

# Second Life

*by Lariope*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

## Chapter One

*Chapter 1 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All italicized lines, and anything you recognize, are the property of the formidable Ms. Rowling. Endless thanks to my incredible beta, Shellsnapeluver.

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Severus Snape released the wards on his study without glancing up. He pushed through the door and strode quickly across the room, sinking into the large leather chair where he'd been sitting when he received Dumbledore's summons. Pointing his wand at the door, he slammed it closed and re-warded it, adding an extra, password-protected layer. Then he let his head fall into his hands.

Through his fingers, he could see the open book and the scribbled notes he had abandoned when the shimmering phoenix shape had arrived, a lifetime ago, it seemed.

"Severus, I need you now," it had said, with terrible urgency, and he had thrown down his work and Flooed immediately to Dumbledore's office. There he'd found the old man crumpled on the Oriental rug in front of his desk. The curse that was spreading through his left hand could barely be contained. It was a miracle that he'd been able to cast his Patronus at all.

Foolish, foolish man, he thought as he took Dumbledore's hand in his own. He cast a barrier spell at the wizard's elbow, hoping to buy time.

"Dobby!" he called.

The house-elf cracked into being beside him. "Sir?" he asked timidly.

"Potions! My stores--I need blood thickener, burn salve, curse blocker, my strongest healing potion and Vita Secundus--immediately!"

Dobby did not linger long enough to reply, but cracked out again, leaving him alone with Albus and the increasingly loud voice in his mind that screamed and gibbered that Albus Dumbledore was dying. Albus Dumbledore was going to leave him alone here, and when he did, well, then what? For whom would he be spying then? He would be nothing but a Death Eater. His hands trembled as he tore the sleeve of Dumbledore's robes away. He cast a diagnostic spell, wincing at the result.

Dobby arrived, laden with bottles. "Sir," he said.

Snape grabbed the smallest phial from the elf and conjured a goblet. He poured the contents of the phial into the waiting cup and added some healing potion from a much larger flask, passing over the others. The mixture was heavy and thick, but it would have to do. He tipped the cup into Dumbledore's mouth, noting with relief that the headmaster was swallowing reflexively. Snape cast several charms to help the potion find the damage quickly, then realized that he had not dismissed the elf.

"That will be all, Dobby. Thank you."

"But, sir... Headmaster Dumbledore--?" Dobby rocked back and forth nervously.

"Will be fine," Snape snapped. "And you will not speak of this to anyone."

The elf gave him a dubious look, but Disapparated all the same.

Snape looked around the room, hoping for some clue as to where the headmaster could have encountered such a virulent curse. He focused on a ring, lying cracked and destroyed beside the sword of Gryffindor. He moved to touch it, thought better of it, and turned back toward Dumbledore, who was beginning to stir.

*"Why," Snape said, without preamble, "why did you put on that ring? It carries a curse, surely you realized that. Why even touch it?"*

Dumbledore did not answer.

*"It's a miracle you managed to return here!"* Snape continued, furious. *"That ring carried a curse of extraordinary power. To contain it is all we can hope for; I have trapped the curse in one hand for the time being--"*

Dumbledore raised his withered, blackened hand before his face to examine it. Snape watched him, filled with fear and pain and disgust. All these years. All these years he'd belonged to Dumbledore, trusted him with the redemption of his soul. And now, before the war had even truly begun, now Dumbledore would leave him alone again, alone with his past. Snape never deluded himself that he was liked or even trusted by the other members of the Order of the Phoenix. It was only Dumbledore's unyielding insistence that preserved his place among them. Now he would have no way in, no way to help, nothing left to do but wait for his duplicity to be discovered. To wait for death. How could the old wizard be so careless with his own life when so many others depended on his?

*"You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?"*

Snape turned away from Dumbledore's open, trusting face. He wished he could strike it. *"I cannot tell. Maybe a year. There is no halting such a spell forever. It will spread eventually. It is the sort of curse that strengthens over time."*

"Well, that simplifies things considerably," Dumbledore said.

"I'm sorry?" Snape replied, whipping back. "I don't follow."

"I'm referring, of course, to the Voldemort's plan to have poor Draco Malfoy kill me."

"As I told you, Albus, the Dark Lord doesn't intend for him to succeed. It's simply a plan to torture Lucius for his recent failures--to make the family watch as the boy fails... and is punished."

