengthening Solution to take effect.

They watched in amazement as Severus' drawn features became more relaxed and normal looking. He opened his eyes and seemed to be more alert. When he spoke, his voice had its normal authoritative timbre to it.

"Thank you, Harry," he said. "My entire body still aches with the mending of bones, but I don't feel as if I'm going to pass out at any second. It seems we have found a new use for my illustrious potion."

Harry smiled at him. "I'm just glad it worked."

Severus nodded at him and smiled a genuine smile, his face finally able to respond as he would like it to.

"I don't think we'll be able to visit you again, Professor," Harry said. "We just wanted you to know that we're thinking about you and want you to get better quickly."

Severus looked into Harry's eyes. "Just accomplish your task, Harry."

"I will, sir," Harry told him.

"What an interesting necklace, Professor," Hermione mused as she fingered a small half heart with the words *One Heart* inscribed on it. "Does it have some meaning?"

Severus' eyes grew wide as his hand went up to the necklace that always graced his neck. It usually was hidden behind his high collars, but with the hospital gown he was wearing, it had surfaced and was lying in the open for everyone to see. His fingers brushed Hermione's as he grasped the necklace. It took all of his control not to grasp her hand and pull her toward him.

"It was a Christmas present given many years ago, Miss Granger," he answered.

His heart constricted. If only he could tell Hermione that it was part of his gift to her during the Christmas they had shared together. If only he could tell her that she herself wore the other half of that necklace with the words *One Mind* inscribed into it. If only he could tell her everything. Facing death had made him long for his Hermione's presence. He knew it would only be a few years before her return, but those years seemed to stretch unendingly before him. He cleared his throat and answered Hermione.

"It symbolizes a very dear friendship that I once had. The two of us were very like minded and cared for one another very much."

"And she still means something to you?" Hermione asked in wonder.

"Very much..."

"What happened to her, Professor?" Hermione queried as she pulled her hand back to her lap.

Severus swallowed hard. "She had to leave our world. Someday she will return."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "I think Severus has had enough excitement for the day," he told the trio, signaling that it was time for their departure.

Hermione rose from the bed and stood next to Ron. He put his arm around her and looked down at Severus.

"Well, we best be off before the Carrows smell us or something," Ron remarked.

Severus gave them a wan smile. "Thank you for visiting me," he said.

His gaze lingered on Ron's arm before he turned to Harry.

"Be careful," he advised him.

"I'll be more careful than you were!" Harry told him, making light of the situation.

"That would not be hard to do," Severus shot back.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione replaced the Invisibility Cloak over them, and Albus opened the door. Soon Severus was alone in the room. He sighed to himself. Obviously things were warming up between Hermione and Ron. His eyes had nearly popped out of his head when he saw Ron's arm lazily resting on her shoulders. Of course, he was adept at schooling his feelings and guarding his emotions so he was saved the embarrassment of a crude reaction to them. He shoved thoughts of Ron Weasley out of his mind and concentrated on his Hermione.

He fingered the necklace and thought of the love he had seen in Hermione's eyes when he had given her the other half of it. He knew she still wore it and would reappear with it secured around her neck. His half had remained around his neck since that Christmas so long ago. He would finger it at night and think of her. When he looked in the mirror, he would see it around his neck, and it would give him hope for the future.

He thanked Merlin that he even had a future. He had thought he would surely die in the woods, but he had been given a reprieve. His Hermione had come to him while he was unconscious for those few days. He had felt her hold him and comfort him. She whispered to him that he would be all right, that he would live and see her again. She had been with him constantly cradling him in her arms. It had seemed so real that he had been disappointed when he had awakened and not found her there with him. He had almost been able to feel her in his unconscious state, making it hard to believe that she was not really there but had only been a figment of his imagination.

Imagination or not, she had saved him. The war, however, was not over. There were still battles to be fought. Now that his cover had been blown, he could fight directly for the Order. There was a certain satisfaction in that, even though he would not be able to help them know Voldemort's plans. Somehow, he knew, Dumbledore would be prepared for the final battle anyway. He was always prepared for everything. Severus hoped he would live to see the end of the war and the return of his beloved. Thoughts of her were the only thing that was getting him through the pain of his recovery.

A/N: Next up: *The Final Battle*

I hope you can all breathe a sigh of relief now. :) It won't be too long before we see Hermione's return. I'm sure you'll all be glad for that! Happy reading and reviewing.

Chapter 33

The final battle finally begins.

Chapter 33

Severus stared out his room's enchanted window into the dark night. Several weeks had gone by, and his bones no longer ached every minute of the day. He breathed in deeply, rejoicing in the fact that his body had healed and he was now his normal, strong self.

Having rejoined the Order as soon as he was able to leave his bed, he'd found renewed purpose. He once again belonged to something where he could make a difference. Relief had filled him at his acceptance. He was finally back in the thick of things again.

At his appearance at that first Order meeting, turmoil had reigned. Albus explained all, and finally the sneers and suspicious looks had disappeared. Having been explained everything, they had welcomed him with open arms. Many had apologized profusely for ever doubting him, and some had even expressed annoyance at Albus for keeping his innocence a secret.

He had assured them that if they had known the truth, his life would have been more in danger than it already had been. Most had seemed to understand and accept that. Petunia had embraced him heartily, confessing that she had known something wasn't right from the start, berating Albus harshly for making them all think badly of Severus.

oooOOOooo

"So, you haven't heard from Harry at all?" came a voice from behind him.

Sirius Black had paid him a visit. He had been worried about Harry, who was still missing.

"I have not," Severus stated blandly as he continued to stare out the window.

He finally turned to Sirius. "Listen, they are on a mission commissioned by Dumbledore. The last I saw of them was right after I was attacked. He will show himself when the time is right."

Sirius gave Severus a quick nod. Their relationship had improved slightly since the trial. They were civil to one another and gave each other their respect usually. Severus had still been surprised to see Black at his door, but he understood the worry that Sirius was having about Harry. He was worried too and not just about Harry.

There was a loud rap on the door. He wondered who else could be calling so late in the night. It was Minerva. She had come to alert him to the attack on the school. He grabbed his wand before the two men followed her to prepare for the battle.

Sirius and Severus were quickly brought up to speed as they followed Minerva. They were both relieved to know that Harry and his friends were safely inside the castle. They quickly helped to usher all of the younger students through the exit in the Room of Requirement and prepared for the attack.

Dudley Dursley came up to the three adults.

"We have activated the DA coins. We should have all the old DA members here momentarily."

Severus turned to Dudley. "Have you alerted your mother? She is not always in close touch with the other members of the Order."

"I sent my Patronus to her. She should be here," Dudley said.

Severus nodded to him. "Stay here and organize the DA members as they arrive. I must find Harry."

oooOOOooo

The battle had begun in earnest, and Severus turned and ran to find the Boy Who Lived, but he was detained, fighting against his former comrades. He felled many of them as they tried to take over the school. Very few of them were any match for him. Even those that were, soon found themselves sprawled on the floor.

Racing out of the school he found himself dodging hexes and sending out his own. He cast his eyes around for Potter, but was unable to find him. Severus saw a giant spider scurrying toward him and quickly shot an Avada Kedavra at the creature. The spider turned over and wiggled its legs for a moment before becoming still. Severus rushed off, still looking for Harry.

He headed back to the school, dodging giants who had taken to stomping on their enemies, crushing them into the ground. A horrid sight met his eyes as he approached the entry of the school. Dozens of giant spiders were retreating from the building, chased by spells cast by the inhabitants within. Severus drew as close as he could and gaped at the throng as it raced away from the school. He caught Hagrid's shape being tossed about on top of the mass of legs and bodies as they disappeared into the night. Suddenly Harry Potter burst through the doors, running after the frenzy of spiders shouting Hagrid's name. Severus saw what Harry did not. A massive giant's foot was descending right where Harry had stopped to call after his friend. Severus ran like a shot and threw himself into Harry, effectively getting both of them out of the way of the huge foot. Severus tumbled and rolled with Harry until he was sure they were out of harm's way. They finally came to a stop with Severus straddling Harry. Harry blinked up at Severus.

"Thanks," Harry said. "I guess I owe you yet another life debt," he mumbled as they got to their feet.

"At this rate, Potter, I will be immortal," Severus told him.

Without another word, Harry began to run back to the building. Severus called to him, but Harry either didn't hear or chose to ignore his call. At that moment Voldemort called an hour ceasefire. Severus soon ran after Harry, who had gotten a good head start because Severus had stopped to listen to all of the narcissistic prattle coming from the Dark Lord's mouth, including an invitation for Harry to just walk himself up to Voldemort and lay down his life.

He finally found Harry in the Great Hall, mourning the fall of Fred Weasley. Severus looked sadly upon Fred's body and noticed not far away, Lupin was crying over his wife's broken body. He hoped that Lupin would survive the night. After all, he had a young baby who was now motherless. There had been so much death and despair already. Who else would fall in this battle? This had to end tonight!

He went to Harry and pulled him to a corner.

"Dumbledore has alerted you to the need for your demise, right?" he asked Harry.

Harry ripped his glance away from the dead and stared at Severus. "He explained everything a few minutes ago."

"What do you intend to do?" Severus asked.

Harry looked back at the death in the room. "I will do as Dumbledore asks. He knows what needs to be done."

"I cannot explain how I know this, Harry, but if you do this, Voldemort will be defeated."

Harry's eyes narrowed in confusion.

"You will be able to defeat him with your sacrifice, Harry, and I think all will right itself in the end."

"How can you know such things?"

"Just trust me. Everything will work out for the best."

Harry nodded. "Will you come with me?"

"I think this is something you need to do by yourself. I will just be in the way. I'll stay here and await your return."

"But I'll be dead."

"Perhaps not," Severus said mysteriously.

Harry gave him another curious look and readied himself to go. Severus put his hand on Harry's arm.

"Good luck, Harry."

"Thanks," Harry said and turned to leave.

Severus left the Hall too, hoping to help those who were wounded. He spied Petunia Dursley off in the distance. She was bent over a downed fighter. Frowning as he looked over the surroundings on the school ground, he noted how many had been wounded. There were bodies strewn everywhere. Most were students as the majority of the teachers and adults had stayed within the school, keeping it secure. As Severus walked, he heard moans from the fallen. He reached Petunia finally. She was still trying to help the wounded student. He stopped and healed the boy. Petunia helped the boy up, rising herself and looked at him.

"Are you hurt?" Severus asked.

She smiled at him. "No, it would take a lot more than this to hurt me, Severus, I had a wonderful teacher."

Severus nodded at her, and together they helped more of the wounded. He helped heal those he could as Petunia called to those who were still standing to shuttle the more seriously wounded back into the school.

Soon the hour of allotted time had passed, and Severus wondered what had become of Harry. He knew that Harry was alive when Hermione had traveled to the past and that had been years after this battle. He was unsure whether the timeline had changed and that now Harry would be dead, but he suspected that although he had willingly walked into a trap, somehow Harry would survive. He decided to secret himself on the edge of the forest, to wait for what would come.

"Is it all right if I leave you?" he asked Petunia.

She nodded to him. "Do you know if Dudley and Harry are all right?" she asked nervously.

"Dudley is in the Great Hall with his friends. He seems to be unharmed. Harry has gone into the woods to face Voldemort. I am not sure of his condition."

Petunia's eyes widened. "He could be killed, Severus."

"I know. I am going to go after him and see what I can find out. I will look out for Harry as best I can."

"What about Sirius, have you seen him?"

"I haven't seen him since the beginning of the battle. I did not see him in the Great Hall with the others, but that doesn't mean that he's hurt."

Petunia nodded but gave him a worried look. Her relationship with Sirius had been going on for over a year now. Sirius was wonderful to her, and she appreciated all of the things that he was. He had been so different from Vernon, she truly felt blessed to have him in her life.

"I will search for him then," Petunia said absently to Severus. She then looked at him more directly. "Be careful, Severus."

"I will be," he assured her and headed for the woods. Secreting himself behind a tree, he waited, not really knowing what he was waiting for, but something told him to be alert and keep his eyes open.

He was shocked a little while later to see Voldemort leading his minions. Standing out amongst them was Hagrid, carrying the body of Harry Potter. Severus' heart clenched within him at the sight of the lifeless Potter being carried by the half-giant. Had everything gone wrong? Had Hermione changed the future so much that the Boy-Who-Lived was now dead? How would they win this war if that was the case?

He grimly watched the procession. Harry seemed to truly be dead...but perhaps... Severus quickly extended his mind and used Legilimency to reach into Harry's mind. He found it to be quite alive. Harry brought the events of the last little while to the forefront of his mind for Severus to see. Severus exhaled deeply in relief, not even realizing he had been holding his breath. He readied himself for whatever useful thing he could do.

He was now behind the Death Eater entourage. Voldemort was calling to the castle for everyone to come and see the now dead Harry Potter. Severus watched as people began to appear from the interior of the school. He saw Minerva scream at the sight of Harry. Then Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were all yelling. Dudley, Petunia, and Black had emerged, hugging one another and crying out.

He listened as Voldemort spun his lies about Harry trying to flee. Leaving the shadows of the tree line, he snuck up behind the line of Death Eaters, awaiting his chance to attack. Soon it had come. Neville Longbottom had slashed the head off Voldemort's snake, Nagini, and defenders came at the Death Eaters from all sides.

Severus had been keeping his eyes on Harry the whole time, so he saw the young man disappear under the invisibility cloak. Severus shot hexes at the backs of the Death Eaters, who were busy fighting off the onslaught of centaurs, teachers, house-elves, and students that were attacking them.

Assuming that Harry was heading into Hogwarts, as that was where Voldemort had disappeared to, Severus quickly ran to the school. He cut down as many Death Eaters that he could as he headed for the castle. Entering the Entrance Hall, he saw Voldemort backing into the Great Hall. He could see no trace of Harry, but he knew he was here, getting close to Voldemort.

Severus entered the Hall and joined a fight against the nearest Death Eater, Rookwood, who happened to be dueling with Aberforth Dumbledore. Rodolphus Lestrage had just joined Rookwood, and they were battling Aberforth together. Severus and Aberforth both shot spells at the Death Eaters, who shielded themselves and shot their own back at them. Between Aberforth and Severus, Lestrage hit the floor, unconscious, and Rookwood was finally stunned into submission.

By that time, most of the other Death Eaters had also been subdued. Only Bellatrix Lestrage and Voldemort himself remained, each fighting three Order members at a time. Severus watched as Bellatrix shot a curse straight at Hermione. Her body flew into the wall near them and crumpled to the floor.

"No!" Severus yelled as he rushed to her side.

Stooping down to look at her, he noticed that she was still breathing. He closed his eyes in relief. Opening them quickly, he waved his wand over her, making sure that she

was all right. She opened her eyes groggily as he stooped over her.

"You are all right, Hermione," he told her as he extended his hand to help her up.

She gave him a beautiful smile that made his heart constrict within him.

"Thank you, Professor," she told him as she grasped his hand.

How he wished she were his Hermione, so he could shower her with kisses and hug her until she became a part of him, but she wasn't. He tempered his feelings and quickly helped her to a standing position, checking on her one more time before turning to the battle scene still going on in front of them.

Several things happened at once. Molly Weasley cried an expletive and felled Bellatrix Lestrange, and Voldemort, in his wrath, blasted Minerva, Horace, and Kingsley away from him and took aim at Molly. Harry tore the Invisibility cloak off of him and shielded Molly. He warned everyone that he had to take on Voldemort himself. Severus moved forward and took it upon himself to keep the crowd from becoming heroes. He aimed his wand at the onlookers, making sure no one came to Harry's aid.

"Severus, I thought you were dead, but it only seems that you have become the lackey of Harry Potter," Voldemort cried.

Severus shot a look of loathing at Voldemort. "I am ecstatic that I lived to see your demise, Voldemort!"

Voldemort's eyes grew wide. "You dare speak my name?"

"It holds no more power than any other name in this room. I no longer fear uttering it."

Voldemort eyed him furiously, almost forgetting that Potter was right in front of him. Finally he came to his senses.

"I will destroy you when I have finished Potter. It will be my finest victory to see your two broken bodies at my feet!"

Severus narrowed his eyes at him. "You don't even realize you've lost already."

"No!" Harry shouted. "This is between Riddle and me!"

Severus backed off immediately. "Of course, Harry. By all means he is yours to destroy," Severus encouraged and turned back to the crowd to keep them from Harry. However, he never let his guard down on Voldemort.

Voldemort turned to Harry and guffawed at him.

"You foolish child! You think you can defeat me? Lord Voldemort? Your silly parlor tricks are no match for the wizard that I am!"

At that moment Dumbledore raced in, his wand extended. Severus pointed his wand at Albus and motioned for him to lower his own. Albus stopped and put it down, knowing that this showdown was between Voldemort and Harry alone.

"What? The mighty Dumbledore is afraid to confront me?" Voldemort cried.

"He knows that I must be the one to kill you! Oh, yes, that's what the prophecy said, that neither could live while the other survives."

"And you think that you are to be the one to survive? You are truly an impudent little brat, aren't you, Potter?"

They raised their wands and began circling each other.

"All of your Horcruxes are destroyed now, Riddle," Harry cried.

Voldemort cried in fury at the use of his given name and the knowledge that his lifelines were no more.

"You have nothing left. When I kill you, you will remain dead forever. There will be no more returning of your shattered soul."

"But you cannot kill me! I am Lord Voldemort, the greatest wizard who ever lived!"

"No, the greatest wizard who ever lived would be Albus Dumbledore. You are just a cheap imitation, Riddle."

"You will show me respect and call me by my true name!" Voldemort demanded.

"I just did!" Harry shot back.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Voldemort cried and sent the curse at Harry.

Harry rolled forward, and the spell missed him completely. The two wizards' wands danced as they began to shoot spell after spell at one another.

"Is something wrong with your wand, Riddle? You don't seem to be able to shoot straight today," Harry baited.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed in fury as he shot another Killing Curse at Harry. Harry dodged it.

"That wand seems rather familiar, Riddle. It seems to be the stolen wand of Albus Dumbledore. Did you think you could only defeat me by using the wand of such a powerful wizard?"

"It is the Elder wand, you fool! Not that a mere boy like you would know the significance of it! I am invincible with it!"

"No one is invincible, Tommy," Harry told him as he shielded himself from a giant burst of flame that Voldemort had shot his way. His charm crackled and sputtered as the fire engulfed it and then disappeared, eliciting gasps from the crowd of onlookers.

"As a matter of fact, I do know about the Elder wand. Dumbledore explained the whole thing to me long before his wand was stolen. I'm surprised you didn't try to kill him, Tommy, but I guess you knew that was impossible. You're... too... weak!"

Severus was not fully familiar with this story, as he had been in the midst of recuperating when Dumbledore's wand had been stolen. All he knew was that someone had cast a deep sleep charm on the Headmaster and snuck into his chambers, brazenly taking the wand. Curiously, no harm had come to Dumbledore.

"I tried to kill him, but he must have known I was coming," Voldemort shrieked in fury. "He had done something to himself, so the Killing Curse just bounced off him!" Voldemort's face was livid, but suddenly, he calmed himself and was his normal gloating self. "No matter... I took possession of the wand, and I am now the rightful owner of it."

"Oh, yes, Tommy, he knew you were coming."

"Don't call me that!" Voldemort screamed.

A huge wave of water came from Voldemort's wand and crashed toward Harry. Harry quickly shot a spell at the water, turning it to steam. It quickly filled the room, blinding everyone, and then dissipated. More hexes were thrown about, each man dodging the other's onslaught. Voldemort transfigured some chairs into daggers and sent them racing towards Harry. Harry crossed his arms and cast a special shield that Severus had taught him. He seemed to be encased in a bubble as the daggers bounced off the shield. Harry dropped the shield as the last dagger fell to the floor and sent a swarm of bees at Voldemort. With a flourish of his wand, Voldemort had turned the bees into butterflies. They flitted around his head for a few seconds, making him look like a crazed flower child from the sixties, before flying off.

"Dumbledore planned on you coming," Harry explained as they continued circling one another and throwing hexes. "He wanted you to get the wand, because he knew it would be your downfall,"

For the first time Voldemort looked confused.

"That's right. Do you remember the night Professor Snape attempted to kill Dumbledore? When he pretended to try to kill him, I mean... setting himself up to be your right hand man and spy to the Order?"

Voldemort narrowed his eyes at Harry, looking furious.

"Yes, well, you missed out on an important fact. Dumbledore lost ownership of the wand that night."

"Voldemort's eyes snapped to Snape, and he sent the Killing Curse straight at the other man's chest. Severus had been keeping a close watch on him, expecting nothing less from the cowardly despot, so he reacted quickly. He rolled onto the floor while shooting a Scattering Spell at the group of people he was standing in front of. The crowd was thrown back before the curse hit any of them.

Severus rolled back to a standing position and took a stance against Voldemort, awaiting another attack.

"He's not the owner of the wand, Riddle," Harry said blandly.

Voldemort's attention was once again drawn to Harry.

"Severus didn't disarm Dumbledore, Draco Malfoy did. He was the true owner of the Elder wand."

Voldemort sneered in frustration, searching the crowd for a sign of the blonde haired boy who had just come out of hiding to fight against him in this battle. He could find him nowhere.

"But he no longer is the owner either," Harry went on as if nothing was amiss.

Voldemort looked at Harry in confusion again.

"You see, when Dumbledore awoke from his coma, he explained everything about the wand to me. He knew where Draco was because the Order was hiding him. We secretly met with him, and he and I duelled. I won. It was a fair match. We explained it away as a training exercise. Draco had no idea what was at stake. I was the stronger duelist. I think that the wand in your hand believes its allegiance to be with me now."

"Nonsense!" Voldemort cried.

In an instant Voldemort cried out the Killing Curse once again, and Harry simultaneously cried *Expelliarmus*. Before anyone knew what had happened, the Elder wand was sailing into Harry's hand, and Voldemort's Killing Curse had rebounded off Harry's Disarmament spell and shot into Voldemort's own body, sending him crashing to the ground.

Voldemort finally lay dead in a crumpled heap on the floor. Severus could hold the crowd back no longer as cheers rang out and they rushed to touch the Boy Who Lived. It took quite a while, but Severus finally made his way through the throng and was face to face with Harry. Dumbledore was giving Harry a hug as Severus approached. Harry pulled away from Albus as he caught sight of Severus. He gave him a huge hug.

"I wouldn't have been able to do it without your help," he confided to Severus.

"It was you who fought so bravely," Severus told him emotionally as they parted.

"Without your training I would have been killed within the first few seconds. You have saved my life numerous times, Professor. I owe you multiple life debts."

"I'll just think of it as life insurance," Severus joked with him. "You must never leave my side for the rest of my life."

Harry laughed. "Somehow I think you'll tire quickly of my...how would you put it...incessant babble?"

"No doubt," Severus said dryly.

oooOOOooo

Severus scanned the Great Hall. Most of the jubilation had fallen to a calm quiet. Many had come to the realization that everything was over and sat quietly with loved ones. Those who had lost family and friends were grouped around their deceased. Some cried, others stared off blankly into space while holding a now cold hand. Remus Lupin sat on the floor next to his dead wife, staring down at her, tears falling on her now serene face. Severus eyed the long row of honored dead. They had given the ultimate sacrifice for the cause. To Severus, even all he had done could not come close to the sacrifices these valiant fighters had given.

He moved to the Weasley family, who were surrounding Fred's body. He looked sadly down at the young man who'd had such great things ahead of him. He smiled ruefully, noticing that Fred had died, as in life, with a smirk on his face. He glanced up at the sad faces of the Weasley clan, noticing one was missing. In place of Ron, Harry was there, his arm supporting Ginny as she cried into his shoulder.

He moved on, leaving the Weasleys to their grief. He spied Petunia, Sirius, and Dudley seated on the floor against the wall. They were all hugging one another with Petunia in the middle, each of her men having a supportive arm around her. Severus nodded his head as he went by.

The Malfoys huddled in a corner. Draco's return had finally turned the tables for them. From Harry's memories, Severus had gleaned that Narcissa had saved Harry to look after her son. The couple had turned at the last minute and fought against their Death Eater friends. Severus knew it was all for Draco, or perhaps to avoid Azkaban. He was unsure whether they would be prosecuted or not. Lucius had been a Death Eater, true and true, up until the very end. Narcissa had been one too, except she protected the ones she cared about which were her son and Severus himself. The Malfoys' fate could go either way.

Suddenly, Severus took in a breath. His heart stopped within him. Ron and Hermione were sitting on the floor against the wall, kissing. Severus closed his eyes. Their relationship had started. He supposed that their being on the run had cemented the relationship as they relied on each other.

He took comfort in the fact that Hermione had said that it hadn't lasted long. In something like six months, she should be rid of Ron. That was, of course, if history followed what Hermione had said. She had told him that he had almost died from a mauling by Nagini. That had not happened. Certain things had changed. He only hoped that Hermione's relationship with Ron was not one of them. He chided himself for being so horrid. He should be happy that she was happy. Part of him was, of course, but he would be so much happier if she were not with Ronald Weasley.

A/N: Next up: Filler: a.k.a. What happens between now and when Hermione returns?

Well, not everyone died. Sorry about Fred. Unfortunately, not everything turns out as we would like it in war. At least Severus escaped the snake. Voldie's dead too, that's a plus. There's just this next chapter of in-between time and then Hermione's back! Wow, I can't believe she's finally coming back. It really seems like it's taken twenty-five years, doesn't it? (Oh, come on, you haven't been reading this story for that long!) Thank you, everybody. I appreciate your reading and reviews.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 of 46

The war is over, and Severus is going crazy.

Chapter 34

Severus was finally back teaching again. He sat at his desk, deep in thought. The new school year had begun, and most of the celebrations for war heroes had concluded. Severus had been honored with the Order of Merlin, First Class. He was proud of his work in the war. He had been able to thwart many of Voldemort's evil attempts, and his training of Harry had made it possible for him to defeat the Dark Lord with ease. Perhaps his life would become normal now that Voldemort was dead.

Although there had been many deaths caused by the war, there had also been many reasons to celebrate. There had been parades and parties galore for the war heroes, but the real celebrations came with the many couples who had chosen to marry. Many people had realized that time was short and happiness could escape them in tragedy. It seemed like every day in the *Prophet* there were at least five marriage announcements. Severus had attended several weddings himself, the most memorable being that of Sirius Black to Petunia Evans Dursley. Severus had sat in the audience next to Remus Lupin, of all people.

He glanced over at Lupin, who held his blue-haired baby on his lap and bounced him to keep him quiet.

"I never thought these words would ever come out of my mouth, Lupin," Severus said, "but blue hair seems to suit your child."

Remus glanced over at Severus and grinned to him. "Would you like to hold him?"

Severus was taken aback but nodded in agreement. He reached out and took the chubby baby. The boy looked at him and grinned, reached a hand out and grabbed his nose. Was this to happen with every baby he met? He heard Remus chuckle. Severus grinned at the baby as he let him play with his nose.

"You're a lot better with babies than I expected, Severus."

"I had plenty of experience when Harry was a baby," Severus confided.

Remus regarded him with surprise. "You knew Harry as a baby?"

"Petunia asked me to help her with her magic. We spent a year working together. I got to know Harry and Dudley quite well in that time."

"You never cease to amaze me, Severus," Remus commented.

Severus gave Lupin a sidelong glance. They had formed a civil relationship since Lupin had taught at Hogwarts. He was yet another hated Marauder who had become tolerable in his adulthood. Between his 'friendships' with Lupin and Black, Severus felt he was getting soft in his old age.

"Are you doing all right, Lupin?"

"Why can't you call me Remus, Severus?"

"I suppose some things will never change," Severus said absently.

"To answer your question, I am doing all right. I miss Tonks terribly, but I have concentrated on caring for Teddy. I find he makes me smile, even when I don't feel as if there's anything worth smiling about."

Severus looked to Lupin as baby Teddy grabbed more at his nose and giggled.

"I am sorry for your loss, Remus. I understand how it is to live without the one you love."

Remus looked at him sadly. "Thank you," he said softly. "I assume you will have the one you love with you again eventually." He glanced at Hermione. "I wish you all happiness when that happens. I, however, must now live without Nymphadora for a lifetime."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Finally brightening up, Remus added, "Now it wasn't so hard to use my first name, was it, Severus."

Severus gave him a slight smirk as he handed Teddy back to him. The baby started to complain and reach back to Severus. Severus looked at the child as if he had lost his mind.

"Whatever could that child want with me?"