"And I imagine you are the successor to the plan, should it fail?"

Snape paused. Voldemort had never spoken this outright, yet, somehow, he knew it to be true. "I think that is his plan."

Dumbledore nodded. "Well, I'll be grateful to be spared the torture of the curse," he said simply.

"You don't actually intend to let Malfoy kill you?"

*"Certainly not!"* Dumbledore replied. *"You must do it."*

Of course. Of course. Because what are spies for when it comes down to it? You can coddle them and dress them in teacher's robes. You can admit them to secret societies and ask them to heal the unhealable. You can charge them with protecting children. But in the end, you always expect them to kill. They are always the weapon. Never the shield.

*"Shall I do it now, or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?"* Snape sat back in his chair and arranged the lines of his face into sneering indifference.

Dumbledore chuckled. "I dare say the moment will present itself in due time."

"If you are intent on dying, why not let Draco do it and spare him the Dark Lord's wrath?"

"Because Draco's soul is not yet so damaged. I would not see it ripped in two on my account."

*"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"*

Always the fear had lingered around the edges, the memory of Dumbledore's face as he spat at him and whispered, "You disgust me." Always the suspicion that for all his protection, Dumbledore hated him still, thought him beneath contempt. Now the truth comes out, Snape thought with a heretofore unknown bitterness.

*"You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation,"* said Dumbledore.

"Very well," he said icily, and matching the chill in his voice was the sudden and trickling, cold certainty that this had always been the plan. "And when do you intend to let the Order know?"

"Surely you realize it will have to be our secret?" Dumbledore said. "Hogwarts will fall. And when it does, you must be well and fully within Voldemort's good graces. There can be no more dance. For how else will you be appointed Headmaster? I am counting on you to protect the children."

Protect the children, indeed.

"So you intend to brand me a turncoat and return me to the Dark Lord," Snape said, his voice completely affectless, his face a mask. "And should I survive...?"

Dumbledore paused, and for a moment Snape was swept with the notion that there was no plan in place for that particular possibility, that the debt he owed Lily Potter had come due at last and with interest. No one expected him to live through the war, certainly Dumbledore did not, and if he were honest, he himself did not expect it. But over the years, he had begun to think it possible that someone, even if he could not find it inside to do it himself, might hope that he would live. He had begun to think that Dumbledore might.

"I see," he said.

"Severus," Dumbledore said kindly. "My dear Severus. I know what I am asking of you. Surely you did not think I would leave you completely without recourse? We both know that your chances of surviving this war are nearly as terrible as my own. But I think there is a way to protect our secret and still secure for you the chance at life, should it present itself."

Snape's lips tightened and there was a subtle lift to his chin. No one who did not know him intimately would see relief in his face, but it was evident in the curve of his brow and the pallor of his skin.

"Do tell, Albus," he drawled.

Dumbledore leaned forward shakily, and Snape nearly interrupted to tell him to relax and save his strength. But he felt, in those moments, as if his very existence balanced on a fine, invisible point, and he intended to hear it, now, before the point turned and tore him to shreds.

"I want you to marry Hermione Granger."

Snape blanched, but managed merely to cross his legs before replying. "And how, pray tell, would marrying the great Gryffindor know-it-all secure my chances at a life?" he asked. "A life worth living, anyway," he added unkindly.

Dumbledore tipped his head slightly in acknowledgement of Snape's distress before he continued. "Hermione is not a member of the Order. She is not bound to share its secrets or her own. And yet, she is an icon of the Light, and will become more so, I'm sure, as the war progresses. Her trust in you," he paused, "would speak volumes."

"Shall I propose immediately?" Snape asked sardonically. "My chambers, of course, would be a suitable home for any student of mine."

"Miss Granger will come of age in three month's time," Dumbledore said, as if they were speaking of the weather or a recent Quidditch match. "If you were agreeable, I would approach her then. Obviously, this would be simply one more of our secrets. Both you and she would continue on as usual."

The only thought tethering Snape to sanity was the simple and reassuring fact that Hermione Granger would never, ever agree to wed the greasy Potions master, dark-hearted bat of the dungeons. He was suddenly profoundly grateful for the persona he'd been forced to cultivate over the years. For Dumbledore seemed in earnest, in fact, seemed to have given this some thought and come to the conclusion, by whatever unfathomable process, that this was a good idea.