"I think he wants your nose," Remus remarked.

Severus glared at him and took the baby back. Sure enough, the child's small fingers grasped his nose once again. He squealed in delight as his hair turned bright purple. Severus rolled his eyes and let the baby continue to play with his face as Lupin and he turned their attention to the ceremony, which was just starting.

As the vows had been exchanged, Severus had marveled at the couple. The war had tempered Black's demeanor, and of course, Petunia had turned her entire life around since that day long ago when he had shown up on her doorstep threatening her so she would take good care of Harry.

Severus came out of his daydreaming and glanced up from his desk at Harry now. He was working on the assigned potion, busily mashing red berries. Severus wondered when he would ask Ginny to marry him. He assumed that Harry would wait until they graduated.

The Golden Trio had decided to return to Hogwarts to finish their schooling. Draco Malfoy had been another returning student. Neville Longbottom had returned also as he had missed most of school the previous year because he was hiding from the Carrows in the Room of Requirement. No matter how Dumbledore had tried, the Carrows had wreaked havoc in the school. Albus had felt as helpless as he had when Umbridge had taken over, if not more so.

Severus looked over to Longbottom as he continued his musings, thinking of how Hermione had looked lovely at the wedding, wearing a dark blue silk dress that reached the ground in multiple flowing layers. Her arm had been tightly wrapped with Ron Weasley's. Severus sighed. It would seem his turn with her would never come. Snapping out of his daydreaming, he noted that Longbottom was doing something wrong.

"Mr. Longbottom, you need to mash those juniper berries, not slice them," Severus called out.

Neville looked down at what he was doing. "Oops!" he said and deposited the sliced berries into the trash. He got some more and went to work mashing them.

"Attention to detail, Mr. Longbottom," Severus instructed.

"Of course, sir," Neville said as he finished mashing the berries.

Placing them in his cauldron, he stirred the mixture until it turned a dark red shade. Severus rose and went over to inspect his work. He sniffed the potion and raised an eyebrow at Neville.

"Nicely done, Mr. Longbottom, despite your near accident."

"Thank you, sir," Neville said, smiling.

Severus looked at a few other cauldrons, stopping at Hermione's brew. Poking his head over her cauldron, he took a close look at the liquid and straightened himself up.

"Miss Granger, a word after class, please," Severus said and returned to his desk.

oooOOOooo

"I'll catch up with you guys," Hermione told Ron and Harry at the end of class. She tossed her hair back away from her face and waited for the classroom to empty. Quickly she went up to Severus' desk.

"Was there something wrong with my work, Professor?" she asked curiously.

"No, Miss Granger, excellent work as usual," Severus told her.

Severus continued, "I could use some help with brewing. I have much I need to brew for the infirmary alone. It keeps me from brewing other things that are important to me. I was wondering if you were interested in helping me."

Hermione's eyes widened. "You want me to help you brew?" she asked in amazement.

"I believe I just said that," Severus said giving her a half smile.

"Wow, I'd love to, Professor. When do you want to start?"

"Tonight. Come to the lab at six. I'll need you twice a week. Does that fit into your busy schedule?"

She nodded and blushed a bit. Severus felt his heart flutter.

"All right then, get along before you're late for class."

"Thanks, Professor!" She grinned, spun around, and left.

oooOOOooo

As Severus sat at dinner, he found it hard to keep his eyes off Hermione. She wasn't his Hermione, of course, but she looked just like her. He had succeeded in building a good friendship with her, and he was glad about it. He was also glad that she so readily had agreed to help him brew. They had been brewing together for several weeks now and had a good working relationship. He enjoyed teaching her small tricks of the Potioneer's trade. She was easy to work with. Her brilliant mind caught on to everything quickly. He felt good when she was close by.

His eyes dropped from her down to the table as he saw Ron put his arm around her. He found himself drawn back to the two of them as they cuddled each other and stole a quick kiss. He'd had to look back at them just as that had happened. Now his chest felt tight, and he had a desire to punch Ron Weasley. Stupid jealousy. It was eating him up inside watching their relationship grow stronger. He wanted to be the one with his arm around her, kissing her, having her look at him the way she was looking at Weasley. He sighed. He just had to keep telling himself that time would pass and they would be together again in the future.

"Severus, have you even heard a word I've said?" Minerva McGonagall huffed at him.

He looked at her blankly. "Oh, sorry, Minerva. I wandered off for a minute there."

She repeated her joke, and he burst out laughing, attracting the attention of a few students who grinned at him as he chortled.

"Thank you, Minerva," he said to her. "I needed a good laugh."

Minerva glanced over at the Gryffindor table and noted the closeness of Weasley and Granger.

"Severus, I wish there were something I could do."

Severus frowned. "There's nothing anyone can do, Minerva. Time just needs to pass."

Minerva placed a comforting hand over his.

"I remember her devotion to you, Severus. Her return will make up for everything, I'm sure."

Severus nodded. "Do you have anymore jokes?" he asked, trying to keep his mind off the topic at hand.

Minerva smiled and began telling another amusing story.

oooOOOooo

"Hi, Professor, would you like some company?"

Severus looked up to see Harry standing in the door of his classroom. He furrowed his brow at the young man.

"Surely you have more important things to do than spend your evening with your teacher, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "Life's been so hectic lately, I feel like we haven't had a chance to communicate since the war ended."

Severus motioned to the chair in front of his desk. "Have a seat," he offered.

Harry got comfortable. "Do you plan on teaching here for a while, Professor?"

Severus thought about it. "I'm not sure... probably for a few more years, yes. Are you still planning on becoming an Auror?"

Harry nodded his head. "Both Ron and I are. We're trying to convince Hermione to do it too, but she always seems a bit reluctant to agree."

"Maybe she doesn't want to be an Auror," Severus said simply.

"And given her future, she probably won't become one, will she?" Harry asked sagely.

Severus sighed. "Harry, I told you when you first found out about that, that I couldn't speak about it with you."

"Can't you just tell me when she'll leave? Will it be soon?"

Severus' jaw tightened. "Harry, I really can't tell you."

"She'll tell me when she comes back, right?" Harry asked tentatively. "I mean, we'll still be friends, right?"

Severus relaxed a bit. "You're worried that, in your future, Hermione and you won't be friends if you choose different career paths?"

Harry nodded.

Severus thinned his lips, thinking of what he could say.

"I assure you, your friendship will be intact. She actually missed you quite a bit while she was gone."

Harry brightened. "Really?"

"Really, now drop it."

Harry snorted. "Okay, okay. Getting things out of you is worse than pulling teeth!"

"I wasn't a spy all of those years for nothing, Harry."

Harry grinned at him.

oooOOooo

He watched as Hermione placed the last ingredient in the cauldron and stirred vigorously.

"Miss Granger, have you thought of becoming a Potions mistress?" he asked.

She glanced up at him in shock.

"Professor, I like Potions, but I could never be a Potions mistress!" she chuckled.

Severus walked over to her and leaned back against a table with his arms crossed in front of him.

"Why not?" he asked curiously.

She finished stirring and let the potion sit. Looking up at him, she said, "For one thing, I don't have the intuition for it."

"Pardon?"

"Take you for example. You just naturally know you should do something. I need to have everything written in front of me, or I mess myself up."

"I find, Miss Granger, that you only 'mess up' when you lack confidence in your abilities."

She looked at him curiously.

"Besides, it takes years of experience to have such an intuition. That's something you can develop."

She pondered his words while continuing to look at him.

"Think about it. The school year is almost over, and I would be happy to have you as an apprentice next year, if you choose to follow such a course."

She got excited. "You're offering me an apprenticeship?"

"Isn't that what I just said?" he deadpanned.

She laughed. It was like music to his ears.

"I accept," she said quickly.

He furrowed his brow. "I thought you said you weren't cut out to be a Potions mistress."

"But you wouldn't offer me the position if you didn't think I could do it! There must be something you see in me for you to offer such an opportunity. Besides, I would never turn down the opportunity to study more seriously with you, Professor Snape; you are an amazing teacher."

Severus blushed slightly. "Thank you, Miss Granger. That's probably enough kissing-up for one night. Why don't you head back to your dorm?"

"Okay," she said with a smile. She gathered up her bag and turned back to Severus. "Thank you again."

He watched her as she left.

Oh, if only I could tell you of our future, Hermione. But you're not my Hermione, are you? You continue to look like my love, but you are not. How I wish I could snap my

fingers and make the remaining years disappear. But, alas, I must wait longer. I am forever waiting, forever yearning for you beside me.

I never thought I'd make it this far, even, when you first left. Miracles do happen, and I have managed to last through all these years without you. Only three years left. But these years will be the hardest, I expect. The anticipation of your return will drive me to distraction.

Please, please, my love, come quickly.

oooOOOooo

About two years later:

Holding the stirrer with the snake head on it, Severus stirred his potion briskly in a figure-eight pattern. He had about four more minutes of stirring before it would be completed and he could put his stirring rod down. He looked up as Hermione burst into the room, a sour look on her face.

"Good Morning," he said deeply.

She glanced over to him and mumbled a good morning before going to the cabinet at the back of the room and extracting a cauldron. She walked over to the table next to him and banged the cauldron onto the table. She then stalked over to the bookshelf and extracted *Most Potente Potions* from it and slammed that down next to her cauldron. She rifled through the pages until she came to the potion she was to create. Running her finger down the ingredient list, she stalked over to the cabinet and began pulling ingredients off of the shelf in a furious manner. Those too were banged on the table.

"Hermione, would you please refrain from breaking my table with all of your banging?" Severus pleaded with her as he removed his stirrer from his concoction and left it to rest.

Hermione frowned and grumbled an apology. Taking her wand, she waved it over the cauldron and filled it with water. Pulling the vial of Essence of Heather off the table, she unstopped it and placed three drops into the water, stirring vigorously. She needed to stir it for two minutes and then add three more drops of the Heather, so she held the flask as she stirred the mixture. Her thoughts were not on her work, though, but on the events that had upset her that morning. She stared into the cauldron not really seeing anything and grew tenser as time passed. Her grip on the flask tightened and tightened until the vial shattered in her palm.

"Oh!" she cried.

Severus rushed to her side and grabbed her hand, examining it. It had several ugly cuts from the glass. He led her to an armchair near the bookshelf and sat her in it. Conjuring up a chair for himself, he began to examine her wound. With a few flourishes of his wand, the hand was completely healed.

Hermione looked up at him. "Thank you," she muttered and looked down again.

"Perhaps you should return home, Hermione. Your mind is evidently not on your work today."

"No!" she said through gritted teeth. "I will not let him win!"

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. "Let who win?" he asked.

"Ron! He will not intimidate me into returning home for the day."

"What happened now?" Severus asked.

Hermione gave him a reluctant look. "He came by this morning and accused me of cheating on him... again... with you of all people!"

Severus' heart clenched in his chest. There was only friendship between Hermione and him. Ron, however, was a jealous prat and accused her of cheating almost on a daily basis. He was dismayed, however, to hear her disdain for the possibility that Severus and she could possibly be together.

"Yes, of all people," Severus said caustically.

"Oh, Severus, that's not what I meant! Any woman would be lucky to have your attention, really," she said as she put her hand on his arm. "It's just that you're my employer. It's not like I'm sneaking out of the house to meet you in indiscreet places. I'm just coming to work. Why can't he understand that?"

Severus relaxed with her explanation. He put his hand over hers.

"How long are you going to put up with this, Hermione? Didn't he accuse you of bedding Harry last week?"

Hermione looked down in embarrassment.

"And he thinks anyone you even smile at must be shagging you."

Hermione opened her mouth to contest his claim, but remembered the argument Ron and she had only yesterday about her friendliness to a passerby. She pulled her hand away and folded her arms in front of her. Her eyes became misty.

"I don't know what else I can do to convince him that he's the only one I want."

A stab of pain shot through Severus' entire body, but he remained calm. "Hermione, he may be my friend, but Ron is being a jealous fool."

"It must be something I'm doing wrong. I must not be paying enough attention to him."

Anger welled up within Severus. He knew what it was like to be showered with her love. Weasley was a fool. He ignored her ovations and sat around dreaming up situations that didn't exist so he could belittle her. Now she was falling for his needy accusations and blaming herself.

"Hermione, this is not your fault. Don't even think like that."

"Then why doesn't he trust me?" she whined, tears falling from her eyes.

Severus would have left immediately and strangled Weasley right then and there, but he knew that would only make Hermione angry. She needed to work this out herself and see for herself that the relationship was going nowhere.

"Hermione, he's an idiot."

Hermione gave him a wan smile. "Well, you certainly aren't beating around the bush, are you?"

Severus smirked. "You need to concentrate on yourself. He has destroyed your self-esteem. You are an amazing witch, but cannot recognize it because of the way he makes you feel." Severus mulled over his next statement, deciding to plod forward anyway. "He's no good for you, Hermione. He's destroying you."

Hermione looked down to the ground. "What am I going to do?" she asked plaintively.

"I cannot tell you that. You must decide for yourself. Go home, or just go for a walk or something. You are no good here today. You'll blow up half the castle in the state you're in."

Hermione looked back at Severus and reached her hand out to his once again. She grasped it and held it. Severus felt a jolt as their hands touched.

"Thank you, Severus. You're a good friend. I have some Arithmancy exams I could grade. Perhaps I won't destroy the castle if I do something that mundane."

Smiling at him, she rose and left the Potions lab. Severus stared after her. A good friend? She didn't know the half of it! He wished she would come to her senses and break up with the Weasley idiot. Her constant relationship with Weasley was killing him. He thought of her every night and wondered how she could hold on to the relationship when Ron was an utter fool.

When he saw them together, his mood became sullen, especially if the couple was getting along. He couldn't stand her showing affection to Ron when he treated her like a possession. It seemed Ron and she fought more often than not these days. He knew that she was not the type to let herself be beaten up verbally, but she clung to the relationship.

Watching her flounder made him just want to take her in his arms and comfort her. He wanted to tell her she deserved better and show her what she could have, but he could not. He would not interfere with her relationship. She was in love with Weasley, even though the dolt was killing her slowly with his jealousy. Severus' heart broke every time he saw her like this. The boy was destroying her spirit... the spirit Severus had fallen in love with.

His heart clenched within him. Why had he offered her a Potions apprenticeship? He had thought at the time it would be nice to have her beside him on a daily basis, but it had only proven to remind him of his Hermione and how much he'd missed her. He should have just left the country as he originally had planned, but when the time had come to make such a decision, he'd found he hadn't been able to separate himself from her like that. Whether she'd be with him or not, he'd needed to be near her. He'd rather watch her with Ron than to not have seen her at all.

His Hermione was still a year away from her return. He didn't know if he could last that long. Of course, he had lasted twenty-four years, but it seemed as the time drew nearer, he became more and more anxious for her return.

Leaving the lab, he went to his bedroom. He waved his wand over his side table, unlocking the top drawer. A small box lay in it, waiting to be lifted out. He stared at it for a while. Finally, he reached in and pulled it out. He placed the box on the bed and knelt before it. Opening the lid, he scooped out the figure that was hidden away in it. His Hermione doll smiled up at him.

The little figure looked up and her beautiful smile grew wider. Tears formed in Severus' eyes. He wanted *that* woman back. He wanted her loving looks directed at him, not at a man who had no regard for her whatsoever.

Taking his finger, he stroked the figurine's hair. She began to speak to him.

"Severus, I will love you always," her beautiful voice said. "Thank you for seeing me as more than a know-it-all and for loving me as completely as you do. I don't know what I did to deserve you or your love, but I'm grateful for it. I want you to know that I cherish our time together and hold each moment deep in my heart. Always know that I am yours and will be forever."

Severus stared at the small figure for what seemed like hours. Tears that had been carefully held in check for years flowed down his cheeks.

"How are you to love me when you are still in love with Weasley?"

The doll frowned up at him and ran to his hand. She fell to her knees beside it and began to hug it ferociously. Severus watched through tear-filled eyes as the little doll soothed him with her small hugs. This was the woman he loved. She had traveled to the past and had fallen in love with him. That was his past. He remembered it clearly. No matter what was going on now, no matter whom Hermione Granger was in love with, some time in the near future, that relationship would end. She would fall in love with him and return, and they would be together once again. Severus sighed and dried his eyes. The little doll continued to hug the side of his hand tightly.

At last, he spoke. "I miss you, my love... more than you can imagine."

The little woman rose and rushed over to the edge of the bed near him, yanking at his robes when she'd gotten to them. He bent down close to her as she raced over to his cheek, kissing him lightly. He withdrew a bit and smiled down at his lovely, little doll.

"Things will be better with your return, Hermione. I just wish you would hurry up."

Severus stroked the doll's hair once again and listened to her message before boxing her up as he had done with the rest of his memories. He returned the box to its place in the drawer and locked it away again, along with his heart.

A/N: Next up: Answers! What's Lucius doing? What will Severus and Hermione do when they see each other? Why will Hermione go back to the past this time? Or will she? Bwahahaha!

Ahem... There, I'm back in control of myself.

I had to put that doll in one last time. She's such a comfort to Severus!

You can all do the happy dance now, because Hermione will be back with the next update. I do have to apologize for this long Ron infatuation. I should probably apologize to Severus too, poor guy.

Part III: Returning to You: Chapter 35

Chapter 35 of 46

The long-awaited return of Hermione is finally here.

Hermione appeared out of nowhere in the Headmaster's office.

"Gah!" cried Dumbledore as he jumped in his seat, visibly shaken.

He looked over and saw Hermione Granger with a Time-Turner in her fingers.

"I'm getting too old for these surprise visits," he muttered under his breath.

Hermione calmed her own nerves and spoke to Dumbledore.

"Headmaster, it's good to see you again. What have I missed?"

"It depends upon where you've been, my dear," he answered.

She looked at him curiously. "You sent me back to 1977, remember?"

Dumbledore looked her over. "Technically, I didn't send you anywhere. It would seem that the mission you spoke to me about at that time was a success. There was no need for that mission in this timeline."

Hermione stared at Dumbledore in shock. She sunk into the nearby chair, trying to grasp the difficult subject of time travel and its results.

"So, you never sent me away?"

"No," he said.

"Then there are two of me now?"

"Well... no," he said.

She narrowed her eyes and gave him a puzzled look.

"Your counterpart disappeared two days ago without a word to anyone," Dumbledore explained. "We have all been worried about her. It would seem when she reached the time when you left in your reality, she simply ceased to exist. I think the two of you could not exist together, being from the exact same time."

Hermione frowned, not pleased that she had killed herself off in the process of trying to change time. That was certainly something she hadn't planned on before.

"I feel like my head is about to explode," Hermione muttered as she rubbed her temples.

Albus rose from his desk and went over to his book shelf. He perused the titles for a while, passing over large, old tomes and thin, ragged texts. His fingers touched every one until they paused over a medium-sized one with a dark green binding. He pulled the book off the shelf. Hermione saw that the title was simply *Time Travel*. Albus sat back down and started looking through it while Hermione sat and pondered what she had learned so far.

"Ah!" Dumbledore cried finally.

"Ah?" Hermione repeated.

"Yes, here it is."

He began to read from the book.

"In cases where the subject has changed time drastically, there might be created two of the same subject. Theoretically, the two cannot exist at the same time, or in other words, two of the same subject, from the same time period, cannot exist together. The traveler, when returning to the present, would cause his other self to cease to exist. Some theorists claim that this phenomenon would occur at the time corresponding to the departure of the traveler into the past. Others argue that it would not be until the exact time that the traveler returns to the present that the other subject would disappear."

Dumbledore paused and looked to Hermione. "Well, it would seem that we've answered that mystery, hmm?" He smiled benevolently at her as he watched her sort everything out in her mind.

"So, that would mean I've only missed two days in my present?" she asked him finally.

"Well, it's not your present anymore, I would suspect. As there was no need to send you to the past, the present has obviously changed."

Hermione chewed on that for a minute. "Professor, I'm really confused."

Albus took a piece of parchment and a quill, placing the paper in front of him on the desk. He drew a straight line across the page.

"Pretend this is your timeline," he told Hermione. "You were happily traveling along it until my counterpart sent you back in time." He drew a small circle toward the right end of the line, then an arching line going backwards. He finally placed another circle farther back on the timeline.

"When you traveled back, your future was left up to chance. It's like you erased it."

He took the quill again and scribbled out the line that went forward from the small circle representing Hermione before time travel.

Hermione frowned. "So, not only did I destroy myself, but my entire future?"

Albus looked at her thoughtfully. "You could look at it that way, I suppose, but I'd rather see it as giving yourself and everyone else new possibilities." He went back to his drawing. "So, when you traveled back, it was like you were in a bubble of your own timeline, remembering everything that happened in it. But when you arrived in the past, it started a different time line." Dumbledore drew another line, jutting from her small circle in the past, running diagonally down from the original line. "You began to follow the new timeline."

Hermione watched him closely as he drew, trying to absorb everything he was explaining to her.

"Of course, we are all on this timeline now and are oblivious to anything that happened in your past. You, however, remember everything from your past, having taken that 'bubble' with you."

Hermione nodded.

"When you went back and started the new timeline, this other timeline ceased to exist." He drew a wavy line through the straight line between the two circles. "You remember it, but no one else does. In this new timeline, there was no reason to send you back in time, however, in your original timeline there was, so you went back, effectively erasing your original timeline. It's a paradox."

Hermione shook her head vigorously, trying to take it all in.

"Yes, my head is going to explode," she muttered as she listened to Dumbledore continue.

"So, the time between when you left the past," Dumbledore went on, "and appeared in this present has all been rewritten. What happened seems natural to us, but may come as quite a shock to you."

Her brain was quick enough to understand all that Dumbledore said, but it was still a lot to take in all at once.

Hermione stared at the drawing for a while before speaking again. "Well, why don't you tell me what's going on now. Am I still a teacher here?"

"Yes, you are the Arithmancy Professor, which was the same position you held when you arrived in the past, I believe."

She nodded.

"How long have I worked here?"

"Since you graduated, three years ago."

"That hasn't changed either. Is Malfoy still on a rampage to destroy Muggle-borns?"

"No. He is currently the Minister of Magic. As in your past, he usurped his power, taking control secretly. He is a power-hungry zealot, but he has made no mention of Muggle-borns. He wants to control the entire Wizarding population instead."

"So, he's still dangerous."

Dumbledore nodded, "Didn't you tell me, all of those years ago, that you had to confine yourself here in the castle for safety reasons?" he asked.

She nodded.

"You don't need to worry about that now. There are no orders for your death currently on the books."

"So, the plan only partially worked."

"It would seem so."

"Start from the beginning, please. I'm curious as to how things came about."

Dumbledore explained much to her. He told how Voldemort had been defeated by Harry. Hermione sat, listening incredulously, as he explained how Severus had taken part in the battle on their side and had not been attacked by Nagini. She sighed in relief to know that he had survived the war.

He then explained that almost a year before her reappearance, Lucius had taken over the Ministry. He had carefully cultivated friends there, so when Kingsley Shacklebolt had mysteriously disappeared, Lucius had been elected as Minister unanimously. Since then, he had enacted increasingly stricter laws. Regulations on the use of magic were not uncommon. It was now illegal to Apparate anywhere without Ministry approval first, and the Floo network was closely monitored.

The Ministry had become all powerful and had taxed the Wizarding world severely. Those who couldn't pay were subject to work colonies until their debt was paid. Unfortunately, they received no wages at the labor colonies, so unless a relative bailed them out, they could technically remain in the camps forever. Some of the prisoners had died from abuse and poor conditions already.

Anyone who broke even the smallest law had also been sentenced to the labor colonies. Sometimes false charges had been put upon a person because they had spoken against the Minister.

People had to be very careful to whom they spoke these days. They didn't want to disappear in the middle of the night. Supplies and groceries were not always readily available. Some of the poorer families were slowly starving. The Ministry turned a blind eye on this grave problem.

There was an underground resistance, led by the Order. There were small branches in all of Britain which had attempted to assassinate Malfoy several times, but all attempts had failed. Those who had been caught had been executed in the streets.

Hermione listened gravely to everything Albus described. She wasn't sure if she had changed anything for the better. At least in the history she remembered, everyone had enough food, and only the Muggle-borns lived in fear. Now it seemed like Lucius Malfoy had destroyed the Wizarding world completely.

She thought back to the young Lucius Malfoy, who had been upset by his father. He seemed to be a far cry from the megalomaniac that now ran their world. She looked down and sighed.

"Hermione, you did your best," Albus comforted. "Nothing can be predicted when you're messing with time."

She sat silently, feeling responsible for everything.

"It's not your fault. Besides, everyone is not affected. Most people go about their lives normally. It's only those who cannot pay their bills or complain about the leadership that have problems."

"But we have lost our freedoms," Hermione said simply.

"That's quite true, but it seems that there is always someone in our world trying to take away our freedoms. Fret not, Hermione, things will work out. The Order has a plan. Hopefully, this time it will work."

"What is it?"

"I will not discuss it with you today. Get yourself reacquainted with being in this time. There will be plenty of opportunities to discuss strategies."

Hermione mulled everything over and nodded at Albus. She hesitated before she spoke again.

"Is Severus still alive?" she asked with fear.

"Oh, yes," Albus said. "He has been the most worried about you of anybody. He thought perhaps you had been abducted and taken to a labor camp."

Hermione frowned. "Is that a possibility?"

"Yes, you have been quite vocal against Mr. Malfoy, but it is very unlikely. As I said, it is not unsafe for you to leave the school. In any case, you had no plans to leave before you disappeared."

"Does Severus hate me?" she asked with trepidation.

Albus gave her a fatherly look. "Of course not, Hermione. Go talk to him, see for yourself how he feels."

Hermione looked at Albus uncertainly. "Is he married?"

"No, he isn't married."

Hermione visibly exhaled.

"Go to him. As I said, he has been worried about you. He will be relieved to see that you are all right."

She rose from her chair and turned to go.

"Oh, and, Hermione?" Dumbledore continued.

She looked back at him.

"It's nice to have you back, finally."

She smiled at him and left. As she descended the many stairs to the dungeons, her heart fluttered. Classes were just dismissing, and the halls were filled with students. Some of them waved and said hi to her. She smiled and greeted them as she went.

The closer she got to Severus' classroom, the more she wanted to run in the opposite direction. She had just seen him a few minutes ago, but he had not seen her for twenty-five years. She feared he would react badly. She desperately hoped that he would not close himself off to her, like he did to everybody else.

Their parting moments before her return flashed through her mind.

"You will see me very soon," Severus whispered.

"You will not," Hermione said sadly.

She'd known in her heart that this was the end of them. How could he wait for her? There was too much time between then and their future reunion. As determined as he may have felt, she'd known that when she appeared in her time, their relationship would be over.

Hermione looked upon him again, hoping to sear his face into her memory. It would be the only thing that would console her when she returned.

Looking into his eyes, she saw such immense love in them. It took her breath away. Could it be possible that his love would last? A glimmer of hope flickered in her heart as a tear slid down her cheek. It was selfish, she knew, to want him to continue loving her. But she couldn't help it. Her life seemed empty without him. She truly didn't know how she would go on in the future without his love.

Severus touched her face again, seeming to memorize everything about it. She broke out of her reverie as he caressed her and kissed her lightly once more.

"You'd better go," he said finally and moved away.

She picked up the Time-Turner and took her wand. She glanced back up at the man she loved and gave him a brilliant smile.

"I love you," she told him and tapped the turner.

"I love you too," he replied as he watched the small instrument begin to spin wildly.

Hermione watched as everything faded to black. Her heart broke as Severus disappeared from her sight. As she sped through time, she desperately wished that he could still love her when she returned. She fiercely hoped that their reunion would be sweet and filled with the love they'd had for each other prior to her departure.

She came back to herself as she continued down, down, down to the dungeons. What if he didn't love her anymore? What would she do? Other than throwing herself off the top of the Astronomy Tower, she had no idea. So many things could have happened in the long stretch of time since their separation.

Snap out of it Hermione, she told herself. Even if he doesn't love you anymore, you'll be all right. You'll get over him eventually.

She steeled herself for whatever was to come and continued to his classroom. Finally, she approached the Potions room. The door stood open, and some students were trickling out of it. She waited on the side of the door, her heart pounding in her chest, until it seemed that everyone was gone. She peeked into the classroom and saw Severus speaking with a first-year student. Her heart leapt into her throat at the sight of him.

He looked so handsome in his usual black attire. He always looked so crisp and well put together. His cape couldn't hide how his robes fit his form so nicely. The hint of white from his collar and sleeve cuffs made him look so amazingly dashing. A great desire to run up to him and throw herself into his arms filled her.