"And how do you intend to woo her on my behalf?" he sneered. "Miss Granger, happy birthday! How lovely to see you. Professor Snape here is going to kill me. Do marry him and prove he was for the Order all along, won't you?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Severus, you do have a way with words. I wish I could trust you to sway Miss Granger on your own."

Snape snorted.

"However, as I'm sure that is an impossibility, I intend to present it to her much as I have to you: as a necessity. Hermione is intimately acquainted with sacrifice and has a well developed sense of justice. You remember, I trust, the year the house-elves nearly went on strike? She understands what is at stake, and I'm sure she would do all in her power to see that you are properly recognized."

"Miss Granger is a *Gryffindor*, Albus, and as you say, she has *exact* ideas about justice. She will not stand by and watch me kill you." His voice dropped and bore in it a tinge of deep regret that it could not be he who stood by this sentiment. "She would rather die."

Dumbledore sobered. "On that point, I believe you are right. However, I see no need to tell Miss Granger that particular part of the plan. She need only be informed that you will need to seem to return to the Death Eaters, that you will commit some atrocity that will secure your acceptance there, and that no one but she will know the truth of the matter."

Snape looked at him levelly. "I have known you to manipulate people in the past, in the name of the greater good, but this seems underhanded even for you, Albus. There is no greater good here. My good name is no reason to condemn a young girl to--"

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you very chivalrous, protecting a young girl's--"

"A *young* girl's--a *young* girl! All witty banter aside, this is preposterous. She is not yet 17! She is my student! If you insist that I marry, why not someone older, more appropriate?"

"I'm sure it is not lost on you that the more appropriate witches are dead," Dumbledore said ruthlessly.

Inwardly, Snape recoiled from his words as if struck. Dumbledore had conjured Lily in the room as surely as if he had spoken her name. "Those we could have trusted were lost in the first skirmish," he continued, "and few babies are born in wartime--"

"There is Nymphadora." Snape grimaced as he said it.

"Nymphadora is spoken for," Dumbledore replied.

"Are you referring to the werewolf? Because he hardly seems to be chomping--if you'll forgive the phrase--at the bit to marry her."

Dumbledore glared at him for the first time that evening. "Nymphadora is in love with Remus. Whether or not he returns her affection. She would never agree--"

"So we forgo the witch who would, quite rightly, stand up for her wishes, in order to pursue a younger and more malleable target?" Snape asked venomously.

"If you insist on looking at it that way."

The two men sat in silence, staring at each other for a time. Dumbledore sighed.

"Forgive me for saying so, Severus, but the likelihood is that we will change her life very little, if at all. The chances that--"

"I have no illusions about my longevity," Snape spat.

"Then I fail to see your objection."

Suddenly, Snape felt very foolish, defending Miss Granger when it should have been clear to him all along that Dumbledore would have never risked his precious Gryffindor princess if he actually thought her life would be affected. *She*, of course, would never be considered expendable.

"And nothing about *my* life would be changed?" he asked pointedly. "I would go on exactly as before?"

"Assigning her as many detentions as I'm sure you otherwise would, Severus."

"Then I suppose there is nothing more to say on the subject," he said, rising. "Speak with Miss Granger if you must, though I doubt very much she'll agree." He moved to the desk to collect the bottles and phials strewn about it.

Dumbledore snatched up a slim, unmarked phial as Snape reached for it. He was remarkably quick for someone who, only a half an hour before, had been on the brink of death, Snape thought. The old wizard held it to the light before beginning to speak in the quiet, clipped tones that told Snape he was murderously angry.

"Is this the *Vita Secundum*?" And before Snape could reply, "Oh, no. No. Tell me you didn't--"

"It's full, as you can plainly see. Or did the curse impair your vision?" Snape's voice dripped with sarcastic solicitude.

"Why is it in this office?"

"I asked Dobby to fetch it, along with the other potions. The ones that saved your life, as you'll recall."

"Severus, I thought I made myself clear on the subject of the Vita. It is for Harry and Harry alone. No one else's life is remotely--"

"Important. Yes, I know," Snape said acidly. "I can see that my concern for your welfare was misplaced."

"We did not spend years on that potion to have it thrown away on trivialities!" Dumbledore hissed.

"I'm sure I will be comforted by your lack of regard for your own life when I have to take it from you," Snape said, removing the phial from Dumbledore's grasp and striding from the room, robes billowing.

Still sitting in his worn leather recliner, Snape lifted his head from his hands and glanced around his chambers. Everything was remarkably normal, unchanged: a stack of rolled parchments on his desk, a fire kept low in the grate, his mother's Abyssinian rug on the stone floor where it had lain since he joined the Hogwarts staff and took up these rooms as his own. And yet, though it would likely be months before any of this came to pass, Severus Snape felt that his life, as he had known it, had ended.

## Chapter Two

*Chapter 2 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Of course, everything and everyone you know belong to JKR. Thanks to Shellsnapelover for being a wonderful beta.

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Hermione Granger sat in the Great Hall, between Harry and Ron, enjoying a breakfast of eggs and rashers. It was her 17th birthday. Harry had already presented her with a clumsily wrapped book on Arithmancy, and Ron had blushed and thrust a box of Honeydukes Chocolates at her. She was feeling warm and loved and looking forward to the arrival of the post owls, who would surely be bringing her birthday package from her parents.

"Merlin, Hermione. 17. You're of age. You can learn to Apparate!" Ron said, through his mouthful of food.

She pursed her lips in mock disapproval and replied, "I won't learn any sooner than you will. You'll be 17 by the end of next term, and that's when we'll be trained."

"And I won't learn at all this year," Harry said glumly.

Ron cut off Harry's train of thought by making a more comprehensive list of what Hermione could now enjoy as a fully grown witch. "You can vote. You can buy firewhisky. You can get married. You can go in the Restricted Section without a note--Hey! You can order from the secret part of the catalogue at Flourish and Blotts--Hermione, if we gave you some money..."

Hermione laughed. "No, Ron. I'm not buying dirty books for you two. In fact, save the voting, I'm sure I won't be doing any of that!"

Harry raised an eyebrow at her. "Not visiting the Restricted Section?"

"Well, yes, but not for--"

Just then, the post owls swooped in.

Three owls approached the Gryffindor table, two bearing a package between them, and one clearly the Headmaster's owl. Hermione reached up to disengage her package and feed scraps of bacon to the two owls making the delivery. She assumed that Dumbledore's owl was for Harry. But on second glance, she saw that the Headmaster's owl was pacing before her self-importantly, and when she gave him her full attention, he thrust out his leg for her to remove a rolled bit of parchment.

"What's Dumbledore writing you for?" Ron asked.

"I don't know; I thought it was for Harry," Hermione said, unrolling the parchment, her birthday present momentarily forgotten.

"Maybe it's for her birthday," Harry said.

"Yeah, but I've never gotten anything from him onmy--"

"Dear Miss Granger," Hermione read, "I've been given to understand that you come of age today. Please accept my birthday wishes and the hope that you will not spend too many additional hours in the Restricted Section. Madam Pince is already alarmed. If you would stop by my office at seven-thirty, there is a matter that I wish to discuss with you. The password is 'Fizzing Whizbees.' Enjoy your day! Yours, very sincerely, Albus Dumbledore."

"What do you think he wants?" Harry asked.

"I haven't the foggiest. It's probably some coming-of-age thing, or something to do with being a Prefect," Hermione replied. She turned her attention to the package from her parents as Harry picked up the note from Dumbledore and read it again.

"Do you think he's going to induct you into the Order?" he asked, and she thought there was a tinge of jealousy in his voice.

"While I'm still in school? Don't be ridiculous. If it was anything important, I'm sure he'd have asked you instead," she said, lifting some packing material from her box and vanishing it with her wand.

"Ooh! They've credited my account at Flourish and Blotts!" she exclaimed. "And new quills, and--oh!"

Hermione lifted a set of pale green dress robes from the box.

Ron whistled, and she blushed. The robes were silken and unadorned but well-tailored, deeply cut and obviously very expensive.

"They shouldn't have," she murmured and picked up the Muggle card at the bottom of the box.

*Dearest Hermione,*

*Happy Birthday! Daddy and I weren't sure what the Wizard tradition was for coming of age, but we thought every young lady (young witch?) should have a decent dress to wear. Perhaps you'll have another ball this Christmas? Anyway, I hope you like it. Professor McGonagall helped us with the shopping this year, so be sure to thank her. We're so proud of you, dear, and thinking of you on your special day.*

*Love,*

*Mum*

Hermione stroked the fabric of the robes once more before returning them to the box. She cast a Reducing Charm on it and tucked it into her schoolbag.