She smiled to herself as she admired him. His moves were as graceful as ever. He put some of the ingredients the students had been using back on the shelves as he spoke to his student. She listened in on the conversation.

"Miss Clemmons, you are doing fine. Just because you exploded a cauldron last week does not mean you are a failure at Potions. Lots of people explode cauldrons."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him. He was being nice to a student who had exploded a cauldron. Had the world suddenly come to an end and she'd missed it?

"But, Professor Snape, it seems that no matter what I do, I can't brew anything right."

Severus put down the bottle he was going to put away and turned to the student.

"Portia, how long have you been studying Potions?"

"For a couple of months, sir."

"Do you think you can learn to do something as complex as potions in a few months?"

"No, sir, but everyone else seems to be getting it, why can't I?"

"You lack confidence, Miss Clemmons. If you would just believe in yourself, you would have no problems brewing whatsoever."

"No, I'm just not cut out for it, sir."

"You know Professor Granger, right?"

Hermione's eyes widened. Portia nodded.

"Believe it or not, she lacked confidence in herself as a student also. It wasn't until she realized she had the instinct to create things from her own head that she really began to excel in potions making."

Hermione listened as Severus comforted the girl and complimented her at the same time.

Portia looked at him skeptically. "I can't imagine Professor Granger ever lacking confidence, Professor Snape. She knows everything about everything."

"Yes, it's hard to believe," he said dryly. "But, Portia, I see the same abilities in you. You are young and inexperienced. Give yourself time, and have some confidence in yourself. Things will become easier."

"But what if they don't?"

"I'll tell you what, if things are still difficult in a month, we'll set up some tutoring sessions, hmm? How does that sound."

Portia beamed at him. "Thank you, Professor. I really appreciate it."

She turned and headed for the door. She noticed Hermione standing there and turned red as she passed by.

"Hello, Professor Granger," she mumbled as she quickly exited the classroom.

"Hello, Miss Clemmons," Hermione said.

oooOOOooo

Severus whipped around and stared at Hermione before walking to her. He came up close to her and looked her up and down. Hermione felt like cowering before him.

"Hermione, thank Merlin! Why did you leave without telling anybody where you were going? We were worried!"

"I... um..." she said.

Severus' hand reached out and grasped her arm. "You could have been attacked by Lucius' men. You need to be more careful!"

Hermione looked up at him and flashed a smile.

"Severus..."

Severus' grasp tightened on her arm. The way she looked at him and smiled, the way she said his name. It was as if his Hermione was standing there in front of him. He felt his heart break once again at her absence. He couldn't help but look to this Hermione with disappointment before he turned around and headed for his private brewing lab.

oooOOOooo

Hermione caught her breath. Why had he looked at her like that? Did he know it was her? Was he sorry she had returned? He *had* moved on, she just knew it. Twenty-five years was too long. How could he still love her after all of that time?

Hermione felt her heart clench in her chest and tears well up in her eyes. She had known all along that Severus and she could never be. But Hermione had been the one who had encouraged him to move on. Why did it hurt so much now to realize that he had? She mentally shook herself. Hermione Granger would not fall apart in front of this man whom she adored. She would take the truth and move on. Trying to be brave, she unobtrusively wiped her tears and put on a happy face.

"Well, come," Severus said hurriedly over his shoulder. "We don't have much time, and you need to start the Wolfsbane Potion so it will be ready for the end of the month."

"Oh, I can't do that by myself," she muttered.

Severus stopped and turned back around from the direction of the lab.

"Hermione, how many times have we had this conversation? You are a Potions mistress now. You are more than capable of brewing Wolfsbane by yourself for heaven's sake."

A Potions mistress? That was news.

Hermione realized that Severus had no idea it was her. Her hopes for their future together grew again. She tried to tell him who she was, but he hurried away before she could say a word. Following him into his lab, Hermione watched as Severus turned and regarded her slyly.

"You didn't go talk to Ron, did you? Whenever you do, you come back doubting your abilities."

"I do?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "Yes, you do," he said to her in exasperation. "He invariably says something that belittles you, and you spend days wondering if it's true. I assure you, whatever he told you is a bunch of bunk. Hermione, it's been six months since you broke up with him. When are you going to fully realize that he has treated you shabbily from the beginning and he's nothing but a prat?"

"Six months?" Hermione gasped. She hadn't been seeing Ron for years in the past she remembered.

"Yes, I know you were together for three years. I know you loved him at some point, but he is too much of a dullard to stimulate you. You need someone in your life that will appreciate you and not be jealous of every man who looks at you. I was happy to see you finally get some backbone and tell him where to go."

"Three years! How could I be so stupid?"

He looked over at her and smiled. "That's what I kept thinking."

Her eyes snapped to his. He was grinning at her slyly.

"I guess time travel took away some of my brain cells," she murmured, waiting for his reaction.

She saw shock in his face. "Did you just say time travel?" he asked warily.

"Yes."

"Time travel... as in 1977?" he asked, looking anxious.

"Yes, time travel, as in I told you not to wait for me."

oooOOOooo

Severus' eyes grew wide. Everything fell into place. The beautiful smile, the way she said his name, it *was* his Hermione. She had returned... finally! He looked her up and

down and rushed over to her. "Hermione? *My* Hermione?"

"Yes, *your* Hermione," she said with a little laugh.

He tentatively reached out and touched her face. He swept over it with his eyes, unable to believe that she truly stood before him... His Hermione. Looking and looking at her, feeling the soft skin of her cheek on his fingertips, he remembered how he'd reveled in touching her when they'd been together in the past. He'd longed for this moment for what seemed to be a lifetime, and now it was finally here.

"But you never left," he whispered.

"It was a time paradox," she explained. "Evidently, I changed the past enough to bypass a time loop altogether."

"I'd wondered if that would happen," Severus mused quietly while continuing to caress her face.

Coming back to the matter at hand, he stared intensely into Hermione's eyes. His hands settled on her waist, pulling her close. Lifting her up, he twirled her around in the air before setting her down again. His mouth came down upon hers, and he kissed her passionately. Severus felt a shiver run through her body as he pulled her closer and cradled her head in his hands while pressing his mouth against her lips. She slinked her arms around him and kissed him back.

Having Hermione pressed against him once again, Severus felt as if he were in heaven. His life was back. He kissed her with everything he had. Twenty-five years of longing was poured into that one kiss. Feeling her mouth pressing against his, shockwaves coursed throughout his body. She was here, and she was his again.

He kissed her as if she had never left. He kissed her as if she was the most precious thing on the Earth. He kissed her until he needed to breathe. Finally pulling away from her, he rested his forehead on hers.

"I have dreamt of this moment for twenty-five years," he whispered.

She smiled at him. "I was just hoping you didn't hate me after all of this time."

He pulled her close to him again. "I could never hate you, my love. It was thoughts of you that kept me going throughout the war."

She pulled his head to hers and kissed him again. He pressed against her, trying to take her into himself. He never wanted to let her go again. At long last, Severus drew away and looked at her. His hand shook as he caressed her cheek once more. His eyes were filled with rapture at her return. He looked at her and drank in the features he hadn't been able to touch for twenty-five years. His hand explored her face as if he had never seen it before.

Here she was, standing in front of him again, her eyes mirroring his image in them. He looked into those eyes and saw her adoration. She still wanted him, even though he was much older now. She still loved him. He could see it in her eyes.

"I was so scared you had moved on, Severus," Hermione muttered.

"Never... It seems that I have lived only for this day." Running his fingers through her hair, he continued. "How I have longed to have you with me, my love. These years have been torture without you."

Hermione closed her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Severus. I wish you had never had to go through that."

"Don't say that, Hermione. Look at who I would be now without you. You have given me everything."

"As have you, my love," Hermione agreed.

They kissed again, and it was as passionate as it had been twenty-five years before. Severus held her, never wanting to release her. He worshiped her mouth and tasted her sweet kisses. He had waited a lifetime for this moment, and he was not going to rush anything with her. He savored every second as their lips pressed against each other and their tongues danced together. Too soon, they were interrupted.

oooOOooo

"Hey, Severus, I wonder if I could ask..."

Severus and Hermione pulled apart and turned to the intruder. Harry Potter stood there gaping.

"Oy, were you two just kissing?" he asked stupidly.

Hermione smiled widely at him. She hadn't seen him in so long, and of course, the first thing out of his mouth was something dumb. She ran over and hugged him.

"Oh, Harry! I've missed you so much!" she cried.

"Hermione, you see me every day," he mumbled. "Stop trying to change the subject. When did you and Severus become an item?"

She pulled back and looked at Severus.

"Two minutes ago, so I would like it if you left us in peace for a minute," Severus snapped at him.

Harry laughed. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry I interrupted you. This is a school you know, and the door was open. Anybody could have walked in here and saw the two of you snogging. What kind of teacher conduct is that?" He chuckled at the two of them.

Hermione looked at him curiously. "You're not upset?"

Harry looked at her strangely. "Why would I be upset that my two best friends hooked up finally? I've been hoping you guys would do this for years now."

Hermione felt like she was going to faint. Had he said Severus was his best friend? She felt two strong arms supporting her as she swayed. Severus looked down at her with concern. She looked back at him and mouthed the words, *Best friends?* He gave her a thin smile and looked at Harry.

"I think Hermione is tired from her trip. She just got back. Perhaps we can continue this lovely conversation later?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure, I've got a Defense class to teach in a few minutes anyway. I'll see you around, Severus, Hermione." Looking at Hermione, he continued, "I'm glad you're back, Hermione, we were all worried. You shouldn't run off like that without telling anyone where you're going." He turned and walked off.

Hermione turned to Severus. "You two are best friends? How on Earth did that happen? And what happened to Ron and him? Harry teaches Defense against the Dark Arts now?"

"Those are all stories for later. I have a class to teach, and you are tired. You should go to your room and get some rest. I have a free period after that, I will see you then."

Hermione threw her arms around him. "Can I observe your class? Please? Then you won't have to hunt me down when it's over."

He kissed her, and then he kissed her again. "All right, but if you start to feel lightheaded again, you'll need to go lie down."

"Yes, sir," she said smiling.

They headed back into the classroom, which was still empty. "So, when did I become a Potions mistress?"

"You finished your studies almost a year ago." He answered.

She frowned. "How am I going to pull that one off?"

"I will teach you again."

She got closer to him as students started trickling into the room.

"Severus, I can't be a Potions mistress, I don't have that in me," she whispered anxiously.

"You were an amazing student the first time, I have no doubt you will exceed yourself this time."

"You taught me before?"

He nodded his head.

"I thought you never took apprentices."

He got close to her and whispered in her ear. "That was a different Severus Snape."

Shivers went down her spine as he whispered to her. She looked up at him searchingly and found him smiling at her openly. She raised an eyebrow at him and turned and took her place in the back of the class.

Soon the period began, and the third years set to work brewing their potions. She watched as Severus wandered around the classroom and gave hints and ideas here and there. There was no anger or malice in his tone. He was helpful to everyone, even to the children who seemed to be having the most difficulty.

Severus glanced back at Hermione often, as if he couldn't believe that she was really sitting in his classroom, waiting for him to finish so they could be together again. Hermione's heart leapt at his glances. He had waited for her, and she couldn't be more thrilled about that.

Hermione looked to the side and noticed two students in the back of the room, their heads together, whispering furiously. Severus had noticed too, and snuck up behind them. He took their heads and pushed them forward, almost dipping them into their cauldrons.

"This is a Potions class, not study hall," he griped at them.

Hermione smirked, remembering a similar situation between Severus, Ron, and Harry in her past. It seemed he still had no patience for disruption in his class. She thought back to his conversation with Portia Clemmons. He had been calm and encouraging. All things considered, this was certainly not the Severus Snape she had left behind. This was a caring teacher who wanted to see his students succeed. She marveled at him. He was more of the man she remembered from 1977 than he was of the man she remembered from the present. That excited her to no end.

A/N: Next up: Getting to know you... again.

I hope you all enjoyed that as much as I enjoyed writing it. Sorry to have killed off Hermione, but she will not be forgotten, nor will her experiences. That will be addressed in a future chapter. Were you surprised at Lucius' outcome?

I really appreciate all of your wonderful comments and the excitement you have shown for this story. And to those of you who don't review, I see you're out there and appreciate you just clicking and reading. Please enjoy this segment and don't forget to review.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 of 46

Hermione catches up a little.

Chapter 36

The class had filed out, and Severus had wandered back to Hermione. He was grinning broadly, something Hermione wasn't used to seeing on his older face. She got up and threw her arms around him, kissing him soundly. He put his hand in her hair and caressed it.

"Merlin, I've missed you, Hermione," he murmured in between kisses.

She pulled away and looked at him appreciatively.

"You've changed, Severus. You were a good teacher before, but now you are amazing."

He smiled again. "I was hoping you would approve."

"I'm a bit out of sorts, to be truthful," she admitted with a small chuckle.

"Come on, you have a lot of catching up to do. Let's go somewhere private to talk."

He led her to his room and opened the door for her. She entered and looked around curiously while smiling at the warmth she felt when she entered. The walls were made of grey stone. Hermione admired the large enchanted window that went the length of the side wall. It showed a beautiful view of the lake. The room was richly decorated in

forest green draperies. Two forest green couches faced each other in front of the fireplace, which was the main focus of the room. It had a mahogany mantel that had two carved snakes slithering up the sides. The fireplace was so massive that it took up a large amount of the far wall.

"I've never been in your apartment, Severus, it's beautiful," she remarked.

He arched an eyebrow at her. "Really, you've never been in here? I thought you used to help me brew."

"I did, but you never invited me into your room."

"I must have really been a fool, then," he observed.

She smiled as she settled on one of the couches. He sat down next to her and drew her to his side.

"I've tried really hard not to turn into the man you described me as, Hermione."

"You're nothing like him, Severus."

He visibly exhaled. "I was hoping you would say that, but part of me was afraid that you would see your old, snarky Potions professor when you looked at me. I figured you would not want to have anything to do with me then."

"Don't be silly. I will always want to have everything to do with you. I love you."

"Are you sure?" he asked hesitantly. "I'm not the young, dashing boy I used to be."

She smiled at him and looked into his eyes. "You're still that dashing boy to me. Perhaps you're a little older and wiser, but still very dashing."

"Hermione," he said and kissed her again.

After a moment, Hermione pulled back and studied him. She took her hand and caressed his face.

"You look younger," she told him.

"How can I look younger than seventeen?" he asked curiously as he chuckled.

"No, I mean you look younger than I remember you from this time." She drew a finger around his face. "You have fewer worry lines, you seem brighter somehow. Did the war go easier for you this time?"

He shook his head. "No, it was long and dangerous. As you explained all those years ago, Voldemort liked to torture me. A few months before the end of the war, my cover was blown and I was practically beaten to death. I was here at Hogwarts for a long time recuperating."

"I'm sorry, Severus. I wish I had been here with you."

"You were in a way. You were always in my mind, Hermione. Your counterpart and I were close, too, as you probably have gathered. You came to me in my mind while I was unconscious after the beating. If it hadn't been for you, I don't think I would have survived."

"I don't know what I would have done if you didn't survive," Hermione told him, her eyes filled with emotion.

"I survived to await your return," he said huskily and kissed her once again.

She pulled back after a minute of bliss with him. "So, why do you not seem as affected by all this?" Hermione asked curiously, running her finger around his face again.

"It's because of you, of course."

Hermione looked at him doubtfully.

"I am being serious, Hermione. As I said before, thoughts of you kept me going. They helped me to have a more positive outlook about my circumstances and helped me overcome the hardest parts."

Hermione gave him a small smile. "I'm glad I was able to help, even though I was unaware of it."

Hermione kissed him again, feeling fulfilled by the passion she felt from him.

"I thought I told you to forget about me," she murmured.

Severus kissed her cheek. "I was unable to do that. I have thought of you every day." He kissed her cheek again and slowly moved down to her neck, kissing her lightly. "Oh, I tried dating off and on, but no one could hold a candle to you. You don't realize just how amazing you are."

Hermione pulled away from him finally and gazed into his eyes. "I have a confession to make," she told him.

He raised an eyebrow to her.

"I have always been attracted to you, even before I traveled back in time."

"How could you ever be attracted to such a nasty individual?" Severus said with a scowl.

She smiled and caressed his face. "There was always a hint of the real you inside of him somewhere. Few people ever saw it, but I did. I was hoping my trip back would help you to be more of the man I had glimpsed deep within you before."

"I owe it all to you, Hermione. Everything I am is because of you."

She kissed his cheek. "Nonsense! I just told you about a possible future. You were the one who made sure it didn't happen."

His face was right next to hers as he spoke.

"Without your warnings I would be that man again. You saved me, Hermione. I will not soon forget that."

He kissed her softly, remembering their times together so long ago. He worshiped her. She was with him again finally. He never wanted to let her go. He wrapped himself around her and reveled in her closeness. After a long time, he pulled back and looked into her eyes.

"Hermione, I love you," he said softly.

"I love you so much, Severus," she answered.

"Then I am the luckiest man in the world."

They embraced while Hermione settled comfortably into his arms. Severus couldn't believe that she was here, and he was holding her. The weight of her absence had finally been lifted, and he was completely content. He reveled in her closeness... something he'd been bereft of for so long now. He felt her snuggle closer to him as elation filled him. The endless wait for her was finally over. They could finally live the life he'd hoped for. Hermione still loved him, even though he wasn't the young man she'd fallen for. His heart filled with joy at the thought of having her with him again, this time forever.

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Sometime later, Severus squeezed her for what seemed the hundredth time. He just couldn't believe she was actually there. Thoughts of Hermione growing up before him filled his mind.

"I must admit, Hermione, you were quite the little hellion during your school days."

Hermione laughed. "I guess you found out about me setting your robes on fire."

Severus looked at her quizzically.

"Or maybe not," she said, looking embarrassed.

"What are you talking about?" he asked her.

"In my first year... at the Quidditch Match. You were trying to save Harry from falling off his broom, but we thought you were trying to kill him, so I set your robes aflame to distract you."

Severus' eyes narrowed. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I noticed Quirrel casting the spell and bumped into him to distract him before anything dangerous could happen."

"Okay, then, it never happened," Hermione said with a wave of her hand. "Forget I said anything about it. I never set your robes on fire. Nope, it wasn't me!"

"That really happened in your reality?"

Hermione blushed furiously. "Yes, and I've been sorry about it ever since."

"It seems you were even worse than your counterpart, she only tried to steal my stores and lie to me about her Time-Turner. She was very sneaky."

"Well, I stole your stores too, but I don't know what you're talking about with the Time-Turner."

"You are truly a troublemaker in any timeline, Hermione Granger," Severus said with a smirk.

Hermione saddened as she looked into Severus' eyes. "How did you do it, Severus? How did you stand watching me all the time and not saying anything about us? I think I would have died a little bit every day had I had to do that."

Severus tightened his arms around her. "It was not easy. I will not try and make it seem so, but it was comforting to have you nearby. After living so many years without you, it was almost a relief to see you again, even if you were so young."

Hermione sat quietly and listened as Severus continued.

"I must say, Hermione, we really were good friends. You confided in me, and I did the same to a point. I never spoke to you about your time travel. I was unsure if that would tamper with the future."

"I feel terrible, Severus, I killed her off with my return."

"What do you mean?"

"That's why she's gone. Albus said there couldn't be two of me from the same time. She just ceased to exist. I killed her."

Severus looked sadly at Hermione. "She's not dead, love, she's right in here with you." He touched her chest. "You both led similar lives. Most people won't even know you are a different woman."

"I know. I just didn't realize what would happen when I returned. It seems rather a waste."

"I am sorry that she will no longer be here, but I would never trade her for you, my love."

Hermione smiled at Severus. "Why did I stay with Ron for so long? I only dated him six months before."

"You believe in miracles, don't you?"

She nodded.

"So did your counterpart. She thought that one day she would wake up and all of the horrid qualities of Mr. Weasley would right themselves. She hoped that then he would appreciate her and treat her well. Finally, she came to her senses and gave up. I can't tell you how relieved I was when she decided to break it off with him. He was rude, controlling, and jealous. He was jealous of Harry and of me. It became so bad that neither Harry nor I speak to him anymore."

Hermione snuggled closer into Severus and laid her head on his chest. "That's awful. Ron used to be jealous before too, but he was never jealous of Harry. Well, except maybe once, but it never interfered with their friendship. He wasn't that stupid. Besides, we all had gotten beyond that a long time ago. We were still good friends. It's hard for me to imagine not having him as a friend anymore."

"Well, he has ruined all our friendships with his actions this time around. I can't speak for Harry, but I am not willing to forgive him enough to be friends again."

"So, how did you become best friends with Harry Potter? You couldn't stand the sight of him before."

"I fostered the friendship."

Hermione's eyes grew wide, but Severus couldn't see them.

"I don't seem to have any lasting hatred for James Potter. It doesn't matter to me that he married Lily because I am no longer in love with her and haven't been for over twenty-five years. I certainly don't like the man, but his son is not to blame for his nastiness."

Hermione smiled.

Severus continued. "I approached him in his first year and offered to teach him some defensive spells to help prepare him for his future. He readily agreed. Our friendship started from there. We have kept an eye out for each other, and I have saved his life on several occasions."

Hermione gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'm glad to see the two of you getting along finally. You can't imagine how exasperating it is to have your best friend constantly belittling, badmouthing, and suspecting someone, even after you know he's on our side."

"Was it that bad?"

"It was much worse, actually, not that he didn't have reason. You hated him as much as he hated you, and you were never afraid to show it."

Severus frowned, sad to know that at some other time his best friend and he were mortal enemies.

"Well, I'm glad that isn't the case now," he said grimly.

"Me too. You can't imagine how ecstatic that makes me. Hearing Harry is happy for us just about made me jump up and down for joy. I was expecting he would give me the silent treatment for months when he found out."

"It seemed you affected more than just me with your little time trip."

"Why is Harry working here, anyway? He was an Auror when I left."

"He's still an Auror, Hermione. He just can't stand working under a Ministry directed by Lucius Malfoy. He's taken an extended leave since Malfoy took power and has been working here ever since. He participates in some Auror work, but has distanced himself from the Ministry as much as possible."

Hermione pulled back and looked seriously at Severus. "Dumbledore explained what Lucius is doing. Have you spoken to him? What is he thinking?"

"He is thinking that he is all-powerful. He loves being showered with money and objects. He cares nothing for the people and seeks to silence any naysayer within our world. I have not gone near him for six months as the last time we spoke we became so irate that we almost blasted each other through the wall."

"Are you still friends, at least, were you before that episode?"

"Yes, and no. We have not been very close for several years since the war. We have been civil to one another though. I suspect we could be civil again, but I have no desire to speak with him."

"He has always given me the creeps," Hermione huffed, "smiling at people with that sneer of a smile, going around making fun of people poorer than he is, trying to kill us at the Ministry in my fifth year."

"He tried to kill you then?"

"He tried to kill all of us when Harry took the prophecy. He ran the raid. Did it happen the same way in this time?"

"No, he wasn't involved. Bellatrix ran the raid. She almost killed Sirius."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Sirius Black is still alive?" she said incredulously.

Severus regarded her curiously. "I take it he didn't survive the attack in your reality?"

"She killed him! He fell through the veil." She thought for a moment. "Harry! He never had to deal with Sirius' death!"

"Neville petrified her before she was able to send the killing curse to Black. He is now married to Petunia Dursley."

Hermione's face fell. "P... Petunia D... Dursley?"

Severus nodded.

"How?" was the only word that she could form.

Severus explained about the house swapping and the friendship that had grown between Sirius and Petunia.

"Wait a minute. Petunia is a witch?"

"Of course, so is Dudley. They both had magic bloom late for them."

"I'm feeling a little light headed," Hermione mumbled, rubbing her forehead with her hand.

Severus pulled her to him. "So, this never happened in your time?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Then I can assume that Dudley and Susan Bones never married?"

"What?"

"Dudley Dursley married Susan Bones about two years ago. They're expecting their first child."

"How can that be?" Hermione asked. "How could either of those horrid Dursleys be wizards?"

"Maybe you should tell me what you do know about Petunia Dursley from your time, and I'll try to fill in the blanks," he urged her.

"She's a witch all right, but not the magical kind. She treated Harry horribly! He was glad to leave his Aunt and Uncle's home. How did she wind up married to Sirius Black?"

Severus explained the whole thing to Hermione as she sat in stunned silence. Finally she shook her head. "And I thought you had changed a lot," she murmured.

Severus grinned at her and then kissed her forehead. "It seems you have caused quite the domino effect with your actions, my love."

"Who would have thought?" Hermione mused. "Petunia Black... unbelievable."

Getting back to the subject at hand, she looked at Severus. "What are we going to do about Lucius then? We can't just let this go on, people are starving and dying. There must be some way to take him down."

"He surrounds himself with loyal minions, much like Voldemort did. He has made himself untouchable."

Hermione looked at him skeptically. "No one is untouchable. There must be a chink in his armor. We just have to find it."

"Dumbledore already has. It's his home. He is still heavily guarded there, but if there is a chance to get to him, it will be there. The tricky thing is that when we take him out, we need to take his undersecretary out too. They are both despots. If the undersecretary takes over the Ministry, nothing will change. We'll also need to take out his close allies, or we'll have a revolution on our hands."

Hermione thought about what Severus was saying. "Albus said there was a plan being formed, but he wouldn't go into it."

"It involves attacking the house. We haven't gotten all of the details sorted yet."

"Well, what do you have so far?"

Severus smiled at her enthusiasm. Looking at her, he could control himself no more and closed in on her beautiful mouth. His kiss was tender and loving. He felt her shudder underneath him and reveled in his ability to still make her quake. He had worried that his older self would not be as attractive to her, but that didn't seem to be the case at all. If anything, she seemed to be reacting to him more. Severus hadn't felt this happy in a long time. It felt as if the world had stopped, and nothing mattered but the two of them. Hermione's hand closed in around his neck, and she pulled him harder into her.

"We will attack the home" Severus managed to say in between her kisses, "during a party that Lucius is throwing," he placed a strategic kiss on her neck, "for his loyal friends." She kissed his mouth. "Everyone we need to attack," she kissed him again, "will be in one place."

Hermione continued her onslaught, pausing only to ask, "Who will take over the Ministry?"

Severus reluctantly withdrew from her heavenly mouth.

"You're jumping the gun a bit aren't you?" he queried.

Hermione gave him a look of longing before getting serious about what they were discussing.

"You need to have the plan fully in place before you begin it, Severus, you taught me that."

"You're as clever as ever, my dear. Albus will probably run the Ministry. He will be accepted eagerly."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "When is this party?"

"In a month's time."

"So, we have about a month to plan an attack."

"We?"

She looked at him sternly. "Yes, we... I was stuck in this castle for a year unable to do anything about anything. I'm not just going to sit back and let everybody else do the work."

Severus put his hands up in surrender. "Okay, okay. You win. You are the most stubborn woman I have ever met."

She frowned at him. "Thank you, I think," she retorted.

He smiled and pulled her to him again. Gathering her into his arms, he held her tightly.

"I am so glad you're finally here, Hermione," he whispered to her.

"I will never leave you again, Severus," she replied before his lips covered hers.

A/N: Next up: Harry's thoughts on the matter.

It's nice to have Hermione back, isn't it? Even though she's a bit befuddled, she's eager as ever to fight for the cause. Thanks, everyone, for your support.

Chapter 37

Chapter 37 of 46

Hermione and Harry catch up. She finds a weekly activity of Severus' to be most unexpected.

Chapter 37

Harry and Hermione sat in the Defense classroom, talking together. Harry lounged behind his desk while Hermione sat cross-legged atop the end of it. Hermione was diligently outlining everything that had happened to her since her trip to the past had begun.

"I actually knew that you had traveled back, Hermione. I found out in our fifth year when I was having Occlumency lessons. I saw a memory in Severus' head about you being his teacher. He was really closed-mouthed about it."

"You knew I went back in time? Did you tell me?"

"Severus swore me to secrecy. He didn't want to mess with your future, or to scare you for that matter."

Hermione thought on that. "I suppose it would be quite disconcerting to know ahead of time that I would go to the past."

"That was his theory. So, Severus was a bear in your reality?" Harry asked, changing the subject.

Hermione nodded. "He was awful. He constantly berated everybody so much that he scared every student in the school. They would run away from him if they met him in the halls. He hated you, Harry. He really went out of his way to make your life miserable. It seemed that he berated you at every possible opportunity. Need I go on?"