Harry and Ron were sitting in silence, clearly lost as to what to say about a friend's new dress robes.

Hermione shook her head and smiled. "Come on," she said. "We'll be late for Charms."

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For all she'd been nonchalant with Harry and Ron earlier, Hermione was seized with nerves as she walked down the corridor that led to the Headmaster's office. She'd never been asked to see Dumbledore alone before.

"Fizzing Whizbees," she told the gargoyle, and he leapt aside to admit her. Climbing the twisting staircase, Hermione told herself sharply that there was nothing to worry about. It wasn't as if she'd done anything wrong. But a tiny part of her mind worried at the possibilities like a cat with a ball of yarn. He'd discovered what she'd stolen from Snape's stores that first year. The Ministry had learned what she'd used the Time-Turner to do. She was going to be expelled.

She raised her hand to knock.

"Come in, Miss Granger!" Dumbledore's voice rang out from behind the door.

Hermione pushed open the door and was amazed to see Professor Snape and Mad-Eye Moody already within the study. *Oh, bugger, what have I done?* Professor Snape was studiously not looking at her.

"Professor Dumbledore, Professor Snape... er, Professor Moody, sirs," she said.

"Never did have the pleasure of being your professor, Miss Granger," Moody growled from his seat in front of the desk.

"Welcome, Hermione. Come, sit," Dumbledore said, motioning her to a seat between the two men.

Hermione sat gingerly, her deportment matching her thoughts, which were completely off-balance. Had Dumbledore just called her *Hermione*?

"I'm sure you're curious as to why I called you here today," Dumbledore said kindly.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, my dear, it seems I have a favour to ask."

Relief coursed through her. She was not going to be expelled after all.

"Anything, sir," she said, the color returning to her face.

"Perhaps you should reserve your judgment until you've heard what the favour is?" Professor Snape said icily. She thought she heard him mutter, *Gryffindor*, under his breath.

"Though I appreciate your willingness to help, Professor Snape is right," Dumbledore said. "Please hear me out before you make a decision."

Hermione noticed that both Snape and Moody were staring angrily into space. She couldn't determine whether their fury was directed at her or at Dumbledore. "Certainly, sir," she replied.

"You and Harry have become very close over the years."

"Yes?" she said, confusion evident in her tone. Was this about Harry? Had he done something? Did they expect her to reveal something, to--

"Are you, that is, is there... anything more between you than friendship?"

A short, huffing sound came from Snape's direction, but Hermione was so gobsmacked by the question that she disregarded him.

"Between me and Harry? No, sir. But... if you don't mind my asking... why?"

Hermione thought for a moment that Dumbledore looked relieved, although she could find no reason for him to ask nor for him to be relieved at her answer, no matter how hard she thought about it.

"Only because I know how much Harry mistrusts Professor Snape."

Ah. So that was it. Hermione nearly tripped over her own tongue as she hastened to reply. "You mustn't think anything of it," she said. "You know how Harry is--all raw emotion and reaction. He trusts you implicitly, Professor Dumbledore, and he would never do anything to betray Professor Snape or--"

Dumbledore nodded, looking thoughtful. "And you, Hermione? Would you betray Professor Snape?"

"No! Sir, I would never--I--is there something that I've done that--?"

"No. No, of course not, my dear."

"I have nothing but respect for--" again, Snape huffed, and Hermione turned to glare at him, "Professor Snape."

"Let me ask you a different sort of question, if I may." Dumbledore waited until she nodded and then continued. "Would you keep a secret from Harry?"

Keep a secret from Harry? Why would he want her to keep a secret from Harry? Dumbledore had already given Harry permission to tell her and Ron everything that they discussed, so why... unless it was about Snape--unless there was something... less than trustworthy?

"Sir, it would depend on the secret," she said slowly. "I would never do anything to cause Harry harm, and I would never keep something from him that might hurt him or weaken his chances against... Voldemort."

For a split second, Dumbledore looked almost triumphant. "But if there was some great need, something that would not harm Harry but would help someone else?"

She wavered for a moment and then replied, "If there were a good reason, and Harry would not be disadvantaged... then yes. If you needed me to, I would."

Suddenly, Dumbledore redirected. "Hermione, as I'm sure you're aware, Professor Snape has spent the last 16 years as a double agent for our cause."

Hermione's head was reeling, but she nodded at the Headmaster and cast what she hoped was a reassuring glance at Snape, who simply averted his eyes and resumed glaring at the wall.

"Of course, the Death Eaters believe he is spying for *them*."

"Naturally," she replied.

"Yes. Well. The time is nearing when Professor Snape will need to seem to break off his attachment to the Order and return to Voldemort."

Hermione did not gasp, but it was a near thing. *Return to Voldemort...* Though she had no love for the sneering, cynical man beside her, she felt a deep pang of pity for him at the idea that he would be forced to live among the Death Eaters, taking orders from a homicidal maniac. She looked at him for some sign of how he felt about this announcement, but saw nothing but his usual scowl upon his face.

"I see."

"No one must know that we have planned this. It must seem to everyone that Professor Snape has betrayed us. Otherwise, the risk that Voldemort will uncover his true allegiance would be too great. Any member of the Order who was captured would be risking Severus's life and our only link to the Death Eaters."

Hermione nodded. "But, sir, why tell me? I'm just as likely to be captured and tortured as any--" She sat forward suddenly. "I think you should Oblivate me."

Moody chuckled appreciatively. "Never heard anyone volunteer to be Oblivated," he said. "You were right, Albus, she's a plucky girl."

Hermione paid him no mind. "Really, Professor, you must Oblivate me. I couldn't bear it if I accidentally--and why does Professor Moody know?"

"Are you implying I can't keep my mouth shut?" Moody asked.

"Alastor," Dumbledore said warningly. "Hermione, if you'll recall, you agreed to hear me out before you made any decisions."

Hermione blushed and sat back slightly in her chair. "Yes, sir. I apologize."

"Quite all right. Should you want to be Oblivated at the end of our meeting, that will be your decision. However, I would like to explain a bit more about the favour I'm asking of you."

"Please continue," she said.

"I think it is very unlikely that I will survive the war," Dumbledore said evenly. "Already, I'm aware that Voldemort is forming a plan to have me killed before the year is out."

"But sir, you're quite protected here, and Voldemort has always been afraid--"

Dumbledore held up his hand. "Be that as it may, I feel my time is running short. As I already explained, Severus will need to seem to turn his back on the Order and return to Voldemort's employ."

Comprehension dawned cold through Hermione's body. She felt an icy tickle that began in her cheeks and seemed to run over her chest before engulfing her heart. If Dumbledore died, there would be no one left to know that Snape had not truly betrayed them. He would be an outcast, perhaps killed, or captured as a Death Eater and sent to Azkaban. She could not be Oblivated. She would have to carry Snape's secret and be prepared to launch his defense as soon as the war ended.

"I'll do it," Hermione said.

Snape turned slowly toward her. "Do what, if I may ask?" he hissed.

"I'll keep your secret. I'll start working now on a case for your innocence that can be set into motion as soon--"

"You have the gist of it, my dear," Dumbledore said. "But I'm afraid that what I'm asking is slightly more complicated than that."

Hermione looked at the old wizard questioningly.

"You realize that there will have to be some action on Professor Snape's part, some parting blow that delivers him safely to the other side?"

"Yes...?"

"If you chose to protect Professor Snape and his secret, I would need to believe that your faith in him would not be broken, no matter what he had to do to leave the Order. I would have to be confident that you understand perfectly that all Professor Snape does, he does for the Light. He and I have made this choice together because we believe that he will be able to protect Harry more effectively from the other side."

Hermione sat quietly for a moment. If Snape would be continuing to protect Harry, then whatever he had to do would not involve hurting Harry too badly. "What do I need to do to convince you that I would bear that burden willingly and trust Professor Snape unreservedly?"

"I would ask you to marry him."

Marry him! Marry him? Suddenly, Hermione could see how neatly Dumbledore had boxed her in with her own sentiments. As usual, she had charged ahead as they must have expected her to do... but--marry him? Her professor? The man who had spent the last five years belittling her, reducing her to tears? He hated her. Surely he wouldn't want...