"Wow!" Harry exclaimed. "I guess I owe you a great deal of thanks for doing what you did. I can't imagine not having Severus as a friend."

"Nor I," Hermione said absently.

Harry got a curious look on his face. "You two were a couple back then, weren't you?"

Hermione blushed and nodded. "Yes! I didn't want to come back to the here and now, to be honest with you. Unfortunately, I didn't have a choice. Voldemort had threatened to kill me. I would have wound up coming back eventually anyway, whether my life was in danger or not."

"No wonder Severus always cultivated your talents."

Hermione gave him a quizzical look.

"He always encouraged you. Mostly secretly because he didn't want the Slytherins to think he was favoring the Muggle-born friend of Harry Potter, but he always let you know how capable you were. He worked with all of us to prepare us for the confrontation with Voldemort. He even suggested that you become a Potions mistress."

Hermione was amazed. She wondered how she would have been different if she had received encouragement from him in her reality.

"Was I ever attracted to him?" she asked.

Harry looked at her seriously. "You had a crush on him. You told me about it a couple of months ago. I guess you had been attracted to him for years, but with the age difference and all, you decided to take a chance on Ron instead. I advised you to tell him, but you had only broken up with Ron about six months ago. I think you were worried that Severus wouldn't want a relationship with you. Ron really messed your head up."

Hermione felt a glow inside of her at the thought that she had loved Severus in this timeline also. She smiled at the thought of it, but wished her counterpart had been a little more forward. It probably would have made Severus happy to see her affection for him. Her mind switched away from that topic and back to Ron.

"Harry, what's going on with Ron? You don't even speak to him anymore?"

"I don't know what he was like in your past, but he's a right-awful git here." Harry said in annoyance.

"Severus said he was so jealous of you and him that your friendships are over."

Harry nodded. "I won't go see him, whether he's my brother-in-law or not. First of all, he's full of himself. He's playing for the Cannons. The attention has made his head swell so big that it's impossible to have a normal conversation with him. Then, while you guys were dating he would constantly yell at you for spending time with me. It was even worse with Severus. He hated the fact that you had to spend so much time brewing with him. It was totally innocent, but he thought you both were having a torrid affair."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You know, the reason I broke up with Ron in my timeline was because of his jealousy, but he never went as far as he seems to have done in this timeline."

"Hermione, he was verbally abusive to you almost on a daily basis. Both Severus and I urged you to break it off with him and find someone who would appreciate you, but you held on to hope for a long time. Finally, after what seemed like the thousandth accusation, you finally got disgusted with him and broke it off. I'm sure he still thinks you'll run back to him eventually. He's just that full of himself."

"I'm kind of embarrassed that my counterpart would let herself be walked on for so long," Hermione said gruffly.

"I don't know why you stayed with him, Hermione, but I don't fault you for it. You only wanted the best for everybody."

Hermione nodded absently.

"In any case, I'm glad you're back. We were all worried when you disappeared suddenly. I'm glad you're okay and that there weren't any real problems."

"It feels odd that a whole different 'me' with different experiences just ceased to exist like that. I'm not quite sure what to think about it."

"Hermione, you're right here. She's part of you, you're part of her. She didn't really disappear, she got absorbed in time."

"But her experiences are gone."

"There's nothing you can really do about that. You have your own experiences to draw from. It seems like the two of you led pretty similar lives from what you've told me. There are just the discrepancies with you becoming a Potions mistress and staying with Ron for so long."

Hermione nodded. "Oh, well, there's no use obsessing about it. It's not like I can pluck her back into existence. That's probably a good thing. Can you imagine what I'd say to myself if I was confronted with her?" She began to laugh.

"Hi there, I'm you, but from a different reality," Hermione said in a high pitched voice. "I'm in love with your friend, Severus, and you were a fool to hang on to Ron for so long. By the way, how could you have been so stupid?"

"I think you might hex yourself if you said all that," Harry said with a giggle.

They both laughed at the thought of such a conversation and its outcome.

"Oh, I'd better get going," Hermione said. "I have a lot of catching up to do for my classes."

She went over to Harry and gave him a hug. "In any case, I am glad to see you again. I missed you terribly while I was in the past. Your father just isn't the same."

Harry nodded. He had long accepted the fact that his dad had been quite the git in his youth. He still had wished that James Potter had lived long enough for Harry to know and remember him. What he had seen of him through the Resurrection stone had made him proud to be his son again.

"Why don't you join Severus and me for dinner tonight?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, didn't Severus tell you? It's teacher's night out," Harry informed her.

"Teacher's night out?"

"Yeah, we all go down to Hogsmeade and have some drinks at The Three Broomsticks. There are seven of us regulars, Ginny and me, you, Severus, Hagrid, Neville, and Hannah. Three others come on occasion, too, Dumbledore, McGonagall and Flitwick."

"Severus goes out weekly with a bunch of you and has a good time?" Hermione asked skeptically.

Harry nodded. "Yep, he suggested we start the group soon after the war. It's been going strong ever since."

"He suggested it?" Hermione cried.

"Yes, he did," Harry said with a look of puzzlement. "Is that something that the other Severus wouldn't do?"

Hermione laughed hard. "The other Severus was as close to a recluse as you could get! He barely tolerated conversation with his colleagues around the dinner table, let alone him being seen going out with them on a weekly basis!"

Hermione shook her head. Would she ever be able to adjust to this different Severus Snape? He never ceased to amaze her.

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Later that night, the group sat in the Three Broomsticks. They all sipped away at their drinks and shared some appetizers. Everyone chattered amongst themselves, and there was a lot of laughter at the table. After chatting and laughing for a while, Severus cleared his throat to get the group's attention.

"I wanted to let you all know before the rumor mill begins cranking out lies, that Hermione and I are now dating."

The table sat in shocked silence except for Harry and Dumbledore. The former was grinning broadly at them while Dumbledore's eyes twinkled furiously. Minerva, who was sitting to Hermione's left, was looking at them curiously with a glint in her eye. All of a sudden everyone began talking at once. Congratulations were extended, questions were asked. None of the party seemed to be able to stop chattering about the newest event.

"That's great, you guys," Neville congratulated them. "It's just been a matter of time," he continued. "We all have seen it coming for months now."

Hermione blushed. *Oh, if only he knew the truth!*

Albus piped in with a smile, "Oh, this relationship has been long in the making."

Hermione smiled at him and then looked at Severus. "That's for sure," she agreed.

The group settled into quieter conversation as Minerva leaned over to Hermione.

"That was a sudden announcement, Hermione. Is there something you have forgotten to tell me?"

Hermione smiled at Minerva. "It's not that I've forgotten, Minerva. It's only that I have just gotten back this afternoon. The only person I've had time to visit, other than Albus and Severus, is Harry."

Minerva smiled and grasped Hermione's hand.

"I'm glad you're back, Hermione, Severus has been lost without you."

Anyone listening to their conversation would think that they were speaking of Hermione's two day 'trip,' but the two women knew full well to what they were referring.

"Minerva, I can't tell you how wonderful it is to be back. It seemed like I was gone for years."

Minerva laughed at her and squeezed her hand. "I assured Severus over and over again that things would be right when you returned."

Hermione looked sadly at Minerva. "I wish I could have come back sooner."

Minerva patted her hand. "Now, now, Hermione, there was nothing you could do about that. Things weren't easy, but Severus survived." She reassured Hermione quietly, so only the two of them could hear. "Honestly, I haven't seen him looking this happy since before you left. He looks as if he's about to dance on the table."

Hermione glanced over at Severus and watched him as he chatted with Neville. He did seem completely carefree. He smiled as he spoke and cast small glances at her when Neville was saying something. She grinned at him and his eyes shone with love toward her. Her heart fluttered at his glance. Boy, did she have it bad for him!

"Well, we've got a little news of our own," Harry piped in.

Everyone turned their attention to him. He glanced over at Ginny.

"Do you want to tell them?" he asked his wife.

"No, you go ahead," she said blushing furiously.

Harry looked back to the group. "We are going to have a baby."

More chatter and congratulations came. Finally the table quieted down a little. Severus rolled his eyes at Harry.

"Please tell me he isn't going to look like you, Harry. I would hate to have the poor boy cursed with your face for the rest of his life."

"Look who's talking?" Harry quipped. "The bat of the dungeons himself."

Hermione gaped at Harry and then burst into fits of giggles. She felt Severus' arm go around her as his mouth came close to her ear.

"He's been calling me that for years. He has no clue as to its significance, but I find it hilarious." Severus whispered into her ear.

Harry looked at them curiously as Hermione started laughing even harder. *She never felt my nickname for Severus was that funny before*, Harry mused. Then he remembered that this wasn't the Hermione from before. He would need to ask her about her reaction privately.

Neville eyed Hermione also. He'd never heard her laugh so hard at Harry's little 'term of endearment' for Severus either. As a matter of fact, she usually rolled her eyes and glared at Harry whenever he'd said that before.

"Are you all right, Hermione?" he asked.

Hermione fought to maintain some semblance of propriety, but couldn't help herself. Her guffaws only became louder as she hid her face in her hands. Pictures of a different Neville were popping into her head. In those memories, the young man referred to Severus as 'bat of the dungeons' repeatedly. The contrast between his sneers then and his innocent face now were just too much for her. She shook her head as the laughter continued to gush from her.

"It's an inside joke," Severus drawled with a look of boredom.

Neville looked as if he was about to say something else, but Severus interrupted what was surely to be a question that would be hard to answer.

"Well," Severus continued quickly as Hermione finally controlled her laughing fit. "With Ginny for a mother, the baby is at least likely to have some common sense. Perhaps he'll actually be able to use a wand correctly."

"Seeing that you taught me everything I know, that's not saying much for your wand skills either, Severus," Harry shot back, proud that he had one upped his friend.

Severus grinned at him as Hermione watched the banter. Never in a million years would she have ever pictured herself at this table with Severus and Harry shooting barbs at each other in a friendly way. Even more of a surprise was that Neville was not cowering from Severus, afraid he would be called something terrible. Everyone got along famously, and she couldn't be happier about it.

oooOOOooo

Severus' arm rested lightly on Hermione's shoulder as they walked slowly back from Hogsmeade. They'd been the last to leave the pub. The couple had stayed late until Harry and Ginny had Apparated back to their home. The Potters had refurbished Grimmauld Place, and Harry spent his nights there, coming back to Hogwarts by Floo every morning.

Hermione tilted her head until it rested against Severus' chest. She breathed in the scent of his cologne and marveled once again that she was with him.

"Did you have fun tonight, love?" Severus asked as they slowly meandered their way back to Hogwarts.

"Mmm," she mumbled.

Severus squeezed her shoulder. "You must be tired. It's been a long day."

Hermione picked her hand up and rubbed Severus' chest. "It's been wonderful, Severus. Just being with you again has made me so happy."

Severus stopped and turned to Hermione. She looked up at him, and Severus caught sight of a chain around her neck, descending underneath her robes. He reached down and fished the necklace out from its hiding place. The half-heart he'd given her so long ago shone brightly up at him. He smiled.

"You still wear this?" he asked. His voice seemed to be husky.

"Of course I do, Severus. It's my most cherished possession."

Severus reached up and pulled his own necklace from beneath his robes. Hermione's eyes grew wide. He grasped the heart and took hers in his other hand. He brought the two together again, as they'd been so very long ago.

"One mind, one heart," he whispered.

"Forever," Hermione added, her own voice nearly breaking.

Severus' eyes moved to meet hers. "Now that you're back, Hermione, I will never let you go again."

"I will never give you a chance to, Severus." Her lips curled into a small smirk. "I will never leave your side."

"Is that a promise?" Severus asked with his own smirk.

"Yes, my love. You are stuck with me."

"Thank Merlin!"

Severus pulled her to him then. His hand cradled her head as his lips sought hers. Her touch as she drew his face in sent shivers throughout Severus' body. Waiting for his Hermione had been excruciating, but it had been oh, so worth it just to have her here now, showering him with her love. His life was here once again, and he finally felt complete.

A/N: Next up: What did I do again? (a.k.a.: a trip down memory lane.)

There were quite a few questions about who the Undersecretary was in the last chapter. Thankfully, as you now know, it's not Ron! I don't even think he would be that much of a jerk!

The Undersecretary is someone we don't know personally. He was a Voldemort supporter, but never became a DE and kept his activities very secret, thus escaping punishment.

Major thanks to Lilith Kayden for her beta work. I definitely appreciate your wonderful suggestions!

Chapter 38

Chapter 38 of 46

Hermione asks to see what she's missed.

Disclaimer: These characters are not mine. Some of the plot in this chapter is quoted verbatim from the Harry Potter books and movies. All hail J.K. Rowling and her awesomeness!

Chapter 38

Hermione entered Severus' classroom the next day, deep in thought. Severus was seated at his desk, reading through and marking some essays that the fourth-years had handed in. He glanced up as Hermione entered the room. His heart leapt within him as he realized once again that she was here, finally... his Hermione. If he hadn't been so austere, he would be leaping through the halls right now rejoicing at her return.

Hermione came up to him and embraced him from behind. He leaned back in his chair and enjoyed her loving embrace.

"Can I ask a favor of you, Severus?" Hermione asked him.

"Of course."

Hermione came around his chair and sat in his lap. She looked concerned about something.

"It's of a personal nature, and I don't want you to be offended," she continued.

"What is it?"

"Could I possibly see your memories of me these last few years? I feel..." She tried to find the right words to express how she was feeling. "I feel like I've destroyed my other self. The least I can do is honor her by seeing what her life was like."

"Her life was much like yours was, I would imagine."

"But she had experiences that I didn't, just like I had many that she didn't. I hate to see those experiences just disappear into thin air. I feel like they should be a part of me, but they escaped me somehow in the transition from one reality to the next."

"Come on," Severus said. "We can use my Pensieve."

"Thank you," Hermione said gratefully.

oooOOOooo

A few minutes later, they both stood in Severus' office. Severus wandered over to the cabinet where his Pensieve was located and opened the doors. Hermione watched him pull out the Pensieve and set it on his desk. He took his wand and started removing memories and placing them into the Pensieve.

"Are you sure you want to see all of them? There are quite a lot."

"Put in anything you think is pertinent," Hermione offered.

After a few minutes, the Pensieve was swirling with memories. Hermione stared into it, a bit apprehensive as to what she might see.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Severus asked.

She looked over to him and put her hand out to grasp his.

"Of course I do."

He smiled at her before they both plunged into his memories.

They emerged in a swirl and stood in the Great Hall. They were up by the teacher's table as Severus looked out at the first years ready to be sorted. Hermione spied herself speaking to Justin Finch-Fletchley. She prattled on about what she had read in Hogwarts: A History.

Hermione blushed as she watched herself gush about stupid facts that really meant nothing. She moved in closer to Severus.

"You were right to call me a know-it-all. Look at that babbling."

Severus looked down at her. "I never called you a know-it-all," he said simply.

Hermione looked up at him gratefully. "Thank you," she responded as she squeezed his hand.

The memory changed. Hermione arched an eyebrow as memory Severus went over to memory Hermione after the troll attack.

"Are you all right, Miss Granger?"

She nodded.

"Please be more careful in the future. Going after a troll by oneself is foolhardy for an adult, let alone for a first year."

Hermione nodded again. Severus went on to coax the true tale from the young Hermione's lips.

"You're good," Hermione murmured as she watched him kindly advise her younger self.

The scene changed. Hermione turned beet red as she watched herself stealing stores from Severus' supplies. She was shocked to see him appear from nowhere.

"Oh, no! You caught me this time!" the real Hermione cried.

Severus said nothing as they watched the memory. Hermione finally looked to him as she watched herself sneak off with the supplies.

"You let me take them," she said softly.

Severus nodded.

"I'm sorry I did that. It's something I've always felt guilty about."

"Shh," Severus said and pointed at the memory that was now forming.

Hermione watched as Severus gave her advice about not being so snooty in class. She observed him in the Shrieking Shack as he listened to the three of them while they explained about Pettigrew, eventually uncovering the identity of the rat. Then they were in the infirmary, and Severus had found out about her Time-Turner. She marveled at how calm he'd been, how he'd kept their secret, and how he'd actually stood up for Sirius Black.

The scene changed again, and they were at the Yule Ball.

Memory Severus watched Hermione dance with Viktor Krum, then there was an announcement that students would ask faculty to dance.

"Why do you have your eyes closed?" Hermione asked Severus.

"I was thinking of all of the horrid possibilities for dance partners."

Hermione giggled as she watched herself go up and tap Severus on the shoulder.

"Were you imagining me?"

"Not in the slightest. I about ran out of the room."

They watched their younger selves dance as Hermione told Severus he was a challenge. The real Hermione reached out and grasped Severus' hand.

"I can't imagine that was comfortable for you."

"On the contrary, I loved every minute of it."

Hermione looked over to Severus and saw his eyes smoldering while looking at her. Her stomach dropped to the floor as he came in for a kiss. When they parted he smiled down at her.

"That's the only thing that was missing from that dance," he mused.

She smiled at him brightly before they returned to his memories. Hermione, Harry, and Severus were sparring together in the Room of Requirement.

"We trained privately with you?" Hermione asked.

"I trained Harry from his first year at Hogwarts. This was the first year you joined us. It seems that our secret meetings were easily figured out by you. Harry came with you to ask me for help with the Golden Egg—we must have missed that memory—and I invited you to stay and train with us."

Hermione watched in amazement as they dueled while he gave them constructive criticism. He never got angry with them, even when they slammed him against the wall and knocked him out. Over and over again, Hermione saw Severus encouraging her, whether it was in potions making or in life itself. He urged her not to be upset when Ron was a prat, he told her how brilliant she was, and he encouraged her in Potions class, albeit quietly. There were so many memories of him just helping her in some way. Hermione felt her heart clench within her. What would it have been like to receive such support from him in my youth?

She watched as her memory self touched Severus shoulder as he hid in the woods, watching Harry get the Sword of Gryffindor. She was stunned to find out that her other self had found a way to know the truth about his attempted murder of Dumbledore.

Then they were in the infirmary at Hogwarts. Severus lay on a hospital bed in a private room. He was pale and looked to be near death. Some of his injuries were still in the process of healing, and his face was a bit black and blue. Hermione gasped at the sight of him.

She watched herself hold his hand and assure him that he would recover. She recognized the look in her eye as more than just friendship. She could tell she had been attracted to him. She smiled to herself. How could she not be attracted to him, he was wonderful.

The scene changed again, and it was after the war. Severus and she were in his lab, brewing, and he suggested she become a Potions mistress. Then there were several memories of them studying together.

Hermione shook her head as she watched herself gush on stupidly about Ron Weasley. She admired Severus' strength in being a good friend and never telling her she was stupid.

"You should have just slapped me upside the head, Severus. What on Earth was I thinking?"

"You were in love, my dear. Love makes people do strange things and hold onto hopes much longer than they should."

Tears formed in Hermione's eyes. "I'm sorry, Severus. That must have hurt to listen to me go on and on about him."

Severus turned and wiped her tears away for her. "That wasn't you, you need not apologize."

His arms went around her as they continued watching. She watched as memory Severus gave a hidden sigh of relief when she told him she had finally broken off her relationship with Ron. He, of course, was very supportive and sweet about everything, boosting up her confidence in her decision.

The memories ended with the two of them joking with each other as they both brewed side by side. Suddenly, Hermione found herself back in Dumbledore's office, Severus standing beside her with his arm still around her waist. She looked up at him and sighed. Extricating herself from his arms, she wandered over to the couch and sat down. Her eyebrows were furrowed, and she looked quite disturbed. Severus came over to her and sat beside her. He took her hand.

"You're upset?" he asked.

"I'm insanelly jealous," she remarked.

Severus arched an eyebrow at her.

"Why?" he asked.

She looked to him. "I hate that she had you. I can't imagine what I would be like if you had been so wonderful to me."

"I imagine you would be like her."

Hermione grinned ruefully. "I would have killed to have such attention from you."

"Hermione, you are wonderful as you are. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you in your youth, but you are amazing nonetheless."

"I am still jealous of her," she muttered. "No wonder she had a crush on you for years!"

Severus looked at her quizzically.

"Harry told me. She told him that she had been attracted to you for years but didn't think it would work out. It seems she was a bit shy."

Severus pulled Hermione close as he mulled over that for a while.

"I'm glad she never told me," he said finally.

Hermione craned her neck back so she could look at him. "Why?"

"Because she wasn't you. She looked like you and acted like you, but ultimately, she wasn't you, and deep down, I knew it. I knew that you would come back and be much different than she was. As I said before, it was comforting to have her near, but I just wanted you back, not her. Something inside of me told me she wasn't you and never would be. You have a spirit that was whittled away in her by Weasley. I sometimes worried that that change in her might have changed you too, but thankfully it didn't. It seemed that she was never you in any case, so I needn't have worried."

"I still think she had it better with the way you treated her. How could she not fall for you?"

"I am nothing to write home about, Hermione."

"Severus, you are more amazing than you give yourself credit for."

Severus smiled at her and pushed an errant curl behind her ear.

"Could I ask you a favor now?"

"Sure," Hermione said.

"Would you show me your memories of me?"

Hermione smirked. "I suppose that's only fair."

They rose and returned to the Pensieve. Severus pulled his memories back into his head, and Hermione was now the one pulling memories out of her mind and placing them into the Pensieve. When it was full she turned to him.

"Do you want some company?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied and grasped her hand.

They plunged into the Pensieve once again.

Severus stood in his classroom glaring down at Harry Potter. Hermione sat wide-eyed next to Harry as Severus asked questions to which he knew the youth would not know the answer. Severus completely ignored Hermione's hand in the air.

"I guess fame... isn't... everything..." Severus muttered vilely.

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The memory changed, and Severus was glowering at her after the troll attack. She shrank back as he looked her up and down with a look of disgust, swirled his robes about him, and stalked out of the bathroom.

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They were in the Potions classroom, brewing. Severus glared down into Hermione's cauldron.

"Satisfactory, Miss Granger," he grumbled and stalked to the next cauldron. Hermione looked at him grumpily.

"What were you thinking just then?" the real Severus asked the real Hermione.

She smiled. "I was imagining that you wouldn't know an outstanding potion if it jumped out of the cauldron at you and transformed you into Lucius Malfoy."

Severus chuckled at that.

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*"Who can tell me the difference between an Animagus and a Werewolf?"*

Memory Severus ignored everyone.

"Please, sir!" Hermione burst out and gave a perfect textbook response to his query.

"Do you enjoy speaking out of turn, Miss Granger? Or is it just that you take pride in being an insufferable know-it-all?"

The real Severus flinched at his nasty comment. He watched the rest of the exchange, including his nasty comments to Harry about loss of limb not excusing him from the essay he had just assigned.

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Then they were in the Shrieking Shack, and Snape was confronting Black. Harry tried to interrupt, and Snape turned, snarling at him.

"Shut up, Potter! You know nothing of what this concerns!"

He turned back to Black and went on and on about how he would receive the Order of Merlin for turning Black over to the Dementors and how he would watch them administer the kiss. Suddenly Harry, Ron, and Hermione simultaneously threw the Expelliarmus spell at him. He flew into the bed and was out cold. Then much later he was arguing with Dumbledore on how Potter must have freed Black and should be punished.

Severus shook his head at his stupidity.

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*They were back in Potions class. Harry and Draco were trading insults. Draco turned and insulted Hermione, which sent Harry into a tizzy. Suddenly, both Harry and Draco sent Transfiguring spells at one another. They missed each other entirely, and the spells hit Goyle and Hermione. Hermione's large teeth grew and grew, and she looked like a deranged rabbit.*

Severus looked to Goyle, who had blotches all over his face, and immediately sent him to the infirmary.

"What about Hermione?" Harry asked.

"I see no difference," Severus muttered and turned away.

Hermione's eyes filled with tears before she ran from the room.

The real Severus looked to his Hermione. Her jaw clenched tensely at the memory. He wished he could wipe it from her mind forever.

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There were more scenes of negative comments and horrid teaching practices. There was not one non-Slytherin student that Severus did not berate or embarrass, it would seem. He got great pleasure out of scaring Neville Longbottom witless. Finally, they were in the Shrieking Shack. Severus lay on the floor in a pool of his own blood.

The real Severus flinched at the sight of such gore.

Hermione conjured up a vial, handed it to Harry, and doused Severus with another. The trio left the Shack and Severus behind, just to be replaced a moment later with Hermione's form kneeling in his blood and cradling his head in her lap. Madam Pomfrey was administering potions while Hermione was asking what she was doing.

"If he dies, it's my fault. I should have found you sooner," Hermione said frantically.

"Miss Granger," Madam Pomfrey chided. "If he survives, and I believe he will, it will be because of you. Without that Dittany you poured on his wound, he would have bled to death, or the venom would have killed him by now."

Madam Pomfrey finished up and levitated Severus' body to a stretcher. They set off to return him to Hogwarts.

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Hermione sat in his hospital room as he lay unconscious. Ron paced back and forth.

"Why can't you just come back to the common room, Hermione?" Ron exclaimed.

"What if he wakes up while I'm gone? He deserves to have someone here when he wakes up after all he's been through!"

"What if it was me in that bed?" Ron demanded.

"I would do the exact same thing, Ronald," she cried.

"Why can't you leave and let someone else watch over him?"

Hermione looked to Ron angrily. "I can't do that because no one else will watch him!"

"You need to decide who's more important to you, Hermione... bloody Snape... or me."

"Get out, Ronald! I'll talk to you again when you're rational." Hermione turned her attention to the unconscious man on the bed.

Ron spun around and left in a huff.

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Much later the memory continued. Hermione sat in her chair, fast asleep. She was awakened by dull moans. Her eyes popped open, and she got up. She carefully examined Severus. His eyes fluttered open.

"Thank heavens you're awake!" she cried. "Can I get you anything?"

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. "Miss Granger, why are you hovering over me like a lost child?"

"You've been unconscious, sir, for four days. Do you want me to get Madam Pomfrey?"

"What I want, insufferable girl, is for you to leave now!"

Hermione looked at him with hurt in her eyes. She straightened up and prepared to leave.

"Thank you, Professor, for everything you did for us. We are all indebted to you, and I'm glad you survived."

Hermione turned and left without a look back, afraid of the contempt she'd see in her Professor's face.

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The scene dissolved, and they were in Dumbledore's office. Hermione stood in front of his desk, flanked by Severus and Minerva. They all looked at Albus.

"I think her appointment would be a definite benefit to the school," Minerva said to Albus.

Severus rolled his eyes. He pointed to Hermione with disdain. "She is too young. I know we lost a lot of faculty in the war, but certainly you could find someone with more experience than her!"

"Severus, my boy, you know there is no one more qualified to teach Arithmancy than Miss Granger. Her work, especially this past year since the war ended, has been extraordinary. I believe you weren't much older than Miss Granger when you came aboard as a teacher."

"It is a mistake to hire her, Albus." Severus growled and stalked out of the room.

Albus rolled his eyes and gave Hermione a fatherly look.

"He will get used to the idea, Hermione. He is just embarrassed that you saved his life. He is not used to being indebted to anyone."

"That's what this is all about?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Of course it is," Minerva mused. "You'll just have to be stalwart. And don't let him boss you around."

Hermione laughed. "Don't worry, Minerva, I won't. He's not as intimidating to me as he used to be."

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They morphed to the Great Hall. Hermione from memory sat down next to Severus.

"Good Evening, Severus, did your classes go well?"

"Mmph," was all she got from him.

"Well, mine were great," she gushed, trying to get him to be a part of the conversation.

He looked crossly at her. "Just because you're a member of the faculty now, Miss Granger, does not give you the right to assume that we are fast friends."

"Oh, Severus, I would never do that!" she joked.

He looked at her crossly and went back to his food.

"I would, however," she went on as if nothing was amiss, "like to be friends eventually. That is, if now that you're not a spy, you can let yourself have friends."

Severus rose from his seat and stuck his face directly into hers, an evil sneer covering his features. "Of course I can have friends, Miss Granger, but you will never be one of them."

He turned and stalked off, missing the look of sadness that crossed Hermione's face before she turned to Minerva and started chatting with her.

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Hermione knocked on Severus' classroom door.

"Enter," he barked. "I'm in my lab," he shouted.

"Sorry to bother you, Severus, but..." she stopped in mid sentence as she entered the lab and saw Severus tending five different cauldrons, all steaming with potions.

"What is it, Miss Granger?"

"Please, would you call me Hermione, for Merlin's sake? I wanted to ask your opinion on something, but I see you're more than busy."

She watched him stir furiously, then move to another cauldron and stir furiously again.

"Do you need some help?" she asked him.

He looked up and scowled. "I suppose you could take care of that boil balm in the last cauldron if you'd like. It's almost finished."

She went over and looked to see where he had left off in the potion and then got to work.

"Why are you brewing so much at one time?" she asked curiously.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I am way behind on the stores for the Infirmary, and I have several other things that need my attention."

"Severus, it's not a sign of weakness to ask for help, you know. I would be glad to come down here and help you brew."

"That's not necessary," Severus said tersely.

"Of course it's not," Hermione snapped. She quickly finished the boil balm and extinguished the fire. She bottled it up and went over to Severus.

"I'll come by on Wednesdays. That's my lightest day."

"Miss Granger, there's..."

"No buts, Severus. I will be here whether you like it or not."

He scowled at her as she turned and left the room.

The real Severus turned to Hermione.

"Why were you always so nice to me?"

She shrugged. "You were always a challenge. Like my counterpart, I have always enjoyed a challenge. Also, I was much less insecure after graduating. Your caustic remarks didn't bother me quite so much."

Severus glanced at her. She was serious. He wasn't sure how anyone could have stood to have anything to do with him, he'd been so awful.

*The scene changed, and Hermione was helping Severus in the lab. He was eyeing her from his cauldron. He watched her go to the shelf and get a jar, bringing it back to her work station. She chopped some ginger and added it to her mixture. Picking up the stirrer she was about to begin stirring.*

"Stir that counter-clockwise," Severus barked.

Hermione smiled to herself. "Thanks, Severus. I've only made this a hundred times, I'm sure I would have forgotten."

In two strides he was beside her. "If you cannot take my instructions, perhaps you should leave!"

She looked angrily at him. "Would you calm down for heaven's sake? You've got a sense of humor behind that thick crust somewhere. I know it because I've seen it. Now lighten up, I was just kidding."

Severus stiffened and glared at her. Finally he turned and went back to his cauldron.

"I think I had a crush on you," the real Severus whispered to Hermione.

Her eyes grew wide. "You've got to be kidding me," she said dubiously.

"There's something in my eyes, and it's not hatred."

Hermione doubled over laughing. "You were impossible, Severus Snape, I swear. I would have never guessed you cared one bit for me, given your actions."

"I hope my better self has an easier time of showing his affections to you," Severus said as he placed his arm around her shoulder.

She smiled at him. "You, as I have said before, are nothing like him," she confirmed as she pointed at her memory.

*Memory Severus stalked up to Hermione.*

"Did you take my carob root?" he demanded angrily.

"No, Severus, I haven't seen it," Hermione told him.

"Well, it has disappeared. I suspect that you used it and either didn't put it back, or finished it."

Hermione looked at Severus angrily. "I told you, I didn't take it, nor have I seen it. Perhaps you used it yourself and forget to get more!"

"Don't lie to me, silly girl! I will know."

Hermione's temper exploded. "Then why don't you just use Legilimency and read my mind, you paranoid prat?"

"How dare you address me like that?"

"How dare you accuse me of stealing?"

"Get out of my sight, you annoying bint."

Hermione glowered at him. She turned and stormed out of the dungeons.

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The scene changed to Hermione walking in the hall. A voice rang out from behind her.

"Professor Granger, may I have a word with you?" Severus asked.

Hermione turned around and looked at him crossly. "Not now, Severus, I'm on my way to class."

"I wanted to let you know that I was mistaken the other day about the carob root. I found it in my room after our disagreement."

Hermione looked at Severus triumphantly. "I told you I had nothing to do with its disappearance," she said and turned and stalked away from him.

"I didn't even apologize?" Severus asked Hermione.

"Of course not. You never apologized for anything," Hermione whispered to him.

There were several more memories in the lab as Severus' iciness slowly went away. He was never *friendly*, but he began to be more civil towards Hermione. They began to have normal conversations, mostly about the fine art of Potions.

Then they were in Albus' office, and Hermione was across from Dumbledore, listening intently. There was no sign of Severus.

"I think that if you go back in time to when Lucius was a student, you may be able to influence his feelings of Muggle-borns."

"Albus, I'm twenty-two years old. How am I going to influence a student?"

"By teaching him, of course. If you could befriend him as a mentor, he may change his attitude."

"Albus, you've gone completely out of your head. Why would he ever consider me to be a mentor?"

"I will leave that in your capable hands. I am hopeful that if he can see how accomplished a witch you are, he will have second thoughts about all that he believes about Muggle-borns."

"Well, I suppose it's worth a try."

"Hermione, I'm not even sure if this will change anything in the present. I know you have been climbing the walls here. I want you to know that you're appreciated. I know your desire to feel useful. This is definitely the most useful thing you could do. Oh, and while you're there, maybe you can get Severus to be on our side from the beginning."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at that.

"I'll do my best, Headmaster."

"It's Albus, you know," he chastised her.

"Yes, Albus."

Suddenly, they were back from the Pensieve, standing in Severus' office together, hand in hand. Hermione looked over at Severus and gave him a half smile. He did not return it. He looked at her solemnly and then walked over to the couch that sat along the wall. He crashed down into it and put his head in his hands. She followed him and rested her hand on his shoulder as she sat down next to him.

"Talk to me," she urged.

He shook his head, but never lifted it.

"Please?" she urged again.

Severus lifted his head and looked at her. His face was filled with pain. Suddenly, he grabbed Hermione and pulled her to him.

"I'm sorry!" he exclaimed. "I was so horrid to you. No wonder you are jealous of your counterpart. I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Hermione wrapped her arms around him.

"Love," she said calmly, "I put that last memory in there to remind you that you are not that man in my memories. You have no reason to apologize for anything." She began to tear up as she went on. "You have been nothing but honorable to me. Please, Severus, don't do this. You're not that man, and you never will be."

Severus pushed back and studied her. "How can you not see him when you look at me?"

"Severus, I have always loved looking at you," Hermione said as she caressed his cheek. "You may look the same, but you are not the same." She smirked at him. "I see the amazing man I fell in love with when I look at you, Severus, not the mean teacher I had as a kid. Please don't forget that."

Severus looked down. "Hermione, I..."

She put a finger to his lips. "Shh. No more of this insecurity, Severus. It's not flattering."

"You know I would never treat you like that," he said finally.

She drew him to her and embraced him. "Of course I do, you silly man."

Their lips met, and their kiss was sweet. Severus couldn't believe that after all of his ugliness in her past she had ever come to love him. She was here, nonetheless, and in his arms, finally. There was no denying her affection for him. He thrilled in her closeness.

"Hermione," he whispered between kisses, "I never stopped loving you."

"I would have killed you if you did," she murmured before covering his mouth with hers.

A/N: Next up: Hermione finally visits with Lucius.

Thanks to Lilith Kayden for her beta work.

I think this was a good homage to the lost Hermione. I hope you all felt the same.

Chapter 39

Chapter 39 of 46

Hermione pays a visit to Lucius.

Chapter 39

Hermione rode the Ministry lift all the way up to the Minister's floor. She shuffled back and forth on her feet, nervously awaiting the opening of the lift doors. In a few minutes, she'd be standing in front of Lucius Malfoy, reintroducing herself. Severus had grumbled when she'd suggested coming here today.

"It's too risky!"

"It's the only way."

"What if he throws you into a work camp?"

Hermione smiled. "Then you'll come and rescue me."

So, even after all of Severus' disagreeing, here she was, ready to face Lucius Malfoy with the intent of being invited to his party.

She stepped out of the elevator and walked over to the only door on the floor. *Minister of Magic* was emblazoned across it with Lucius' name in even bigger letters right underneath. She opened the door and walked up to the receptionist.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Malfoy. My name is Hermione Granger."

"He's expecting you," the nasally voiced woman responded. "Go right in through that door." The woman motioned to a door on the right.

Hermione headed for the door and entered. She smiled as she saw Lucius sitting at his desk. He did not smile back.

"Lucius, it's good to see you again," she gushed, letting her nerves show through her speech.

"Is it?" Lucius said. "To what do I owe this visit, Miss Granger?"

Hermione hesitated. She hoped that their decent relationship in the past would open conversation in the present. She hoped he wouldn't hold whatever her counterpart might have said or done to him against her. She hoped he would take their past into account before throwing her out of his office.

"Lucius, I wanted to let you know that I was back from the past."

Lucius eyes grew wide. "Professor Granger? Is it really you?"

"Lucius, you are now quite a bit older than me, there's no need to be so formal," Hermione said with a smile of relief.

His eyes narrowed at her. In a few seconds, his face softened considerably. "I was quite upset at your disappearance all those years ago. After all, you were my favorite teacher."

Hermione sat down in the chair in front of his desk, shocked at his admittance.

"You never told me that!" she cried.

"I almost did. I told you that I thought you were a great teacher."

"Well, that's quite a bit different than being your favorite!" Hermione laughed. "Thank you Lucius. That really means a lot to me."

He smiled thinly at her.

Hermione got a serious look on her face. "Lucius, as your friend, I really need to ask you what you are doing. People are suffering. Doesn't that upset you?"

"Frankly, no, it doesn't. They deserve what they are getting. If they can't live by the Ministry's rules, they deserve punishment."

"But people are dying in your camps. Can't you do something about that?"

Lucius looked at her crossly, "I am running them as I see fit."

"You don't care that they're dying?"

Lucius leaned in over his desk and glared at her. "As I said before, Professor, they are in there for a reason. If they can't obey the law, they must be punished. It is the only way to have order in our society!"

Hermione quickly saw that he would not bow to her and turn from his ways. She decided to soften her stance with him.

"I guess your right, Lucius. It just seems so... harsh."

"Most of the Wizarding population lives a happy and fulfilling life," Lucius said as he sat back in his chair. "Don't talk to me about harshness. If Voldemort were in power, do you think anyone would be happy?"

"No, of course not, and I'm glad that you see that too. I was quite worried about what would become of you as a Death Eater, Lucius. I was glad to hear that you fought against Voldemort in the end."

Lucius smiled at her. Hermione caught her breath at the kindness she saw behind his smile.

"How is Narcissa?"

He instantly frowned. "She is a jealous bat. She hovers over me and questions me about everything I do and everywhere I go. She assumes that because I have power, I am being sought after by every woman in London. She is driving me insane."

"I'm really sorry to hear that. I always thought you two had a good relationship in the timeline I remember."

"We have a good enough relationship, she just drives me crazy." Lucius eyed Hermione curiously, debating something within himself. Finally he spoke again. "Hermione, when you left, I was very upset."

Hermione's eyes clouded as she looked regretfully at the man she'd gotten to know rather well in the past. "I'm sorry, Lucius. I wish I could have told you about myself back then, but I couldn't. I felt badly, having to leave without a word of goodbye to anyone."

"You said goodbye to Severus."

"He was the one who sent me away! If he hadn't warned me, I would be dead."

Lucius nodded. He stared into her eyes and held them with his gaze. Hermione was startled by the intensity she saw in them.

"I loved you, you know," he whispered.

Hermione's mouth dropped open. "You... you *loved* me?"

He nodded. "I tried to fight it. At first I was just playing with my flirting, but before long, I realized that they were subconscious attempts to get you to notice me. Before I knew it, I was in love. The way you guided me through my decision to drop Arithmancy... You are so brilliant, and you think things through so masterfully. I never stopped loving you, Hermione, especially when I knew you would come back eventually. I not only love you, Hermione, I admire everything about you."

Hermione sat in the chair, stunned. "Lucius, I had no idea."

"I know. I didn't let on a thing. I knew you were happy with Severus, but I secretly wished that you would break up so I could try to win your heart."

"I...I'm sorry, Lucius. I have always felt you were my friend, but nothing more."

"Perhaps now that you're back, you might find me more appealing?" His head tilted slightly as he cocked an eyebrow at her.

Hermione stared at him. She wanted to shout that she would never like him like that, but she couldn't. This was their opportunity to get to him. She would play along. She swallowed hard. Fear gripped her, but she pushed it away and gave Lucius a coy look.

"I find you very appealing, Lucius. I always have, but I'm still involved with Severus."

"Why did you come here then?" he asked provocatively. "Severus and I are at odds right now. Perhaps you secretly hoped for something to happen?" His eyes were filled with desire for her while his tongue lazily ran along his lips seductively.

A ball was forming in Hermione's stomach, but she needed to see this through. Inwardly cringing, she continued on with the ruse.

"Perhaps..."

"Yes, he's not quite so appealing in his old age is he?" Lucius drawled.

She wanted to spit in Lucius' smug, ugly face. She bit down the urge and gave Lucius an equally provocative look.

"I must admit, Lucius, you are as handsome as ever in yours."

He smiled alluringly at her and rose from his seat. Coming around to her chair, he stooped beside her.

"It would make me ever so happy if you would consider my advances. I would love to have a powerful witch like you by my side, and as I said before, I love you."

He closed in on her and kissed her. She wanted to pull away and wipe her mouth off, but she let him do as he wished. His tongue invaded her mouth, and Hermione inwardly cringed. They kissed for a long while. She wanted to cry, thinking of her cheating on Severus like this.

Lucius put his hand to her cheek and caressed it. He pulled away from her and looked at her longingly.

"You are as exquisite as I remember," he murmured as he continued stroking her cheek.

Hermione smiled at him, hoping it wasn't obvious how horrible she felt after their wanton display of affection.

Finally, he put his hand down and took hers in it. He looked her up and down. "You are very beautiful, Hermione. I have longed to have such a beautiful witch's affections."

She looked down demurely, trying to play her part.

"I am having a ball at my Manor next week. I would... love... for you to attend."

Her smile widened. "It sounds lovely."

"It's next Friday evening at seven p.m."

Suddenly Hermione pretended to look concerned. "I know you want me to come so we can get to know each other better, but I must insist on bringing Severus. He would be suspicious if I attended by myself."

Lucius studied her for a moment. "That is acceptable, as long as you remember why I have invited you," he warned her.

Her stomach turned at his insinuation, but she kept her cool.

"You're the only reason to attend in my mind, Lucius," she said sultrily.

He smiled at her. "I will look forward to your attendance, then."

He took her hand and kissed it. He rose and helped her out of her seat and walked her to the door, keeping his eyes fixed on hers the entire time. She knew he thought he was being incredibly seductive, but to her it was extremely repulsive. Here he was, a married man, yet he was falling all over her. Such infidelity made her sick.

Lucius' eyes fell to her lips and before Hermione could escape, he'd captured them in his own again. His tongue forced entry, and he took from her what he wanted. There was no romance in this kiss, it was pure lust. Immediately, Hermione knew that she was just an object to him... something to display to his followers. Her insides crawled in upon themselves at his touch, but she showed none of her disgust to the man who held her in his arms.

Finally, the kiss was over, and Lucius was pulling away from her. His eyes were filled with want. Hermione awkwardly withdrew from his grasp. She reached out and gave Lucius' hand a little squeeze. She winked at him as he opened the door for her.

"I will see you next Friday, then," he said to her in a business-like way. Lucius' secretary gazed at them over her glasses, but didn't say a word. She returned to the memo she was composing.

Hermione turned and coyly blew him a kiss. She quickly left the office. Taking the stairs down a floor, she ran into a public bathroom, where she heaved up her lunch into the toilet. Oh, he was disgusting! He thought he could have whatever he wanted! Well, he would never have her!

She suddenly remembered Severus and threw up some more. She felt so disloyal to him. Could he forgive her for flirting and kissing Lucius? She hoped so, but right now, she was so embarrassed that she could not face him. She left the Ministry, returned to Hogwarts, and barricaded herself in her room.

oooOOOooo

A couple hours later there was a light knock at her door. She went to answer it, hoping it wasn't Severus. When she opened the door, she found him standing there. She was so embarrassed she couldn't look him in the face. She stared down at the floor and opened the door wider so he could enter. Severus strolled in and turned to her.

"I thought you were going to check in with me when you got back," he said inquisitively.

"Sorry," she said, not making eye contact with him. She rushed around him and sat down on the sofa.

He sat next to her and took her hand. She stiffened at his touch.

"Hermione, what is it?"

Hermione studied her knees. She had never noticed how bony they seemed when she sat this way, even through her robes. Finally she offered an explanation.

"I've done something horrible," she said morosely.

"What could you do that would be so horrible?" Severus questioned.

"I kissed him. He came up and kissed me, and I kissed him back." She spit it out with her eyes closed.

oooOOOooo

Severus scowled. He rose and stalked to the window. He should have known Malfoy would try to take advantage of her. He stiffened, awaiting Hermione's story. Had Lucius convinced her that he was the better suitor? Had everything Hermione remembered about his past-self been enough to throw her into Lucius' arms?

"You kissed Lucius?" Severus asked through gritted teeth. "Tell me everything that happened, if it's not too lurid a tale," he snapped. "Start from the beginning."

Hermione eyed Severus' back. He refused to turn from the window. Butterflies flitted in her stomach as she glanced away while speaking to his rigid form. "So, I went there... You know I went there," Hermione said, a bit flustered. "He told me he was in love with me. Did you know that?" she asked in a confused voice.

"I suspected it, but no, not for sure." Severus' eyes closed. The despot loved her. Lucius Bloody Malfoy, with his perfect hair, teeth, and eyes, bloody loved Hermione. I don't stand a chance!

Hermione continued tentatively. "I thought I could use that to my advantage, and before I knew it he had rounded his desk and kissed me." She looked down again, afraid that Severus would wheel around now and accuse her of infidelity or something even worse. "It seemed to go on forever."

Severus did turn around. He stared at Hermione and watched her squirm. There had been no excitement or enjoyment on her part. He could tell that simply by looking at her. A wave of relief flooded over him. Despite his fears that Hermione would not be able to resist his advances, it seemed that she found no pleasure in the situation.

"Do you have feelings for him?" he asked Hermione.

"Oh, yes, a deep feeling of repulsion," she spat. She still wouldn't look at Severus.

Severus stared at Hermione for a long while. Finally, he cleared his throat. "You would have made an excellent spy during the war, Hermione. I had no idea you had it in you."

She hesitated before asking him the question that burned through her mind. "Are you angry with me?"

In a flash, Severus had rushed back to the sofa. He took his fingers and gently turned her chin so she was looking at him. Her eyes were filled with apprehension. He looked straight into them.

"I am not angry with you at all. I will admit that the idea that Lucius might have stolen you away from me caused me to panic. I'm sorry for doubting you, Hermione. I should have trusted our love to withstand Lucius' advances. I will not doubt you again." Severus leaned in and kissed her tenderly. "Forgive me for doubting you?"

Hermione pulled back and looked into Severus' eyes. "There's nothing to forgive on your part. I was the one who let that lecherous man touch me."

"You need not feel guilty for that, my love. You have opened a door that we didn't even know existed. You have done brilliantly, Hermione."

She searched his face, trying to tell if he was just trying to make her feel good.

"No, I'm not just trying to make you feel good," he responded.

"Stupid Legilimens," she muttered.

He arched an eyebrow at her and then pulled her close and kissed her.

"I'm sorry," she said when he had pulled away.

"For calling me stupid?"

"No, for kissing Lucius."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"No,"

"Are you going to leave me for him?"

"Of course not."

"Then there is nothing to apologize for... except for calling me stupid."

She gave him a small grin. "Then I apologize for that," she told him.

"I accept," he said before kissing her again.

"What information did you get out of him?" he asked as he released her from his kiss.

She had brightened considerably and told Severus about the invitation to the party.

"I insisted that you come so that you didn't suspect anything was going on between Lucius and me," she told him.

"He was okay with that?"

"Oh, yes, once he reminded me why I had really been invited. Infuriating man!"

"Hermione, this is brilliant. You can keep him occupied while I open the Floo for the rest of the Order. This is better than any of us could have hoped for!"

She glanced at him as he looked at her happily. "You mean you really expect me to seal myself into a room with that pervert?"

"I'm sure you can handle yourself, love."

"What about Narcissa and Draco?" Hermione asked.

"Narcissa will be busy entertaining guests. She will not notice what is happening until it is too late. As for Draco, he is not pleased with his father's doings. He has been a secret member of the Order since the attempt on Dumbledore's life. He can help to make sure that I am not discovered as I connect the Floo and organize the Order members."

"Draco is on our side now?" Hermione mused.

"He has been for quite some time."

Hermione shook her head. It was yet another surprise to which she would need to adjust. Would she ever grow accustomed to this new world in which she lived?

They leaned back on the couch together. Hermione rested her head on Severus shoulder. Severus sat thinking for a while. He mulled over their plan. Finally, he put his head down on hers and hugged her.

"Will you be all right with this assignment?" he asked Hermione.

She sighed. "I'll do what I have to do for the Order. However, I can't promise you that I won't hex Lucius Malfoy into next week if he gets too frisky."

"That's my girl," Severus muttered happily.

A/N: Next up: This is no party.

Thank you, Lilith Kayden, for your beta work. Thank you, dear reader, for your interest, wonderful insight, and comments.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40 of 46

Severus and Hermione attend Lucius' party.

Thanks to Lilith Kayden for being a fabulous beta. You go, girl!

Chapter 40

Severus knocked on Hermione's door. He heard her call for him to come in. Opening the door, he looked around, but she wasn't in the sitting room.

"Back here in the bedroom," she called.

He hurried to the bedroom and found her standing in front of a mirror, putting an earring in her ear. He caught his breath at the sight of her.

Hermione had put her hair up in an elegant twist with a spiral curl framing each side of her face. Her dress was floor length and made of a dark burgundy embroidered taffeta material. It accented every curve before sweeping out into a drop-waist skirt. The sleeves were full length and ended in points at her wrists.

Severus came up behind her and encircled her waist with his arms.

"You look ravishing tonight, my dear," he told her.

She smiled at him as she finished placing the long diamond earring into her ear. With her outfit complete, she turned and inspected her date. Severus wore black dress robes. The jacket was left open, and he had a dark gray dress shirt underneath. A black bow tie finished off the outfit. She smiled her approval at him.

"I don't think I've ever seen you look so sexy, Severus," she commented as she looked him up and down, admiring everything about his outfit.

He grinned at her and took her arm. He led her out of her room and out of the castle.

Everything was set for the raid. When Lucius took Hermione to have his 'private' conversation, Severus would slip away and open one of the fireplaces at Malfoy Manor to the Floo network. He was hoping to use the one in the second floor study. The room was large enough to conceal a raid party until everyone had amassed. They would attack the party guests before the Ministry could realize what had happened and send reinforcements. Hopefully, they would capture anyone who controlled the Ministry or who would be a threat when Lucius was removed from power.

Severus and Hermione talked strategy as they walked to the Apparition point, making sure that every possible angle had been analyzed and that there would be no mistakes. Finally, they Apparated to the Malfoy's and joined the party.

There were quite a few people there...all of them Malfoy supporters. Severus had explained to Hermione that most of the people with whom Lucius surrounded himself were former low-level Death Eaters who had escaped conviction because of uncertainty as to whether they'd been Imperiused or not. Other supporters had been powerful people who had sympathized with the Dark Lord, but had kept a low profile during the war. Evidently, Lucius had spent a good deal of time fostering friendships with these people, who all were as power hungry as Lucius himself.

Hermione perused the room, noticing that Lucius' body guards had dressed up for the occasion and were all wearing black dress robes with bow ties. She rolled her eyes at them. Lucius spotted Severus and Hermione soon after and made his way over to them with Narcissa.

"Severus, Hermione, how wonderful for you to have made it tonight!" he exclaimed as his eyes ate up Hermione in her dress. He stared at her excitedly, seeming to be a rabid wolf. She smiled at him, playing her part.

"Thank you for the invitation, Lucius," Severus said. "Narcissa, you look lovely as always."

Narcissa smiled at Severus and told him thank you. She then glared at Hermione, not uttering a word to her.

"Well," Lucius said brightly. "Make yourselves at home. The buffet is in the corner over there. Help yourself. We need to excuse ourselves and greet more of our guests. I will see you later."

The last part was directed at Hermione. She smiled broadly at him, hoping he thought she was excited about their up-coming rendezvous. Narcissa glared once again at Hermione as she was turned and directed toward the entryway. The host couple wandered off to welcome another couple who had just walked in.

"Be careful, Hermione," Severus whispered. "I think Lucius would have ripped that dress right off you with his eyes alone, if he could have gotten away with it. He's not one to be told no."

Hermione stiffened. "Will he try to force himself on me?"

"I don't know," Severus said truthfully. "He might."

Hermione frowned. She had a bad feeling about this whole operation, but Severus had been positive that everything would go as planned. She certainly hoped so. Even if it didn't, though, Severus was too thorough to not have five back up plans to help them escape with their lives if necessary.

They went over to the buffet and picked at the offerings for a while. Draco wandered up to them eventually.

"Severus, Hermione, it's nice that you could come," Draco drawled to them.

Hermione raised her eyebrows at him, not expecting to be on a first name basis with the man who used to sneer at her and call her names. Of course, it made sense. If he was an Order member, then they must have some sort of tolerance for each other.

"How are you, Draco?" Severus asked.

"I'm fine. I'll keep the guards occupied when I see my father take Hermione out of the room," he said in a low voice.

"I'll just need a couple of minutes to sneak upstairs," Severus said.

Draco nodded and brought his drink up to them in a mock toast. He withdrew and began to mingle with other guests. Before long, Lucius was headed for them, sans Narcissa.

"Here he comes," Hermione whispered to Severus.

"I love you. Good luck!" Severus whispered back quickly before Lucius got within earshot.

"Ah, there you are!" Lucius said jovially. "I don't believe, Hermione, that you have ever had the pleasure of seeing the art gallery."

"No, Lucius, I haven't," she replied.

"Well, you must come and see it. You don't mind, Severus, if I steal your date away for a few minutes?"

Severus felt like punching him in the face, but only nodded calmly. He watched as Lucius led Hermione back into the depths of the house. After they had disappeared, Severus searched the room, looking to see if anyone was eyeing him. He saw Draco joking with the two guards closest to him. He scanned the rest of the room quickly. No one seemed to be paying him any attention so he slowly slipped away, heading for the stairs. With a quick glance behind him, he rapidly ascended them and entered the first room he came to... the upstairs study. It was empty. He sealed the door and warded it so no one else could enter. Rushing over to the fireplace, he began to connect it to the Floo network.

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Lucius took Hermione by the arm and led her down the hall. The art gallery was in the back of the house, well secluded from prying eyes. He opened the door, stepping aside to let Hermione through. She entered and gave a genuine gasp. Never had she seen a finer collection of artwork anywhere except in a museum. Hanging on a dark red wall were several Monet's, a Degas, a Van Gogh, and two Rembrandts, and that only made up the left side of the room. There were several huge sculptures that stood in the center of the room, blocking some of the other artwork that decorated the expanse. She wandered over to a Monet.

"I just love Monet," she told Lucius.

"He is my favorite," Lucius answered.

She smiled at him.

"Of course, none of these works can surpass the beauty in front of my eyes right now." Lucius said, his eyes looking at her lustfully.

Hermione beamed at him. Inside she felt like throwing up, but she pushed it down and kept her demeanor light. She decided to walk around the gallery, taking as much time as possible to put off his advances. She slowly circled the room. The Muggle artists near the entry gave way to magical ones. As Hermione made her way around the room, she realized that almost all the paintings were moving. She stood in front of an avant-garde piece by an artist she'd never heard of.

"That's my pride and joy. My father did it...under an assumed name."

Hermione looked over at Lucius. "Really?"

He nodded.

"Do you have any other works of his?"

"Yes, I do. They're all really ugly, but I like this one very much."

Hermione studied the red and green swirls on the canvas. They moved about hypnotically. "I like it too," she replied.

Lucius stepped closer to her and put his arm around her waist.

"Hermione, I am glad you chose to join me tonight."

Hermione looked at him tentatively.

"I have one concern, Lucius."

"What's that?" he asked.

"What about Narcissa?"

"She won't bother us."

Hermione turned to look directly at Lucius. "I mean, I don't usually have affairs with married men. What will your wife say when she finds out about us?"

"Who says she has to find out about us?" Lucius said as he kissed her neck.

"Lucius, I thought you said you loved me."

"I do," he continued as his lips moved up toward her cheek.

"Then you are going to leave Narcissa?"

Lucius stopped kissing her and drew his head back so he could look at her.

"I have no intention of leaving my wife."

Hermione looked angry. "Then what exactly are your intentions?" she said with her voice raised.

"I intend to make love to you in my art gallery."

He came in closer, but she put both of her hands up to stop him.

"I have no intention of having sex with you tonight!"

Lucius narrowed his eyes at her.

"I thought I had made myself clear the other day," he said brusquely.

"Lucius, I came here to find out exactly what you want from me. As I said, I have strong misgivings about starting anything with you, as you are a married man."

"There are lots of married men who get their pleasure elsewhere," Lucius drawled.

"Look, I am not interested in being someone's fling. I want a long term relationship. It seems that you are not willing to get involved in one, so I believe that this meeting is over."

She began to walk to the door, hoping that she hadn't taken it too far and that he wasn't going to let her just walk out of the room without a fight.

"Wait!" Lucius said urgently.

She stopped and turned around. He crossed the room and stood next to her again.

"What if I did leave Narcissa?"

"You just said you didn't want to do that."

"I know, but I do love you, Hermione." Lucius looked her up and down, with a possessive look. He stroked her hair with his hand. "I have wanted you for as long as I can remember. I would do anything to have you."

She softened her stance and looked at him. "How do I know you're not just stringing me along?"

"I guess you'll just have to trust me," he grinned slyly at her.

oooOOOooo

Lucius had no intention of leaving his wife. He wanted Hermione so badly, however, that he would say almost anything to have her.

"Lucius, I want you to know I am not some harlot who will wait for you indefinitely to break up your marriage. Be honest with me. Do you have any desire to leave your wife?"

He hesitated for a moment before telling her, "I will do anything to possess you, Hermione."

"And you would want to marry me?"

He nodded. He would tell this witch exactly what she wanted to hear until she was his entirely.

"If you want me badly enough, divorce your wife and marry me. I will play second to no one."

Lucius stepped closer to her. "You drive a hard bargain," he said lustfully.

Lucius' devious mind worked quickly. He would move slowly, until she could resist him no more, and then she would be his. His mouth closed on hers, and he kissed her possessively. Groaning, he pulled her to him and held her tightly. Forgetting his intention to move slowly, he devoured her mouth and pulled her even closer. He would not release her until he'd convinced her to let him do as he wished with her.

oooOOOooo

Hours had passed. At least it had seemed like hours to Hermione. She actually didn't know how long they kissed, but it had seemed that time stood still. Lucius' thin lips were doing things to hers that only Severus had a right to do. Where was he? Why was it taking Severus so long to rescue her?

Suddenly, the door burst open and in flew Severus. Lucius and Hermione pulled apart as Severus drew his wand.

"I wondered what the two of you could be doing in here!" he said angrily, playing the love-sick fool, according to the plan they had worked out beforehand.

Lucius looked at him blandly and said, "Oh, Severus, don't make a big deal. The woman has just decided she wants something a little spicier in her life."

Hermione backed off and withdrew her wand silently.

"Stay away from her, she is mine!" Severus ordered.

"That's not what she says," Lucius taunted.

Before Severus could say or do anything else, two of Lucius' goons burst through the doors, wands extended. One of them began dueling with Severus, and the other raced toward Lucius.

"The Manor is being attacked!" the guard cried before Hermione could stun him.

She sent a spell flying at him as he said that, and the man fell to the floor.

As quick as lightning, Lucius had spun around, his wand drawn, and fired a shot towards Hermione. She blocked it deftly and sent one of her own. They sparred and conversed at the same time.

"So, your attention to me has been a ruse to attack my home!" he yelled and shot off a spell.

Hermione ducked. "Of course it was, you conceited prat!" she yelled back. She sent another hex flying. It missed him.

"You are no better than your busy-body counterpart. She was always trying to put her nose in where it didn't belong. You and your boyfriend will pay dearly for your treachery!" he spat at her and ducked another spell.

"Try your best, Malfoy," she shouted.

They stopped talking and continued fighting. It was a fierce battle, with both of them dodging and shooting spells at one another. Severus was dueling with the other man, but they were also not getting anywhere. Severus and Hermione moved around the room and were soon almost back to back. The second guard had, by now, regained consciousness and had rejoined the fight. They all started fighting randomly; shooting spells at whoever came into view.

Severus and Hermione were outnumbered, and they knew it. Severus grabbed her and turned over a table to hide behind. They shot at all three of their enemies, but only Severus seemed to fell one of them. Lucius screamed as he saw his favorite body guard fall to the floor in a mass of blood, a victim of Severus' Sectumsempra spell. Lucius, in his anger, shot a spell at Severus, and the table shattered into a million pieces. Taking advantage of Lucius' rage, Severus rose and sent a curse towards him.

Lucius reacted quickly and shielded it. Hermione shot a spell from her crouched position, but it flew over Lucius' head. He sneered at her, but aimed his wand at Severus' chest. Distracted from the imminent danger, Severus had turned to the remaining body guard and deflected a hex from him. Before Hermione could do anything, Lucius had shot the Killing Curse directly at Severus. It hit him on the side of his chest and sent him flying to the ground. Hermione screamed and looked back at Severus. He was lying flat on his back staring vacantly into the air.

Two things happened to Hermione in that instant. The first was that her mind went a bit insane. The other was that her magic went right along with it. Her vision tunneled until all she could see was Lucius Malfoy. Great green flashes spurt from the tip of her wand as she quickly rose. Without realizing it, she shouted *Avada Kedavra* at Lucius.

Green light shot from her wand and surrounded everyone in the room but Severus and Hermione. The two figures that were standing dropped to the floor like stones. Hermione lowered her wand and stared blankly at them... seeing nothing and registering nothing in her mind. Slowly she came back to sanity. She had killed them both with one curse. She looked down indifferently at her hand, which still held her wand. She didn't even remember casting the curse. Then her foggy brain processed why she had been so upset. Coming back to her senses, she wheeled around and raced to Severus.

She knelt beside him and shook his shoulders, "Severus! Oh, no, Severus!"

His vacant eyes still gazed skyward. His chest was eerily still. Fear settled in Hermione's heart as she shook Severus, but his eyes didn't clear, nor did he move.

You can't be dead! We have too much to live for. Memories of the happiness she had felt when she had returned and had been wrapped in his embrace flooded her mind. In reality, Severus' arms lay by his side, but she felt them around her. His eyes stared blankly ahead, but she felt them pierce her soul. His lips were immobile, but they seared hers with a fervent kiss.

She stared down at Severus' still form. Her hopes for the future bled out of her. There would be no happy ending for them. There would be no marriage or family. There would be nothing but loneliness. She threw herself on his body and sobbed.

"No! No! You can't be dead! No! We haven't even had any time together. You can't leave me, Severus. Please... please, wake up!"

Her sobs turned to wails. She covered his body with hers as her tears flowed down her face and seeped into Severus clothing. As she moved to look at him again, the necklace she'd worn since that Christmas in the past dangled from her neck and touched the one he now wore openly on the outside of his robes. She pulled back and fingered his. *One Heart* had been inscribed on it. Hers read *One Mind*. Her heart and mind seemed to dissolve into nothingness as she stared down at the only man she'd ever loved. They were one. How could she go on as only half a person? How could she exist without him by her side? The rest of her life extended before her. Endless days, bereft of any happiness, stretched out ahead of her. Misery and grief filled her future. The man whom she adored would never be with her again. She could not fathom how she could exist like that. She didn't want to.

"Why must we be torn apart whenever we come together? Severus, please..."

Her tears and sobs continued as she gripped Severus in a tight embrace. She would never let him go. She would not leave him again. She had deserted him for twenty-five years! They had been kept apart from each other, neither being able to feel complete without the other. All that time, utterly wasted! She would not let him go. She would not leave him again!

Merlin, why did it have to end this way? They were supposed to be happy, finally. Now she just saw pain and heartache stretched out in front of her with no end in sight. Her life was over. He was gone, and he had taken her life with him. *Please, someone come and wake me from this nightmare, or it will never end! Better yet... kill me too...*

The enormity of what had happened came crashing down around her. She was alone. Her life had gone. Her entire being yearned to join him... wherever he was. But fate was cruel, and she would endure. Simply existing... never fulfilled. She would never see him smile at her again, never feel him hold her or kiss her. She would be alone... utterly alone... forever.

"No!" she screamed again and again. "No!"

After becoming hoarse, she felt two hands pulling her up and away from Severus. She shot a look around and saw Harry holding her, tears streaming down his face as well.

She struggled to get out of his grasp. "No, Harry! I won't leave him. I won't leave him again!"

She broke free and fell back on Severus still body, sobbing hysterically.

"I won't leave you again, Severus. I won't leave you again!"

She cried it over and over again. She begged him to come back to her, but he didn't stir. She refused to leave him, but her cries went unheard. Severus Snape was no more.

A/N: Next up: Are you in the beyond? I think you are!

Yes, he's really dead. Don't kill me, please. I assure you, this story will have a happy ending. (No, I do not consider Ron and Hermione being together as a happy ending. That's more of a tragedy.) Please stick with me, and trust me. I promise I won't let you down. Well, unless you want some other outcome than the one that I've thought up. Then possibly I'll let you down... but I'm rambling.

A big hug and cyber applause will go to anyone who can figure out how this will have that happy ending. There have been a couple of clues as to how this might work out, but they are somewhat subtle and happened in previous chapters. Good luck. I'll be hiding away in a cave in the mountains of Wyoming while you ponder this. Don't look for me. The area is vast and filled with coyotes... and moose... giant moose. Moose that trample down marauders looking to take out their wrath on a poor fanfic author. Consider yourselves warned.

Chapter 41

Chapter 41 of 46

Severus is saddened by his death.

Chapter 41

Severus opened his eyes and was surprised to see nothing but white. It was a bright white... rather misty. It felt cool on his face. He sat up and glanced down at himself. He wore a white Wizarding robe. White wasn't really his color, but, he was glad to have something on at all. He continued to look around. The haze seemed to be thinning somewhat, and he began to make out shapes in the fog. He stood and started walking around tentatively.

He finally began to recognize his surroundings. It was the Room of Requirement. He was in the room where Hermione and he had spent so much time. It looked brighter somehow, though. He wondered where he really was. Thinking back to what he could remember before he passed out, he was shocked to realize that he was dead. He remembered Lucius screaming *Avada Kedavra*, and everything had gone black.

Crap, he thought. *Now I'll never be with Hermione.* He frowned and fell into melancholy, but the intense grief he expected from that realization didn't come. Perhaps incredible sadness did not exist in this place.

He wandered over to a white couch that was now completely visible and sat down. He wondered what he was supposed to do now.

The door to the Room of Requirement opened, and a woman walked in. She was beautiful. She wore a white flowing dress that fell in layers. It swayed around her as she walked. Her eyes were green, and she had a white rose in her beautiful, long, red hair.

"Lily?" he said.

She came to him and embraced him. "Severus!" she said enthusiastically.

"Why are you here, Lily?"

"I have come to be your guide," she explained.

"Guide?"

"Yes," she said. "Your guide to the beyond."

"Oh," he said flatly. "Why you?"

"I requested it, Severus. I wanted to be your guide because I am indebted to you for the things you did to help my son. You have been a true friend to him and have saved his life numerous times."

Severus only nodded and looked down.

"Aren't you ready to go on?" she asked curiously.

He shook his head no.

"It's because of Hermione, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Lily, I waited for her for so long, and when I finally got her, I got killed. It's just not fair."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "I know what you mean. James and I were so happy to have Harry, and then before we knew it, we were pulled from his side."

"I tried to save you," he told her.

"I know."

Severus raised his head and met her eyes. "Lily, I'm sorry for the way I acted at school. I wish I had never yelled at you like that."

"Sev, you already apologized multiple times." Lily squeezed his shoulder. "Don't worry about it. I forgave you a long time ago, I just should have told you that I had, but life seemed to get very busy, very quickly, and I never found the time."

Lily paused for a minute. "I'm sorry that I was so cruel to you. I should have forgiven you sooner. I don't know what came over me. I was just so hurt by your words and the thought of you becoming a Death Eater. Even though I knew you had been really embarrassed and that's why you called me what you did, I couldn't bring myself to make amends with you." They sat quietly for a moment before Lily continued, her voice very soft. "I was so very impressionable back then, Sev. I let my other friends influence my feelings for you. That was wrong. You were my first Hogwarts friend, and I threw that away because my other friends couldn't accept you. It was incredibly immature of me. Will you forgive me for that?" she asked him tentatively.

He stared at her for a while, surprised at her admitting that she had fault in their 'breakup.' He then slowly nodded, showing her his acceptance of her apology.

"Can I ask you a question?" Lily asked.

"Of course," Severus said.

"If you had your choice, would you continue on, or would you return to the land of the living?"

"I would return immediately. I am not complete without Hermione. She is everything to me." Severus glanced around. "Even a pleasant place like this seems lackluster without her. I have lost her again. It seems that we only ever have a short time together before we are separated." Severus sighed and looked to the ground again. "Now she will go on alone and live her life. She's sure to find love elsewhere. She will not want to be with me after death."

Severus' shoulders drooped in defeat. The sadness he knew would come was starting to drip into his soul, like a cancer. Once again Lily's hand rested on Severus' shoulder.

"If you want to return, you may."

Severus' head snapped up, and he looked at Lily.

"What do you mean? I thought once you were dead, there was no going back. I have no desire to be a ghost, Lily."

"You're right of course. Once you are dead, there usually is no going back. But I have a way to overcome that." She smiled at him and continued. "You see, Severus, when I used my magic to protect Harry, we somehow became magically joined. Harry owes you several life debts. Being joined with him, I can pay back those life debts just as much as he can. I choose to pay you back by restoring your life to you."

Severus' eyes grew wide. "You... you would do that for me?" he asked her simply.

"Severus, you were my best friend in school for a very long time. You have been a best friend to my son. I am indebted to you just as much as he is. I would gladly do that for you."

Severus threw his arms around Lily and hugged her tightly. "Thank you," he whispered.

She patted him on the back. "I am happy to do it, Severus... to finally be able to do something for you after you have done so much for me."

She pulled back and looked at him carefully. "Now remember," she explained to him. "This is a one time thing. If you go and get yourself killed again tomorrow, you are stuck here."

Severus laughed at her. He certainly wasn't planning on getting himself killed again anytime soon.

"Thank you, Lily," he said as everything started to get dim around him again.

oooOOOooo

The first thing Severus noticed was that he could hear again. He heard Hermione hysterically sobbing nearby. Harry was soothing her from somewhere above him.

"Hermione, you need to come with me. You can't stay here any longer. He's gone," Harry pleaded.

"NO!" Hermione cried. "I will not leave him again. I won't, I won't," she sobbed.

Severus tried to move, but found himself still immobile. Trying to speak, he found he could not. Slowly he began to get feeling back in his body. He felt Hermione on top of him. He could tell her arms were surrounding him, and she was holding on to him as if her life depended on it. He wondered if he would be able to breathe with her holding him so tightly. Then he realized he was already breathing shallowly. Finally, he flexed his fingers and realized his paralysis had gone. He put his arms around Hermione and entwined his fingers in her hair.

"It's okay," he told her as she picked her head up and looked at him.

oooOOOooo

Pushing herself forward so she could get a better look at Severus, she shakily extended her hands and felt his face. She touched every part of it as he looked at her. By some miracle he was looking at her, and he had spoken to her.

"Oh! You're alive!" she finally squeaked and put her head down into his chest again and sobbed.

"You're alive! You're alive!"

She looked back up and began to kiss him furiously. Severus smiled at her and said, "I'm alive," between her furious kisses.

Harry was watching the scene in disbelief. "But you were dead," he said incredulously. "We all saw you!"

Severus looked over at Potter and stopped kissing Hermione. He studied Harry's face for a moment before speaking.

"Your life debts are paid," he said succinctly.

He could speak no more, for Hermione wouldn't let him. She showered him with kisses and hugs and cried on his shoulder for quite a while as everyone else slowly left the room to give them some privacy. Hermione finally calmed herself and decreased her crying down to sniffles. Severus and she sat up. He pulled her into his lap as she studied his face.

"How, Severus? You were dead, I'm sure of it."

"Very dead," he conceded.

Hermione touched his face again, making sure he was real. Severus told her everything... about meeting Lily in the beyond and his choice. He explained how he had felt at peace, even though he knew he would not be with her. He looked at Hermione and stared into her eyes.

"I chose to come back to you. I didn't want to be separated from you again," Severus told her. "No matter how peaceful and beautiful it was there, Hermione, it was nothing without you."

Hermione stared into the eyes of the man she loved. *He chose me. He chose to return to me and give up all of that beauty and peace... for me. Would I... Could I have done the same?* His eyes looked back at her. Those eyes had just been vacant, but now were filled with passion and adoration for her. She knew she'd come close to never seeing those emotions in him again. She knew she would have done anything to be right here with him again, watching him look at her like that. *It would have been an easy decision.*

"Did you feel like this when I left?" she asked him quietly.

"Feel like what?"

"Like your entire life had deserted you. Like the rest of your days would be bereft of happiness and nothing would ever change that."

Severus smiled grimly at her. His hand came up to her cheek. "I did. Hermione, I was shattered when you left. It took a long time for me to feel whole again. I, however, knew that we would be reunited again. With my death, you had no such reassurance."

"I wished I had died too," Hermione whispered.

"You mustn't ever think that way, love. What we have should be cherished, not turned to tragedy."

Hermione nodded and smiled wanly at Severus. "Thank you, Severus. Thank you for giving up all of that for me. I couldn't have gone on without you."

He smiled boyishly at her, and she saw the seventeen-year-old Severus hidden behind his older face. "Now you never have to," he said smugly before his lips met hers.

oooOOOooo

Hermione and Severus slowly made their way out of the gallery. They met Draco waiting patiently for them outside. His face was drawn into a tense frown. He was here to say a final farewell to his father, whose body still lay on the Art Gallery's floor.

"Draco, I'm sorry about your father, he gave me no choice. I knew he would kill me, if I didn't kill him," Hermione explained to him sadly.

"I understood what could happen when I agreed to help with this mission. I loved my father, but I was aware of his shortcomings. I just wish I could have convinced him to be a better person."

Hermione pulled Draco into a hug. She felt him stiffen within her embrace.

"I'm sorry, Draco. I would have liked to see him be a better person, too. I wish it could have ended differently."

Slowly he took his hand and patted her on the back.

"You did what you had to do. I don't blame you."

Hermione pulled away and released Draco. She gave him a sad smile and turned back to Severus. She gripped him tightly, afraid that if she didn't, he would disappear. Draco slipped by them and entered the gallery. He wandered up to the lifeless body of his father and knelt beside it, a single tear sliding down his face.

oooOOOooo

Hermione and Severus continued down the hall and back to the site of the battle. Neither of them was quite sure what had gone on during the battle, they only knew that they must have prevailed, or half the Order would not have been surrounding them when Severus had come back to life.

They found Harry, who was giving orders and guiding people to the Aurors who would take the prisoners. Harry turned to them and smiled widely. His grin soon dissolved as he looked to Severus. His expression became serious, and he threw his arms around Severus.

"I'm glad to see you alive again, my friend," he told Severus.

Severus embraced Harry. His voice was filled with emotion. "I am not done making your life miserable yet, young man."

They patted each other on the back and separated, Harry looking a bit embarrassed by his emotional reaction. Severus looked to the ground, not wanting to acknowledge the display either.

"What happened back there?" Harry asked his friend and mentor.

Severus brought his gaze even with Harry's. "I met your mother."

Harry's eyes grew wide.

"Evidently, her magical bond with you gave her the opportunity to use the life debts you owed me to restore my life."

"You saw my mother?"

Severus grinned and nodded. "She was as beautiful as ever, Harry."

"Did you tell her I love her?" Harry said softly.

Severus put his hand on Harry's arm. "Harry, she already knew. I could tell."

Harry smiled to himself at Severus' remark.

"So, I guess we won?" Hermione asked.

Harry nodded. He looked at Hermione curiously. "What happened with Lucius in the Art Gallery? We found three bodies including Malfoy's."

Hermione sobered. "Severus killed one of the body guards, but we were still fighting against Lucius and the other one. When Lucius killed Severus, something snapped in my head. I killed them both with one Killing Curse."

Both Harry and Severus gazed at Hermione in amazement. "One Killing Curse?" Harry asked in disbelief.

She nodded. "I can't even really remember casting it. There was a flash of green light and then everyone was on the floor but me. I could tell they were all dead."

Harry looked over to Severus. "Have you ever heard of anything like that happening before?"

Severus shook his head. "Never," he said.

Harry looked back at Hermione. "Wow," he uttered.

"Very eloquent," Severus murmured.

Harry glared at Severus before rolling his eyes. Hermione had grown to like the sarcasm that went along with Harry and Severus' relationship. Each seemed to live for the chance to one up the other.

"Now, boys," she said as she hooked an arm through each of theirs. "How many times have I asked you to play nice?"

Harry looked over Hermione's head at Severus. "We had better watch ourselves, Severus, or she may kill us both with a wand wave," he said in mock fear.

Severus looked back at Harry. "Kill you maybe, she actually likes me," he snorted.

Hermione laughed as they walked arm in arm out of the Mansion.

A/N: Next up: A surprise visit from Ron

Somehow, the moose wasn't a deterrent. I think I saw some of you sneaking around, aiming wands and exploding rock formations. Do you realize how old that hunk of rock was before you turned it into gravel?

There were some amazing theories as to how things would make themselves right again. I appreciate all of those. They were so intriguing to read. Unfortunately, no one got close to the solution. Remember all those jibes that Harry would have to hang around Severus because he owed him so many life debts? His life insurance policy definitely worked out for him, even if it was in a round about way. Cyber hugs, anyway, to everyone who had an idea about how it would all end up.

So, am I forgiven? You guys are great. Big thanks to my beta Lilith Kayden for turning this around almost instantly.

Chapter 42

Chapter 42 of 46

Ron pays a 'special' visit to Hermione.

Chapter 42

Minerva McGonagall, newest Headmistress of Hogwarts, opened up her paper and read the headline.

Albus Dumbledore sworn in as Minister of Magic.

Today was the official swearing-in ceremony for Albus Dumbledore. He took on the position of Minister in the wake of the death of Lucius Malfoy. His first act as Minister was to repeal all of the intrusive laws that Minister Malfoy had instituted during his short reign. All labor camps have been dissolved, and the extra taxes that have been plaguing our world have been repealed. To celebrate this glorious new day, a parade with the Minister as guest of honor made its way down Diagon Alley. Onlookers cheered their new leader as the older wizard waved jovially to all, throwing lemon drops at the vast crowd as he passed by. This reporter can assure you that the Wizarding world is breathing a collective sigh of relief in the hopes that life will return to normal once again.

Minerva smiled to herself. She was happy for Albus. He'd make a fine leader and enact fair laws. Pondering upon the last lines of the article, she wondered exactly what normal life in the Wizarding world was.

oooOOOooo

Severus knocked on Hermione's door and heard her yell for him to come in. He entered her room and found her lying on the couch. She immediately sprang up from the couch and went to him, surrounding him in a hug.

"It's about time you got here," she told him.

He smiled down at her. "I just saw you at breakfast fifteen minutes ago."

"Look, Mister, if you think I'm going to let you out of my sight for as long as 15 minutes after you went and died on me, you have another thing coming."

Severus smiled down at her and traced her lips with his finger. "Do you have that book I loaned you?" he asked her.

"Oh, I left it on my dresser. Go ahead and get it."

Severus untangled himself from her embrace and went into the bedroom to retrieve the book. He heard a knock on the door as he picked up the large text he had asked her to read. It was an advanced Potions book that would help her prepare for her becoming a Potions Mistress.

From the other room, he heard Hermione exclaim Ronald Weasley's first name. Severus put the book back down and went to the doorway, hiding himself so he could see what Ron wanted without being found out. Being a spy for so long had its advantages. He peered out of the crack in the door and into the other room, seeing Hermione embrace Ron.

oooOOOooo

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed again. "It's so good to see you! It's been so long! I'm glad you came by." She pulled him into the room and sat him down on the sofa while she sat in the chair across from him. "I caught the play-by-play of your Cannons game on the wireless the other day. You were brilliant! I'm so glad you've found something you truly love."

Ron gave her a wide grin. "Thanks," he gushed. "We sure killed the Firebolts. I think that was our best game of the season."

"Oh, Ron, you were wonderful! I couldn't stop being proud of you."

Ron beamed at her. "Thanks, Hermione. I'm glad you caught the game."

"So, tell me what's going on with you? It seems like we haven't seen each other in ages!" Hermione gushed. She was so pleased to see her old friend, especially after not laying eyes on him for months now.

"Well, you know how it is. Girls are always falling all over me. It's really tough being a big Quidditch star. I don't think the Cannons could have done anything this season without me. After every game, I'm swarmed by beautiful women. I don't think I've had a night at home in six months!"

Hermione frowned. This wasn't the Ron she was used to. The old Ron wasn't so full of himself and his abilities. Neither was he a womanizer. She remembered all of the horrid things Severus and Harry had said about him. She had found it hard to believe, but now here was the proof in front of her.

"The team really depends on me. They are constantly telling me how they couldn't ever have become as popular without me for their Keeper!"

Hermione nodded, looking a bit wistful. No matter what Ron was doing in her past, he had usually placed what she had been doing above what had been important to him, especially after not seeing her for a while.

"By the way, I heard you had your hands full toppling Malfoy from power," Ron said with a bit of concern.

Hermione nodded, thankful that he had stopped bragging and had gotten around to asking how she was. "Yes, thankfully all went as planned, and no one on our side was hurt permanently."

"Ginny told me you killed Malfoy?"

She nodded again frowning. "It wasn't my finest hour, Ron, but I did what had to be done."

Ron looked at her seriously. "Hermione, I came to talk about something with you."

Hermione raised her eyebrows in question. "You know you can speak to me about anything, Ron," she told him.

"Ginny said that Severus and you are dating."

Hermione considered Ron before answering. "That's right."

oooOOOooo

From Severus' hiding place, he could see the both of them clearly. He saw a flicker of concern cross Hermione's face at Ron's statement.

"Why, Hermione?" Ron asked with a look of disgust on his face.

She looked confused. "What do you mean, why?"

Ron leaned back on the couch. "I know you were devastated by our breakup and that you're on the rebound, but Severus? He's so old and ugly."

Hermione looked at Ron furiously. "Ron, he is neither old nor ugly. What are you trying to say?"

"Look, Hermione, I know you don't get many offers from men. If it hadn't been for me, you'd probably have been alone for all those years. You know, you're kind of plain... Still, why would you throw your life away on Severus?"

Severus groaned within himself. The boy knew not what he had begun.

Hermione's eyebrows knit together in fury.

"And I suppose you have a better offer for me, then?" Hermione snapped.

Ron brightened considerably. "Of course I do. I want us to get back together. I'll take care of you, Hermione! I know you. Severus doesn't know you like I do. We've been friends forever, and we have history together. I'll make sure you never spend your life alone. I'll treat you right."

"Ron, you would do that for me?" Hermione asked as her hands clasped and came up to her chest in mock gratitude.

"Of course I would, Hermione. We make a great team."

Severus shook his head. The boy was a total dunderhead, if he didn't see what was going to come.

"Oh, Ron!" she exclaimed as she rose from her seat and approached him. "I can't believe that you would be so kind as to take someone as plain as me back, especially with all of those girls chasing you! I'm sure they're much prettier than I am."

"Well, yes, of course they are..."

"You are really sacrificing yourself for me," she continued, ignoring his comment. "Here I thought I would die old and alone, but you're here to rescue me!"

"Aww, Hermione, it's not that much of a sacrifice. We're used to one another. It seems like a natural progression."

"Of course," Hermione said with a flash in her eyes to which Ron was oblivious.

Ron grinned as Hermione came to the couch, but his grin disappeared as she threw herself on top of him and pinned him down on it. Her wand pointed into his cheek. Her mock glee faded away, and a look of fury filled her face as she regarded Ron.

"You know, I don't know why I wasted my time with you for three years, Ronald Weasley, but I can assure you that the best thing I ever did was to get rid of you. You are a self absorbed, jealous, twit who knows nothing about me. You have never treated me right, and I doubt that you would start now. You expect me to return to you so you can accuse me of bedding anyone I look at? Forget it. I would never put myself in such a position again. You will never abuse me the way you did before, is that clear? You can take your offer and shove it. And if I ever hear you say anything against Severus again, I'll hex your tongue right out of your mouth. Is that clear?" She emphasized her question with a sharp poke of her wand into Ron's cheek.

Severus winced at the lashing she had given him, but inwardly, he cheered her. Ron was a twit and deserved everything she had said.

Ron replied in a squeaky voice, "Yes."

She poked him further. "I couldn't hear you."

"Yes, Hermione," he squeaked.

Hermione withdrew her wand and slowly got off of Ron's shaking figure. Severus felt it was time to make his presence known and walked out of the bedroom. Ron's eyes bulged as he saw Severus emerge from the room and head his way. Severus came up to Ron and grabbed him by his robes. He picked him up and dragged him to the door. He walked out into the hall with Ron and pushed him up against the wall.

"Listen, Weasley, I put up with your abuse of Hermione while she dated you because I didn't want to hurt her, but I swear to you, if you ever say anything that upsets her again, I will hex more than your tongue off. Do you understand?"

Ron's voice was even higher when he answered Severus, if that was possible. "Yes, Severus."

"It would be best if you just stayed away from us," Severus said emphatically as he let go of Ron's robes with a look of disgust. "Now get out of here!"

Ron didn't say another word. He spun around and quickly walked down the corridor, trying to save some face by not making a run for it. Severus watched him go, a sneer on his face at his once friend, who now seemed like the stupidest man alive. He turned and went back into Hermione's room and closed the door. He saw her staring out the window with her arms folded and went up to her. She stared pensively out the window.

"Are you all right?" he asked tentatively.

She nodded but said nothing.

"You were magnificent as always, love."

A single tear fell down her cheek. Severus drew her to him and put his arms around her. She pushed away from him and turned to the window again.

"Hermione?" he asked quizzically.

"Am I really that plain, Severus?"

He looked at her in shock. Of all the things Ron had said, she had chosen to believe the biggest lie of all. He was so angry he almost turned and sought Weasley out to kill him, but he knew that would not solve Hermione's sudden self-doubt.

"Hermione, you are beautiful. I wonder every day why someone as lovely as you would want to be around me."

More tears flowed down her face, but she gave Severus a grateful look and a wan smile. "It's like he never grew up in this timeline!" she cried. "He acts as juvenile as he did in our fifth year!"

Hermione tightened her grip on her arms and squeezed herself in exasperation.

"Ugh! Why does he make me so mad?" she cried in exasperation. "How can a few words from him make every positive thing I think about myself just vanish? He has had the ability to make me feel like *nothing* for as long as I can remember! With only a few words from him, I feel inferior and *ugly*." Hermione looked down and sniffed. "He's done it since we first met, but he had calmed down in my timeline. He hadn't said anything hurtful in so long, I just didn't expect him to be so thoughtless."

Severus hugged her again, and she did not pull away. "He is a fool, Hermione. A stupid fool."

"The night of the Yule Ball, Ron ruined my entire evening. I didn't have you to encourage me to return to the dance, I just went back to my room and cried myself to sleep. I had been so excited that Viktor had asked me. Ron hadn't believed that I had a date." She imitated Ron's voice, "*No one would ask out Hermione, she's too plain. She's just lying about having a date. You'll see, Harry, the poor thing will be at the ball all by herself*" she said bitterly. "Then when he saw me with Viktor, he proceeded to berate me for going with him because he was so jealous, he couldn't see straight."

"You were so beautiful that night, I dreamed about you for weeks," Severus divulged.

Hermione looked at him with her mouth agape. "You did?"

He smiled at her and wiped the remaining tears from her face. "Unlike Mr. Weasley, I can appreciate a beautiful woman when I see her."

Hermione's shoulders sagged. "I'm being foolish, aren't I?" she asked him.

"Hermione, he hurt you, do not berate yourself even more by your reaction. But do not let him convince you of a lie. You are hardly plain, Hermione Granger."

Hermione remembered saying the very same words to him a long time ago. She smiled up at him. Severus kissed her on the forehead as she closed her eyes, reveling in his touch and kiss.

"I should have gone ahead and hexed him anyway," Hermione said. "It always made me feel better when I did that in the past."

"Did you make a habit out of hexing Ron?"

"Just a couple of times, when he was completely unbearable."

"I remember when you attacked him with a flock of birds. Did you do that in your timeline too?" Severus asked.

Hermione pulled back a little and gave him a small smile. "Of course I did."

"Do you want me to go after him and hex him for you? Perhaps I could give him a pig's tail or maybe a donkey's head."

Hermione laughed finally, picturing Ron with the head of a donkey. "It might be an improvement," she remarked.

Severus laughed as well. Suddenly, the grin fell from his face, and he looked deeply into Hermione's eyes. "Hermione, don't let him bother you. He is a self centered prat. One day he will find a vapid woman who thinks he is a god. He will marry her and live his life happily being told how wonderful he is. You, however, will have a better life with someone who appreciates not only your stunning good looks, but your amazing mind and talents."

oooOOOooo

Hermione smiled gently at Severus. How could Ron even try to say that he understood her better than the man before her now? Severus understood everything about her and went out of his way to make her happy. Ron never went out of his way to do anything or make anyone but himself happy.

Her smile widened before she kissed Severus on the cheek.

"I'm glad he came by," she said finally.

Severus looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

"He gave me the opportunity to see how wonderful you are, once again. He said he understood me, but it's obvious he doesn't. You, however, appreciate me as I am. I don't think I'll ever get over just how lucky I am to have you. You are the most amazing man I have ever met, and I love the respect you have for me."

"Oh, well, in that case, perhaps he should come by more often," Severus joked and pulled her into an embrace.

His intense kiss melted away any lingering thought of Ronald Weasley. All there was for Hermione was the man in her arms. He gave her a love that no other man could ever come close to offering her. *Ron who?* was her final, coherent thought before she became lost in the man before her. His kisses carried her away. She could think of nowhere else she'd rather be than right here within the arms of Severus Snape.

A/N: Next up: A slight disagreement.

Severus probably should have gone ahead and hexed Ron, but his concern was for Hermione. I'm sure Ron will get exactly what Severus predicted... and he'll love it... but Severus and Hermione will have the better love and relationship.

Chapter 43

Chapter 43 of 46

A small disagreement.

Chapter 43

Hermione was lecturing in her classroom when Severus appeared in her doorway. He seemed annoyed about something.

"A word, Professor Granger," he demanded.

Hermione looked to the class. "Finish the problems on the page we have been discussing. I will be back in a minute."

She walked to the door and out into the hallway. Severus was glaring at her.

"Why did you tell Shawn Duncan that it was all right for him to rifle through my stores?" Severus said irately. "You know how particular I am about my potions ingredients."

"Severus, I didn't . . ."

"I can't believe you would be so callous as to tell him to do that!" Severus concluded.

Hermione looked at him crossly.

"Severus, I would never tell a student to do such a thing!"

"Mr. Duncan said you gave him permission to take frogs and moonshade dust for a private project."

"And you took him at his word?"

Severus stared at Hermione before nodding. Hermione felt anger boiling within her. It was typical of him to jump down her throat for no reason whatsoever.

Hermione lowered her voice and said in a menacing tone, "For your information, Severus, I told him to ask you for help with a project, I did not give him permission to steal from you. What do you take me for, an idiot? Now if you'll excuse me, I am in the middle of a class."

She wheeled around and stalked back into the classroom, leaving Severus looking upset.

oooOOOooo

Severus stood outside the classroom and mulled over her words. He had overreacted. Of course she would never tell a student such a thing. She understood what his stores meant to him. Why had he been such a fool? He turned and started walking away from her classroom.

He had been irate all day. Two classes had exploded cauldrons, and he had been in the infirmary with students for most of the morning. When he had returned to his classroom he had been furious to see Duncan rifling through his bottles. He had yelled at the boy, and Duncan had seemed as if he would cower so low, he would disappear into the floor. Then Duncan had given the ridiculous accusation about Hermione. Having been so irate and tired from the morning, Severus hadn't given the excuse a second thought and had wheeled around in his fury and headed for Hermione's classroom to give her a piece of his mind. His actions had been foolish.

He needed to apologize. Hopefully, Hermione would calm down and be able to listen to him.

oooOOOooo

Hermione stormed to her desk and looked about the class nastily. She saw several pairs of eyes avert themselves from her and look back down to their work. *They had better ignore me, or there will be points taken, and taken quickly.*

The nerve of Severus, yelling like that! How dare he accuse me without even knowing all of the facts? And Shawn Duncan! He had outright lied to Severus! I was only trying to help the boy, and he behaves like that? It will be a long time before I ever try to help that young man again.

Hermione fumed for the rest of class and for the following class. Soon dinner came, and she was seated in the Great Hall, picking at her food. Severus had not come in yet, and she was thankful for that. She had no desire to see him right now. She popped a piece of chicken in her mouth and looked over at the Gryffindor table while she chewed it. There was Shawn Duncan laughing with his friends. She looked at him crossly.

At that moment, Severus sat down beside her. She glanced over at him and frowned. She could tell he was about to say something, but she was in no mood to hear it. Pushing her chair back, she haughtily got up and left the table, leaving Severus to stare after her sadly. Hermione wound her way around the table and went over to Shawn, who was still laughing loudly.

"Mr. Duncan, 50 points from Gryffindor and detention in my classroom immediately following dinner, is that understood?" she said sharply.

The grin fell from Duncan's face as he looked up at her. "Yes, Professor," he said sheepishly.

Hermione glared at him and stormed out of the Hall, returning to her classroom to await Shawn Duncan and his detention.

She didn't need to wait long. Within half an hour there was a knock at her open door. She looked up to see Duncan standing there sheepishly.

"Come in, Mr. Duncan."

Shawn came in with his head down.

"Do you mind explaining to me what it was you thought you were doing today in Professor Snape's classroom?" Hermione asked haughtily.

"I... I... I'm sorry, Professor Granger. I didn't mean any harm. I thought I could sneak some ingredients for something my friends and I want to brew. I didn't expect to get caught. When Professor Snape came in, he was so irate I said the first thing that came into my head."

"So, you're saying that the first thing that came into your mind was a lie?" Hermione asked.

Shawn looked down and nodded.

"Mr. Duncan, do you know the meaning of the word integrity?"

Shawn nodded his head again.

"Good, I want a two foot parchment on the meaning of integrity and how it affects you personally and those around you. You may begin now. You are excused when you have finished."

Shawn turned and settled into a desk. Hermione watched him gather parchment and a quill before she pulled out some essays that needed marking and began to work on those. She had a hard time concentrating. Her mind kept going back to the argument Severus and she'd had earlier that day. It was so typical of him to just assume the worst of her and bite her head off for it.

A small voice inside her head said, *No, it isn't. He's not like that anymore. That was a different Severus.*

Hermione paused. It really wasn't typical of him, was it? She had confused him with his counterpart and had acted accordingly, assuming the worst of him and shielding herself from more insults by avoiding him. She was disturbed by her reaction. Would she do this every time they had a fight? That wouldn't be very healthy for their relationship. She looked down at the paper she was grading, but was troubled by her realization.

She sat deep in thought until Shawn came up to her desk with his essay. She took it and glanced at it. Placing it on her desk, she looked up at her student.

"Mr. Duncan, I trusted you and gave you a suggestion that I thought might help you. You in turn, abused my trust, tried to steal supplies, and then, when confronted, lied about it. You caused Professor Snape and me to have a disagreement because of your lies which he and I have yet to resolve. I promise you, I will think twice the next time I have the urge to help you in any matter. You're dismissed."

Shawn hung his head in shame. "I apologize, Professor Granger. It will never happen again."

"I hope not, Mr. Duncan, I would like to regain my trust in you."

She went back to her marking, signaling the termination of the conversation. Duncan slunk out of the room like a sad puppy. A few minutes later there was a knock on the door. Hermione didn't even look up.

"Did you forget something, Mr. Duncan?" she called with her nose buried in an essay.

After a minute of silence she looked up to see Severus standing in front of her desk holding a bouquet of dark purple tulips. The flowers were so dark they looked black. She looked from the flowers to Severus' face. He looked somewhat scared. It almost made Hermione laugh, but then she remembered she was supposed to be angry with him.

"Hermione, I brought a peace offering," he said as he extended his arm and offered her the flowers.

She reached out and took the flowers, admiring their beauty. "How did you know these were my favorite?" she asked as she made a vase appear and arranged them into it.

"Your counterpart loved them so I figured they would be a good choice."

At the mention of the word counterpart, Hermione frowned. She turned her attention fully to the flowers, primping them up. Severus cleared his throat, causing her to glance his way.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I had a really rough morning. I know that doesn't excuse anything, but I was at my wits end already when I caught Duncan in my stores. I didn't even think twice when he fed me that story. I just reacted."

Hermione looked back at the flowers. They were really beautiful. She mulled over her feelings. She was feeling guilty. He had been the one who had been in the wrong, why did she feel badly? She knew exactly why, but she was unwilling to discuss it right now. She turned and looked back at Severus.

"It's okay. We all reach our limit now and then," she said blandly.

"Hermione, please, I'm sorry," he continued.

"Take a walk with me," she ordered and turned before he could answer.

oooOOOooo

She walked out the door and down the hall. Severus hurried to catch up with her. He watched her covertly as they walked. She seemed deep in thought, and he was reticent to interrupt her musings. He tentatively continued to walk beside her, not uttering a word.

Before he knew it, they had left the castle and were walking toward the lake. Neither of them said anything. After a few more minutes of silent walking they reached the shoreline of the lake. Hermione sat on the grass. Severus mulled over whether she wanted him to sit, but finally decided to settle himself down next to her. She stared out at the water and said nothing. Severus waited nervously, wondering when the tongue-lashing would begin, but she didn't yell, she didn't tell him he was a jerk, she didn't break up with him. She did nothing.

"Hermione?" he called to her softly after waiting for what seemed like a century.

Hermione continued to stare straight ahead. "You know, in my past you used to always speak to me like that."

Severus hung his head in shame.

"When you did it today, I found myself retreating into the defensive mode that I used to use with you. It was as if I was back in my own time, trying to shield myself from your wrath. I just reacted and then I avoided you, just like I used to do."

"I remember the memory of me blowing up at you for nothing. I did that all the time?" Severus asked in shock.

"Yes. The memory I showed you was only one of the times you screamed at me for doing something with which I had no part. You often were quick to jump to conclusions and blame me for things that weren't my fault. Many times I had to be on the defensive around you," Hermione admitted.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I wish you never knew that other Severus Snape. He was nothing but a selfish, angry man."

"But you're not like that, Severus," she said as she looked down.

He snorted, "Not usually. I'm rather ashamed of my actions today."

"And I am ashamed of mine," Hermione said.

"You have every right to be upset with me."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't mean that. I'm upset that I fell back into old habits so easily. I even felt myself thinking of you in the negative light that I used to do with your counterpart when he was terse with me. I'm sorry I confused you with him. I will try to not let that happen again."

"Hermione, please stop chiding yourself. It must be difficult to reconcile the differences between myself and my counterpart. I didn't help by blowing up at you. Will you forgive me?"

Hermione finally looked at Severus. "Of course I forgive you. It was a simple disagreement. Everyone loses it now and then."

Severus studied Hermione. He wondered if they could really work this out. She would always see him as that nasty git that he had been. She would eventually get fed up and leave him.

"Perhaps we shouldn't continue this relationship," he said quietly.

Hermione looked at him in shock. "What?" she exclaimed.

"I can't erase what I did to you before, Hermione. It will just bring you pain thinking of it. I'm not sure it's possible for you to forget how I used to be."

Hermione grabbed Severus' robes and pulled him toward her. "Severus, you're right, it's not possible for me to forget how you used to be, and I'm glad about that. I cherish the changes you've made. You did that for me. Every time I think of those differences, I feel the love that you have for me. Please don't push our relationship away because I messed up and got lost in the past."

"But I hurt you back then," Severus said sadly.

Hermione surrounded his face with her hands and drew it toward her. "And I know you would never do that to me again, Severus. Please, don't throw us away."

"I don't want to hurt you, Hermione."

She smiled beautifully at him. "I know that. I love you for who you are now, not who you were in another life. I'm not worried that you'll turn into that other Severus Snape. I know that you won't."

The fear left Severus as she spoke to him. He would not lose her because of his stupidity or because of his counterpart's actions. He would cherish her forever. He pulled her close and kissed her.

"I would be a fool to let you go," he told her finally.

"That's for sure," she joked, giggling at him before she was lost in his kisses again.

A/N: Next up: The Willow tree.

Only two chapters and an epilogue of fluffer-nutter left!

Chapter 44

Chapter 44 of 46

Severus and Hermione visit Hogsmeade.

Chapter 44

"So, what do you want to do in Hogsmeade this weekend?" Severus asked Hermione.

She looked up from the tests she was grading and put her quill to her mouth and nibbled the end.

"I haven't any idea. I haven't really thought that far ahead yet," she confessed. "Do you have anything in mind?"

He grinned cunningly. "Just to have a nice time with you."

She smiled back at him and went back to grading papers as he kissed her neck.

oooOOOooo

Hermione held Severus' hand as they strolled down the street. They had just left Honeydukes with a bag of candy. Hermione offered the bag to Severus, and he pulled out a chocolate truffle. He popped it in his mouth and savored the flavor for a bit before turning to Hermione.

"Did you want to go to Madame Puddifoot's?" he asked her.

She gave him a sidelong glance. "I don't care how much you've changed, Severus Snape, I know you wouldn't be caught dead in there unless you were keeping students from snogging one another."

He laughed. "That sounds like a great idea! Let's go."

He pulled her along, as she laughed at him. Soon they were peering into the small teashop. There were eight couples in the shop, all students. All of them were behaving themselves. Severus heaved a huge sigh.

"There's no action in there, I'm afraid," he said glumly.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. He looked at her with an even more pitiful look, and she burst out laughing. Turning, they went back the way they came. Soon they had reached the end of the street. They were now facing the large field where they had been attacked all those years ago. Hermione looked over at the field and caught her breath. The Willow tree stood majestically in the center of the field, just as it had in the past.

"It's still here!" she exclaimed, rushing over to it.

Severus smiled as he caught up with her. "I put some wards around it so it would be preserved. It seems that a couple of years after you left, Hogsmeade was attacked by Death Eaters. I assume the tree would have been destroyed in the attack had it not been for my protection."

Hermione looked at him curiously. "You saved this tree just for me?" she asked in amazement.

"I had ulterior motives. Every time I look at it, I think of you. At the time, I wanted lots of things to remind me of you, since you weren't around anymore."

Hermione smiled at him gratefully. "Thank you, my love," she said as she gave him a kiss.

"You know," Severus said as he pulled back from her lips, "there's a rumor that this tree is surrounded by buried treasure."

Hermione gave him a doubtful look.

"Really," he said. "I bet if you waved your wand around it, you might find something valuable."

Hermione laughed at him.

"Go ahead, try it," he urged.

Hermione continued to look at him dubiously, but pulled out her wand and began the spell. Soon she saw a part of the ground underneath the Willow begin to glow. Her head snapped back to Severus.

"What did you do?"

"I assure you, witch, I had nothing to do with this," he retorted with a smile.

Hermione cleared the snow from around the tree and dried the ground where the glow emanated. She knelt down and looked expectantly at Severus.

"Well, go ahead, it's your treasure," he told her.

She flicked her wand quickly. The dirt came up from the ground revealing a small ring box that had been buried in the earth. Hermione stared at it hesitantly before she reached into the hole and fished it out. She stared at the box for a long time.

"Well, aren't you going to open it?" Severus asked quietly.

She looked over at him but didn't say a word. Grasping the box she flipped it open and uttered a gasp. Inside was a beautiful engagement ring. It had a thick gold band and centered on it was a square cut diamond solitaire. Hermione looked nervously up to Severus.

"Hermione, will you marry me?"

Tears streamed down her face as she threw her arms around Severus. "Oh, of course I'll marry you!" she exclaimed.

Hermione kissed Severus soundly. Fulfillment filled his soul.

She agreed! We will always be together. All of the years of waiting for her... now she is finally mine! I swear I will never let her go again.

He reveled in her closeness as he kissed her tenderly. Finally they separated from each other. Severus motioned to the ring box in her hand.

"The ring has an inscription on it," he told her.

She pulled the ring from the box and examined the inside of it. She read the inscription aloud.

"My eternal treasure," she said. "Severus, that's beautiful."

"You're the one who is beautiful," he told her.

He took the ring from her hand and placed it on her finger. Hermione gasped as she felt the ring slide up her finger and take its rightful place on her hand. She looked down on it, filled with emotion. She looked back at Severus.

"I can't believe that you are finally mine!" she cried. "I love you, Severus."

"And I you," he said before kissing her senseless.

oooOOooo

Severus and Hermione sat next to each other in the Great Hall. It was dinner time, and everyone was chatting away with abandon. Hermione smiled to herself and looked down at her hand. No one had noticed the engagement ring yet. She couldn't wait to see the staff's faces when they realized.

Sybill Trelawney had wandered down while Hermione was deep in thought, so when her voice came from her side, Hermione jumped slightly. She turned and saw that Sybill was speaking to her.

"Hermione," the Seer said in her strangely low voice.

Hermione looked at her quizzically.

"I have had a vision about you."

"Really?" Hermione remarked sarcastically.

"You are in grave danger!" Sybill warned.

Hermione almost choked on her food. She looked incredulously at Severus and then back to Trelawney.

"What is it this time, Sybill?"

"The one you are involved with is dark!"

"Perhaps I like him that way," Hermione responded.

"You are in danger!"

"I thought we had established that fact," Hermione said blandly. "Wait, let me guess. This person I'm close to, he is dark and dangerous, right?"

"You have finally come in contact with your inner eye!" Sybill rejoiced.

Hermione rolled her eyes as Severus scowled, making Sybill eye him provocatively.

"Severus, I have read in the cards that you will deepen a relationship with a woman. After all of this time, we can finally have the relationship you so desire. I have longed to have you near me."

Hermione looked over at Severus curiously. His scowl deepened. Hermione turned back to Trelawney.

"So, if he's dark and dangerous for me, why is he fine for you?"

Sybill came close to Hermione. Her glasses made her eyes look like saucers.

"You are involved with Severus?" she asked curiously.

"I'm his fiancé," she told her, waving her fingers in Sybill's face so her ring sparkled in the light. "Did you see that in your crystal ball?"

"Gah!" Sybill shrieked and pulled back.

She got up from the table and hurried from the room muttering to herself about life being unfair and all the good one's being taken. Hermione watched her retreat, smiling at her quick departure. She turned back to the table to see every eye on her. Grasping Severus' hand, she smiled coyly and waved her ring at them again. Minerva was the first to get her bearings.

"Severus, Hermione, congratulations!" Minerva said as she burst out of her seat and hugged the two of them.

Murmurs and exclamations of congratulations were given by the entire staff. Suddenly, Minerva, in her capacity as new Headmistress, called attention in the Hall.

"Students, I would like to alert you to some exciting news. Professors Granger and Snape are engaged to be married."

There was thunderous applause from all four tables. Wolf whistles and cat calls were heard from the Slytherin table, and Hermione was surprised that she was getting such an acceptance from them. After all, Severus was their head of house; they were quite protective of him. Hermione glanced at Severus and saw him looking a bit embarrassed. Nonetheless, he raised his hand and waved at them, forcing a smile onto his face. She followed suit and waved also.

Suddenly the hall erupted in a chant. "Kiss her, kiss her," the students chanted.

Hermione blushed and looked to Severus. He blanched. Public displays of affection weren't something that Severus Snape would readily agree to in any timeline. He looked over to her. She shrugged her shoulders. Suddenly, his eyes smoldered with emotion. Throwing propriety to the wind, his head slowly closed in on hers as he whispered into her ear, "I will treasure you forever."

He then kissed her for all to see. The students went wild as Severus and Hermione forgot everyone and lost themselves in each other. They finally pulled apart when Minerva put her wand to her neck and cleared her throat loud enough to be heard over the chaos that was going on in the hall. Severus grinned at Hermione, and she grinned back.

"I'm glad everyone approves," Hermione remarked.

"I am too," Severus agreed as he kissed her again, making the Hall erupt in more cheers.

A/N: I hope you enjoyed today's fluff-fest. It seems like we have a wedding to plan. That will be up next! Thanks you, Lilith Kayden, for your beta work. I am deeply indebted to you. Thanks to everyone else for sticking with the ups and downs of this story!

Chapter 45

Chapter 45 of 46

The wedding!

Chapter 45

Hermione sat in front of the mirror as Ginny Potter combed, pulled, and maneuvered her hair. It was her wedding day, and she had left her hair to Ginny, not having the patience or ability to make it look as good as she knew Ginny would. She smiled as Ginny piled all of her hair atop her head, pinning it so the curls flowed freely from the top.

"You really do have magnificent hair, Hermione," Ginny mentioned.

Hermione harrumphed. "It is my biggest trial."

Ginny smiled. "I'm sure Severus doesn't think of it that way."

Hermione smiled at her radiantly. She couldn't believe it was finally the day Severus and she would be married. The semester had seemed to drag by, but at last the day had arrived. They had chosen to get married on the last day of school. They found that after their very blatant announcement, everyone down to the last student wanted a part in the festivities.

McGonagall's eyes twinkled at them as if she were Albus Dumbledore when they had requested that classes on the last day of school be cancelled in order to have the wedding.

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," Minerva had gushed. "After a hard year, this will be the perfect ending! It will give the students a chance to relax and to celebrate together before summer starts."

Minerva beamed at the couple. "What are your plans for the wedding?" she asked.

"We were wondering if we could hold it in the Room of Requirement," Hermione explained. "That way we can just have it transform into a reception hall after the ceremony."

Minerva smiled at them and nodded approvingly.

Thus began the planning stage. Invitations had been sent out, designs for the Room of Requirement had been created, and outfits had been bought, among other things. It seemed like Hermione hadn't taken a break for at least two months. Severus had asked her to go on holiday with him, but she had begged off, claiming there was no time for her to breathe, let alone take a holiday. Severus had pouted a bit, but had finally given up. He couldn't wait until they were officially wizard and wife so they could have some time together again.

At long last, the big day had arrived. Hermione stared in the mirror at her hair again. It was already looking great, and Ginny wasn't even half finished.

Hermione turned her attention back to Ginny, who was now arranging the curls at the top of her head to form a cascading updo, her curls dropping elegantly at the back of her head. She left a loose curl to frame each side of her face and picked up hairpins that had white flowers with rhinestone centers in them. She placed them strategically around the base of the updo in a circlet, giving the hairstyle the perfect touch.

Ginny smiled at Hermione. "Well, what do you think?" she asked.

Hermione studied herself in the mirror, not believing that that was truly her hair that looked so marvelous.

"Oh, Ginny, it's perfect!"

Hermione got up and gave her friend a huge hug.

"It's just what I pictured, only better," Hermione gushed.

"It will look wonderful with your dress," Ginny commented.

Hermione glanced over at her dress, which hung on a hanger in her closet. She sighed as she thought of walking down the aisle in it. She hoped Severus would like it.

"Why the big sigh?" Ginny asked.

"I hope Severus likes my dress."

Ginny glanced over at the traditional ivory wedding dress. "It's gorgeous. He'd be an idiot not to like it. And we all know Severus Snape is no idiot."

Ginny noticed the frown on her friend's face.

"You're nervous, aren't you?" Ginny asked Hermione.

"No, of course not!" Hermione said a little too enthusiastically.

"I was nervous when I married Harry too. You remember! I almost ran out of the room in nothing but my slip, I was so flustered."

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad it happened that way in this reality too." Ginny, being Harry's wife, was privy to Hermione's little trek into the past. "You were so cute, Ginny, fretting that he would leave you at the altar!" Her eyes grew wide. "You don't think Severus will change his mind, do you?"

Ginny laughed. "You're just as bad as I was. Just don't leave the room until someone assures you that you have your wedding gown on!"

Hermione grinned at Ginny as she began to apply her makeup.

oooOOOooo

Severus paced back and forth in his black tuxedo, his tails flapping behind him as he whipped around from side to side. Harry sat quietly and watched him.

"You'll wear a hole in the carpet, Severus, pacing like that."

Severus frowned, but continued to pace.

"Why couldn't we have had the ceremony earlier?" he mused. "This is intolerable, having to wait until noon to begin."

"It'll be here before you know it," Harry consoled.

Severus stopped pacing and stared straight at Harry. "You don't think she'll change her mind, do you?"

Harry laughed. "We're talking about Hermione here. She never changes her mind about anything, remember?"

"I keep expecting her to wake up one day and realize she's made a horrible mistake."

Harry scoffed at Severus. "I don't know who you're demeaning more, Hermione or yourself, with that statement," he remarked as he rolled his eyes.

"Harry, you have to admit, she could do much better. I'm practically old enough to be her father."

"I sincerely doubt she sees you as a father figure, Severus," Harry harrumphed. "I swear, Severus. You're intelligent, somewhat funny, and even though you resemble a bat, you're not that bad looking, but I don't think there's a more insecure man on the planet."

Severus frowned at him. "I'm only insecure about Hermione. If you had to wait for Ginny for twenty-five years, you might be having some worries too."

"Severus, she adores you. Lighten up. This is the best day of your life. Stop worrying and enjoy it."

"That's easy for you to say, you've already got the girl."

"It seems to me," Harry said with a furrowed brow, "that you got the girl twenty-five years ago. Calm down! And for heaven's sake, sit down, will you? You're giving me a headache with all that pacing."

Severus dropped into the chair next to Harry and began to fidget with his fingernails.

"Do I need to put you in a body bind?" Harry asked, chuckling as he said it.

Severus gave him a look that would have killed anyone else.

"For heaven's sake, Severus, sit still!"

Severus put his hands besides him. He then began to tap his foot.

"She's going to back out on me, I know it," he said in frustration.

"Do you want me to go check on her?" Harry offered.

Severus' eyes lit up. "Would you?"

"What are friends for?" Harry grumbled.

He got up and left the room, in search of Hermione.

oooOOoooo

There was a knock on the door, and Ginny rushed over and cracked it open.

"Harry, what are you doing here?" Ginny asked as she opened the door wide. "You're supposed to be sitting with Severus."

"I can't take it anymore. He's about to jump out of his skin. I came to make sure Hermione was still here and wanting to marry him."

"Why wouldn't she be?" Ginny asked.

"Severus thinks she's going to leave him at the altar."

Ginny laughed heartily. "No such luck. Come on back." She motioned to him to follow her into the back room where Hermione was. Harry followed her but stopped dead when he saw his friend ready to be wed. He let out a low whistle. Hermione stood in front of a large mirror, making a few adjustments to her dress. The dress was ivory satin with sleeves that stopped just below the shoulder. The bodice was covered in white floral appliqués delicately placed over a satin layer. The white of the floral design beautifully contrasted with the darker ivory of the dress. A layer of the satin swept around her torso in gathers, accenting her bust and was cinched at the side by an ivory satin rose. More floral appliqués went out in rays from where the rose sat. The full skirt was simple, but elegant, flowing in an a-line away from her with the train extending back from it, decorated with more of the floral appliqués.

Hermione turned to Harry and smiled at him.

"You look lovely," Harry admired.

"Thank you," Hermione said.

"I was just here to make sure you hadn't headed for the hills," he said to her.

Hermione gave him a curious look.

"I have a very anxious bridegroom to appease, please tell me you won't run off on him."

Hermione laughed. "And here I thought he was going to be the one to run off on me!"

"You're not serious, are you?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Not really, but I'm a little nervous myself."

Harry crossed the room and gave her a huge hug. "Severus is a lucky man," he commented.

"And I'm a lucky woman."

Harry pulled back and looked her up and down. "You really look beautiful, Hermione. Severus is going to faint dead away when he sees you."

"He had better not. He would hate to miss his own wedding," Ginny piped in.

"He has waited long enough to be wed to you, Hermione," Harry said with a smile. "I guess he won't blow it by fainting."

Hermione tapped him on the arm. "Get out of here. I still have to put on my veil and we're on in ten minutes. Severus probably thinks you ran out on him, too, by now."

Harry smiled and kissed her on the cheek. "Good luck, Hermione. May everything be as wonderful as you have hoped."

With that he left the two women to prepare for the wedding.

oooOOOooo

"Is she still here?" Severus asked anxiously when Harry came back in.

"Yup," Harry replied.

Severus continued his pacing as he cast a glance at Harry. "What took you so long?"

"I was enchanted by her. She looks lovely, Severus. You won't be able to keep your eyes off her."

Severus finally stood still, regarding Harry with an arched eyebrow. "And that is something new?"

Harry laughed. "I've never seen her look so happy, Severus. You two were truly made for each other."

"I just hope she will not regret her decision."

Harry walked over to Severus and shook him. "Will you cut it out? She's ecstatic. She thought you were going to chicken out on her! Calm down already and enjoy your wedding day, for Merlin's sake. It only comes once in a lifetime."

Severus sighed, "Of course you're right. Shall we be off?"

"Let's go get you married," Harry said with a smile.

oooOOOooo

The Room of Requirement looked amazing. It formed a huge hall with large arched windows lining the walls. They were enchanted to show a spring meadow and a beautifully sunny day. Severus and Harry stood at the front of the hall underneath a mass of green vines that intertwined to form a large arch. The arch was bedecked with white roses all throughout it.

Behind the men was a waterfall that started at the ceiling and coursed straight down into a large pool that had white swans swimming gracefully in it. Green lily pads were scattered throughout the pool, each one holding a single white rose. The pool turned into two small streams that babbled along the edges of the hall, giving a peaceful feel with their babbling over rocks as they led to the back of the hall to form two smaller pools, also adorned with swans and lily pads.

The hall itself was huge. It had to be. Every single student in the school was in attendance and many friends and family were there also. Even the media had shown up, intent on covering this high-profile wedding of two war heroes. Rita Skeeter stood in the very back of the hall, a Quick-Quotes Quill hurriedly scribbling as she murmured her description of the hall and everyone in it. Other reporters were doing much the same for their respective agencies.

Hermione's parents sat in the front row, beaming from ear to ear. Hermione had decided to walk down the aisle alone. Wizarding weddings did not require anyone to be 'given away,' and Hermione was fine with not honoring the Muggle tradition. Molly and Arthur Weasley sat next to her parents. They beamed from ear to ear. Sybill Trelawney sat behind them, muttering to herself and shaking her head now and then. The rest of the faculty were scattered among the other guests. Most of the Weasley children were sitting near their parents. Even Ron had made an appearance, a lovely woman on his arm. Ginny had explained to Hermione that he had begun dating a Quidditch fan soon after his visit to Hermione and Severus and his inept attempt to reconcile with her. Hermione had smiled when she had found this out. It seemed Severus was right, and Ron had already found a woman who would kiss his feet. They were set to be wed in three months.

Harry and Severus waited patiently for the ceremony to begin. Harry was the one who waited patiently, actually. Severus was still a bundle of nerves. Harry admired the pool in front of them while Severus fidgeted beside him. Harry looked over at his friend.

"Severus, deep breaths," he advised.

Severus breathed in and out a couple of times, finally beginning to relax. Of course, that was when the music for Hermione's entrance started. The chords resulted in him standing ramrod straight, a look of terror on his face.

Hermione turned the corner, and Severus' terror was immediately replaced with a look of sheer devotion. His bride was coming toward him, her eyes filled with love for him. She was an incredible vision. He had never seen a more beautiful woman in a more beautiful wedding dress.

Harry leaned over toward him and whispered, "I told you she was stunning."

"Stunning does not begin to express what she is, Harry," Severus murmured and took in his bride some more.

Harry had been right; Severus couldn't keep his eyes off her. It seemed to take forever for her to draw next to him. She flashed him a shy smile. His grin became so wide, he thought his face might crack. They turned to the front of the hall, where Albus Dumbledore was just settling in to perform the ceremony.

"Today, ladies and gentlemen, we are here to celebrate the union of Hermione Granger to Severus Snape. This binding has been a long time in the making, and I personally have never seen more devotion and love between a couple... ever. They have overcome many obstacles and stand here as a testament to their undying love."

Albus' eyes twinkled as he regarded his two friends before him.

"Severus, will you take Hermione's wrist, please," he directed.

oooOOOooo

The couple turned toward one another. Severus gently placed his hand around Hermione's wrist, and she did the same around his, stealing a glance into his eyes. He looked at her with such intensity she thought her insides would melt. How had she gotten so lucky to find such a love from this man? She gave him a small smile and continued to stare into his eyes as Albus held his wand over their clasped hands and pronounced the binding ceremony.

"Hermione Jean Granger, do you promise to always love and support Severus Tobias Snape as your husband, lifting him when he is in need of lifting, and being his constant companion from now until you leave this Earth?"

"I do," Hermione uttered.

A golden band surrounded their clasped wrists.

"Severus Tobias Snape, do you promise to always love and support Hermione Jean Granger as your wife, lifting her when she is in need of lifting, and being her constant companion from now until you leave this Earth?"

"I do," Severus uttered, barely able to keep his voice steady. Unable to believe that after all of this time, Hermione was finally to become his and his alone.

Another golden band surrounded their wrists. Albus touched his wand to their wrists.

"With the power I hold, I seal this binding and vow with my authority. You are now husband and wife, never to be separated again as long as you live. May you always be as happy as you are today."

With his pronouncement, a third gold band encircled the other two, joining them and making a braided chain that surrounded their wrists. The chain glowed brightly for a few seconds and then disappeared into their joined wrists. Hermione and Severus had been watching the band bind them together. Hermione felt a jolt as the band disappeared and signified that Severus was now her husband. She felt like laughing with joy as she realized that Severus was finally hers. Albus smiled at the two as they looked again into each other's eyes.

"You may kiss the bride," he offered jovially.

Severus looked to his bride. Hermione looked to him and saw his eyes dancing at her. She marveled at the giddiness she saw in the usually austere man before her. He smiled widely at her, making her heart beat faster. A tiny, low-pitched giggle escape his lips before he touched them to hers and kissed her soundly.

Hermione didn't know what she had been expecting when he kissed her. She knew they wouldn't be kissing passionately in front of hundreds of guests, but his chaste kiss was the most amazing kiss she had ever received in her entire life. His little giggle before he bestowed it upon her had made her heart skip a beat and her chest explode with love for him.

His lips pressed to hers were better than anything she could have imagined. She felt in them his longing for her to be his, his love for her, his never ending devotion to her. She was his everything...his Hermione. She took everything he had to offer and reveled in it. He was finally hers. They had gone through so much to be here together. He was hers now... her Severus... and he would be forever. The two didn't even hear the cheers that erupted in the hall. All they knew was each other. They were finally one. Their love had endured the separation of time and now they finally had each other forever. Life was good.

A/N: Just an epilogue left! Can you believe it? It only took forty-five chapters to get these two together forever. Major thanks to my beta, Lilith Kayden. She has a wonderful eye for detail. Thanks to you, too, dear reader, for sticking with this, even through the tough times... and not killing me.

Chapter 46: Epilogue

Chapter 46 of 46

A peek into the future.

Epilogue

Because of the changes in the timeline, the ages of Harry's children do not go along with Canon.

Hermione awoke to a presence at the side of her bed. The dark form was sniffing. Hermione opened her eyes and looked to her five-year-old daughter.

"Emily, what's wrong?" she asked.

"I had a bad dream," the little girl sniffed.

"Oh! Do you want to talk about it?" Hermione asked.

She could barely make out the distinct shaking of the girl's head in the dark.

"Come here," Hermione soothed.

She reached out and took her daughter by the waist, hoisting her onto the bed. She moved the girl over her body and in between Severus and her. Emily's straight dark-blond hair fell over Hermione's face as she lifted her over herself. Severus shifted a little and cracked his eyes open.

"Emily, why are you in our bed?" he asked his child.

"I had a bad dream, Daddy."

"Did you want to talk about it, sweetie?" Severus asked her.

Her tiny arms encircled her father, and she said everything hurriedly.

"Mommy was walking out by the lake, and the squid grabbed her and dragged her into the water!"

Severus rubbed Emily's back.

"It's okay, Emmy. It was only a dream. You know dreams are not real."

Emily sniffed. "I know," she said quietly.

Severus kissed the top of her head.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Are you ready to go back to bed now?"

She nodded.

"Do you want me to tuck you back in?"

She shook her head. "Mommy do it."

Hermione smiled to herself as she dragged herself out of bed. She extended her hand and took her daughter back to her room and securely tucked her in again for the night. She returned to bed, expecting to find Severus back asleep, but he wrapped his arm around her when she laid back down.

"All better?" he asked.

"She was asleep before I pulled the covers over her."

Hermione pulled herself closer to Severus and put her arm over his chest. She was just falling back to sleep when there were urgent wails heard in the next room. She cracked her eyes open and moaned.

"I'll get him," Severus told her.

"He's probably hungry, Severus," she mumbled.

"Leave everything to me," he assured her.

She was back to sleep before he left the room.

Going quietly into the baby's room, Severus stared down into the crib at his wailing son. The little black haired boy wiggled, and his face crunched up in annoyance as he cried.

Severus reached in and lifted the little boy out of the crib, immediately quieting him. Severus sat the boy in the crook of his arm and looked at him.

"What's all the hubbub about, Sebastian?"

The baby smiled at him and grabbed his nose. Severus rolled his eyes. Each of their three children had had a love affair with his nose, but Sebastian put them all to shame. The boy overlooked favorite toys, pacifiers, and bottles and demanded Severus' honker. Severus wondered why they even bothered buying any toys for the eight-month-old little boy. He was only happy when he had a hold of Severus' nose. He even went so far as to suck on it. It was at the most inopportune times also. Severus would be overseeing a detention and his boy at the same time. Little Sebastian would reach for his Dad's nose, insert it in his tiny mouth, and commence sucking and gurgling. Of course, the student would chuckle when he or she noticed. How was Severus supposed to have order when this baby made him into a laughing stock?

Severus emerged from his musings and tapped his wand over the bottle that was on the changing stand, warming it for Sebastian.

"Mom says you're hungry," he told the boy matter-of-factly.

Picking up the bottle, he got Sebastian into a more comfortable position and inserted the nipple into the little boy's mouth. The baby sucked greedily at the bottle.

"It would seem that your mother is right," Severus mused as he settled himself into the rocking chair between the crib and changing stand.

Sebastian pulled the bottle from his mouth and gave Severus a big grin, his black eyes meeting his father's and seeming to smile too.

"Now then, Sebastian, this isn't play time," Severus said quietly as he reinserted the bottle into the boy's mouth.

"Finish your meal and get back to sleep," he ordered.

The baby smiled at him again and reached for his nose.

"Come on, take the bottle," Severus murmured.

The baby began to suck vigorously again. Severus rocked him and watched him eat, reflecting once again on the miracle that was birth. He had watched his beautiful Hermione carry all three of their children, and he'd had the privilege of seeing them be born. Each and every one had been a treasure to behold. He remembered holding their first child, Marcus, for the first time ten years ago. His curly black hair forming a little bush atop his head, Severus had marveled at how perfect he was, even though he had been the smallest baby Severus had ever seen. He had held the baby reverently and shown him to Hermione. She had smiled with her beautiful smile at the boy. In that moment, Severus had finally felt it would be possible for him to share her smile with another person on the Earth.

They had been blissfully happy before the children came along, but they had found that something they never even knew was missing had suddenly filled their lives with the arrival of Marcus. Hermione was the consummate mother; kind, caring, loving, and watchful.

Coming back to reality, Severus noticed that finally Sebastian's eyes had drooped shut, and the bottle lay at an odd angle against Severus' chest. The little boy's mouth hung open from when he was suckling. Severus quietly rose and placed the boy back in his crib, hoping that he wouldn't awaken again. Straightening up, he quietly left the room and headed back to bed.

Severus crawled back in with Hermione and pulled the covers over him. His wife was facing him, but was fast asleep. He admired her as she slept. She had not seemed to age in the twelve years they had been married. Well, he knew deep down that she had, but she was still as beautiful as ever, if not more so.

As if she had sensed his staring, she cracked her eyes open at him.

"Did he need to be fed?" she asked sleepily.

Severus pushed her hair out of her face and told her yes.

"Thank you for taking him. He's kept me up for the last three nights. I don't think he'll ever sleep through the night."

"He just can't get enough of his mother," Severus mused.

"Very funny," Hermione replied before placing her arm around his chest and snuggling up to him.

They held each other in a loving embrace as they both fell back to sleep.

oooOOOooo

"Mom, Dad! It's time to get up!"

Severus groaned as his oldest child played alarm clock for them. He glanced at the real clock and noticed it was already eight in the morning. Hadn't they just been up a couple hours ago? He felt Hermione stir next to him. She sat up.

"Come on, we have plenty to do before the picnic," she said as she hauled herself out of bed.

"I suppose," he said, frowning, as he dragged himself from the comfort of the bed. "When are we meeting Harry and Ginny?"

"At eleven o'clock. That will give the kids plenty of time to run around before we eat."

"Mm hmm," Severus mumbled as he stumbled over to the bathroom and into the shower.

He quickly disrobed and got in, letting the water course over his body, waking him up. He was letting the water hit his chest with his eyes closed, when he felt two arms encircle his waist.

"Did you want some company?" Hermione purred into his ear.

He smiled devilishly and turned around to face her, wrapping her in his arms.

"I always want your company," he murmured, before kissing her soundly.

oooOOooo

The Snape family made their way out of Hogwarts and out onto the grounds. They were headed for the lake, a picnic basket in Severus' hand.

"Come on!" Marcus demanded, "We'll be late!"

"You can't be late to a picnic, Marcus," Severus said with a roll of his eyes.

"But I can see they're there already!" the boy cried as he pointed.

"You may run along ahead if you can't be patient enough to arrive with the rest of the family."

"Thanks, Dad," Marcus said and sprinted the distance between his family and the Potters, who had set a huge blanket out on the shore of the lake.

Hermione smiled after him.

"You would think he never saw them, the way he acts," she mused.

"Well, we only live in the same castle as they do, they hardly ever get a chance to see one another," Severus commented tartly.

Emily, who was holding her mom's hand, looked up at Hermione.

"Can I run ahead too?" she asked with big eyes.

Hermione laughed. "Go ahead, Emmy," she told her.

Soon the little girl was bounding after her brother.

Hermione looked to baby Sebastian, who was in her arms. "Pretty soon this one will be running right after them," she said.

"Shudder the thought! He's our last child. He can stay a baby forever as far as I'm concerned."

Hermione looked tentatively at Severus. He didn't notice her glance or look of worry because at that moment, Sebastian had made a wild dive for Severus' side. He steadied the baby with his free arm as the boy toppled toward him.

"Perhaps we should switch cargo?" Hermione asked.

"Fine," Severus said as he handed her the picnic basket and lifted Sebastian out of Hermione's arms.

Of course, the baby went straight for Severus' nose, enveloping it in his tiny mouth. Severus could feel his little tongue dance over the top of it. Perhaps he should invent a pacifier in the shape of his nose? He had never met a baby that wasn't enthralled with it.

At long last, they had made it to the blanket and the Potter family. Harry and Ginny smiled up at them in greeting.

"Where did the kids run off to?" Hermione asked, as she looked around.

Harry pointed. "They headed in that direction."

Ginny held three-year-old Lily on her lap. Severus sat next to her and let baby Sebastian giggle and coo at Lily, who laughed at him.

"Baby Bastian laugh!" Lily exclaimed.

Everyone smiled at the toddler and her musings.

Suddenly, the rest of the children came bounding up, eleven-year-old James in the lead, closely followed by Marcus, a ten-year-old Albus, and Emily, who was struggling to keep up with the older kids. They had been ignoring her the whole time, and she decided to plop down on the blanket and play with Lily instead. She got up in Lily's face and started saying nonsense to her in her high voice.

"Mom, can we go by the edge of the Forbidden Forest?" James asked Ginny.

"James, it's called the Forbidden Forest for a reason," Ginny told him.

"We won't go in it, we promise!" James exclaimed.

His statement was followed by wide eyed nods from the other two boys.

Ginny glanced at Harry, who glanced at Severus. Severus turned to the three boys.

"You may play by the edge, but if any of you step one foot in the Forest, this outing is over, is that understood?" He looked at the boys with a stern look that would make most of his students cower at their desks. These three boys just laughed.

"Thanks, Uncle Severus!" Albus said, as they turned and ran away.

Harry leaned back and watched his children run off. James was in the beginning of his first year as a Hogwarts student and felt he knew more about the castle than any of his cousins. He was sadly mistaken, as Marcus and Albus had found just about every secret passageway that existed, even without the use of Harry's Marauder Map.

"Is James adjusting to student life?" Hermione asked. "I wish I could have him in my class already."

"He loves it," Harry mused. "He thinks he owns the place. He wants me to give him breaks in Defense, but I've told him a thousand times, he gets treated just like every

other student in the class. It annoys him to no end!"

"Yes, he thinks I owe him something in Potions also. He's too much like his Grandfather," Severus said, but there was no malice in his words.

"My Dad would never expect things from you, Severus!" Ginny cried.

Severus leveled a look at her that said she was a dunderhead. "I meant his namesake, silly woman!"

"Oh, yeah, of course," Ginny said as she turned red with embarrassment.

oooOOOooo

Soon enough they had summoned the children, and everyone was digging in to lunch. Hermione picked at her sandwich, only taking a few bites before abandoning it on her plate.

"Is something wrong, love," Severus asked her. "You haven't had much of an appetite these last couple of days."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, no, nothing. I'm just not hungry." She looked away and followed Emily, who had already finished eating, and was walking along the shore of the lake, tossing stones in as she came upon them.

The boys were talking about school. James was filling the other two's heads with horror stories of the teachers. Of course, he refrained from saying anything about Severus or Harry. That would be left for when they were out of earshot of their parents.

Soon enough the boys had finished, and had bounded off to the edge of the Forbidden Forest again. Ginny looked over to Hermione.

"So, we're thinking of having another baby," she said excitedly.

Hermione smiled at her. "Really, Ginny? Are you ready for four kids?"

"Oh, what's one more?" Ginny scoffed.

"Sleepless nights," Severus piped in, "as well as diapers that never go away, and nine months of torture while you carry around a basketball in your abdomen."

"Oh, Severus! Come on!" Ginny argued. "Yes, those are all there, but what about the wonder of having a baby in the house?"

"You can have Sebastian, if you'd like. He still doesn't sleep through the night."

"He'd never survive without your nose, Severus," Harry piped in.

"Yes, of course you're right. But then you'd get a taste of what a baby is like once again. One tends to forget, when the child isn't wailing at all hours of the night, how little sleep one gets."

"Oh, Severus, you're such a party-pooper sometimes!" Ginny cried.

"Well, do what you see fit, but as for Hermione and I, we are through bearing children. Isn't that right, Hermione?" He looked to Hermione in confirmation.

Hermione had been eerily quiet throughout the whole conversation. Now she just gave Severus a tight smile and looked back over at Emily.

"Emmy! You're getting a bit close to the water, hon!" she yelled to Emily.

She then quickly got up and rushed over to Emily's side, taking her hand as they began to walk around the lake. Emily looked up into her mother's face as they began their walk and got a troubled look on her own face.

"Is something wrong, Mommy?" Emily asked.

Hermione looked down in surprise. She hadn't realized her emotions had been so evident. Of course, that was nothing new. Severus had always accused her of wearing her heart on her sleeve and being easy to read. She, naturally, felt the same about him; they knew each other so well.

"Oh, honey, everything's fine. I'm just worried about something I need to tell your father."

"What do you need to tell him?"

Hermione flashed a smile down at her youngest. "It's a secret that I can't even tell you yet. But when the time is right, I will tell everyone, okay?"

"Is it a good secret?" Emily said eagerly.

"I think it is, but I'm not sure that Daddy will be very happy," Hermione said with a new frown.

"Are we getting a dog?" Emily yelled and jumped up and down.

Hermione laughed at her lively daughter's enthusiasm. "No, sweetheart, we aren't getting a dog. Let's forget about it right now and have a nice walk."

"Okay, Mommy, if you say so. Did you know that the Merpeople keep Grindylows as pets?" Emily asked excitedly.

"Yes, I had heard that," Hermione told her daughter.

The next ten minutes were spent by Emily talking about everything that came into her head. Hermione counted the changes in conversations. They totaled fifteen. Hermione smiled at her daughter, who had her own penchant for asking questions about everything and anything. She had barely answered one question when Emily had changed subject or asked another. Hermione shook her head. Emily was surely going to be a know-it-all like her mother.

oooOOOooo

Hermione lay in bed in the dark and stared at the ceiling. Severus' rhythmic breathing was soothing to listen to, but her mind was racing a mile a minute. What was she going to do? She had found out yesterday that she was pregnant, but they had not planned on having anymore children, and Severus was happy as a clam with that decision. His comments today at the picnic had proven that to Hermione without a doubt.

She absently felt her stomach, not that there was any sign of a baby yet. She was only about ten weeks along. She had been so involved with school that she hadn't had time to think about her body until it started fighting against her. She had awakened with a queasy stomach for the last several weeks, culminating in her throwing up the morning before and again this morning after Severus had dressed and gone to take care of Sebastian.

The throwing up had clinched it for her, and she had performed the necessary spell, confirming her pregnancy. She had not told Severus, because she was unsure of his reaction. Now she was downright fearful. What would he say? He didn't want anymore children. He was sick of getting up every night to tend a baby. A tear fell from her eye and dropped down her face to the pillow. Hermione rose and left the bedroom to stare out the enchanted window in the sitting room. More tears came freely as she

stared at the moon. It sat above the lake and made the water shimmer with the light from its full face.

She didn't know what to do, or how to tell him. Would he be angry? Would he pretend to be happy, but secretly be miserable? Hermione put her face in her hands and began to sob. She really didn't know what to expect from Severus. He was usually so easy-going, but this was a life changing event, and he could have a terrible temper. She suddenly felt Severus' arms surrounding her as his body pressed into hers from behind.

"What's wrong, love?" Severus asked with concern.

Hermione stiffened at his presence. She hadn't meant to wake him, and now she would be forced to tell him her news. Severus turned her toward him and looked at her with concern.

"Why are you crying?"

Hermione struggled to control her tears and hormones. She looked into Severus' concerned face and felt his love for her. No matter how he would take this, she was sure he would always love her.

"I have some news for you," she said finally.

Severus tensed. "Are you ill?" he asked in fear.

Hermione smiled in assurance. "No, love, it's nothing like that."

Severus pulled her closer. "Then what has you so upset?"

"I . . . I'm . . . Oh, you're going to be angry!"

Severus' eyebrows moved together. "What am I going to be angry about?"

"It's just that, you've made your opinion perfectly clear, and we had agreed, and . . ."

"Hermione, you're not making any sense."

Hermione gave Severus a pleading look before she blurted out her secret.

"I'm pregnant."

Severus' eyes widened. "Did you just say that you were pregnant?" he repeated.

Hermione blanched. "Yes."

Severus' grin was so wide that Hermione could not mistake his happiness for acting. He lifted her up and twirled her around in the air, placing her back on the ground only to envelop her in a hug and kiss her passionately. When he pulled back from her, his Cheshire-cat grin was still plastered on his face.

Hermione was thoroughly confused.

"I thought we were done having children," she said in confusion.

oooOOOooo

Severus looked to her with sudden realization. He had been spouting off all day as to how they were through with having children. Of course she had been crying her eyes out because she was expecting. He pulled her close once again.

"Oh, Hermione, I'm sorry. I've confused you considerably." He pulled her away from him so he could see her face. "We had discussed this after having Sebastian and had agreed not to have anymore, but I've always wanted more children. I know your pregnancies are difficult and that newborns are a lot of work, so I would never ask you to have another one if you didn't want to. I was happy, even if we didn't have more, so felt fine about spouting off about never having more kids. But, Hermione," he said, giving her a boyish grin. "I'm ecstatic."

Hermione laughed in relief. "Severus, I was beside myself. I thought you would hate that we were having another baby."

"Are you happy about it, love?" Severus asked her tentatively.

"I'm ecstatic too!" Hermione told him.

Severus pulled his wife to him and kissed her passionately. He thought of the last twelve years they had shared and was grateful for every minute. He had waited for her for what seemed to be forever, but she had finally come back to him. Now she was giving him another gift of her love... another child.

Severus pulled back and looked at Hermione; his life. He was happier than he ever thought possible and more so than his counterpart could have ever been, and it was all because of this beautiful witch who loved him. Leaning back into her, he kissed her again and again. He was the luckiest man alive.

The End

A/N: Thanks to Lilith Kayden, who spent a lot of time reading and suggesting for this story. I appreciate all of you who have followed this story to its conclusion. You all deserve a medal for staying fans for so long! Thank you for your interest and especially your comments.

I originally wrote this a while ago and had no intentions of writing a sequel. However... a review from AnnabelleElizabeth on Ashwinder has sent the plotbunnies flying. So, a sequel following the 'other' Hermione and her journey into Hermione's old reality is planned and started. I'm not in a super-hurry to get it done or posted as I have other stories that have been waiting patiently for their turn to post, but I'm working on it and will hopefully have it ready for posting in a little while.