Hermione was too shocked to speak. She did not gasp or protest as Snape clearly expected her to do, given the way he was staring at her, but she said nothing for so long that a strange, vibrating tension began to fill the room. Thoughts twisted and tumbled through her mind. Ron. She'd always thought she'd marry Ron. Wasn't that the way it was supposed to work? She would marry Ron and... Her thoughts strayed inadvertently to that secret, cherished wish of her heart. She in ivory cream, Ron in navy blue, the garden of the Burrow alive with flowers. In her mind she looked up at her beloved wizard's face and saw instead the lined and sneering countenance of Severus Snape. Marry him? Impossible. No one could really mean for her to--but she thought of the first time she had seen him in Grimmauld Place at an Order meeting. The news that he was a spy. She thought of Sirius, the waking dead look of his eyes after Azkaban. She could not consign this man--horrible or not!--to a punishment he did not deserve.

It was Snape who finally broke the silence. Curling his upper lip into a snarl, he said, "Where's all the Gryffindor bluster now, Miss Granger? You were bearing burdens unreservedly a moment ago." He turned and addressed Dumbledore, "I told you she wouldn't agree. They're never as brave as they claim to be."

"Severus!" Dumbledore said sharply.

When Hermione found her voice, she spoke quietly and deliberately. "You will not bully me into this, Professor Snape. If I agree, it will be on my own terms. And you have no reason to doubt my courage. You're asking me to give up the rest of my life. I'm well aware that Wizarding marriages cannot be undone."

"Your *terms*, Miss Granger? And what might those be?"

Hermione ignored him and turned, instead, to Dumbledore. "I have questions," she said simply.

"Go right ahead, my dear."

"Earlier you asked me if I would keep a secret from Harry. Would this be the secret? Would I be expected to..." Finally, her nerve seemed to break for a moment, but she paused and collected herself. "That is, would anyone know that we were married?"

"No one but Alastor Moody," Dumbledore said, inclining his head toward the scarred and weathered wizard. "He would witness your marriage. He would also have the responsibility of hiding it from the Ministry."

"Hiding it from the Ministry?"

"Surely you realize that all Wizarding marriages are recorded at the Ministry, Miss Granger. Imagine the headlines should someone stumble across our records. Scandal at Hogwarts: Professor Allowed to Wed Sixth Year Prefect." He glowered at her.

She nodded. "I see. So our marriage would be a secret until the war ends."

"Precisely," Dumbledore said.

"And then?"

"Pardon?" Snape said.

"And then what?" Hermione all but snapped. "So the war ends, and I launch your defense. We play the devoted couple for a while... Harry and Ron never speak to me again... my parents probably disown me... and then what? Do I spend the rest of my life living in the castle with you? What?"

"I hardly think that Hogwarts will continue to employ me after I'm branded a Death Eater," Snape drawled.

If she could have stamped her foot, she would have. "You know what I mean! Will we continue the ruse for the rest of our lives or--"

"Miss Granger," Snape said slowly. "Do you actually expect that I would agree to... marry you... if I thought I would live through the war?"

She stared back at him, unwilling to back down. "If you are so convinced that you won't survive, why even put this plan into place?"

"I assure you that this was not my idea."

She closed her eyes briefly. "I see."

"Do you now?"

"Still," she began again at full strength, "in the event that you were to survive... I would want some assurances."

"Ha," Snape spat. "So now you show your true colors. A monetary amount, I assume? How many galleons, Miss Granger, would it take to buy your soul?"

"That's disgusting," Hermione said quietly. "Neither my soul nor my life are for sale. If I chose to marry you, Professor Snape, I would want assurances that both would remain my own."

"As I have no use for either, I don't see where that would be a problem."

"And would you... would you want an heir?"

Snape stared at her, disbelief drawn in broad strokes across his face. "Do you take me for a rapist? I assure you that I have as little use for your body as I do your soul."

"So we would not be required to--"

"Absolutely not."

"Severus," Dumbledore began.

"What?" he snapped.

"You know that to bind this marriage, to prevent annulment in the instance that someone were to discover it--"

"No, Albus. No. I would rather be kissed by Dementors."

Hermione sat quietly, listening. Perhaps she would be saved after all. For there was more than one kind of honor at stake here. As much as her very cells seemed to rebel at the idea, she would not leave Snape without recourse. But if *he* chose to call it off... then no one could blame her for--

But that wasn't true. Unless they agreed to Obliviate her, she would know. She would blame herself.

"Reconsider, Professor Snape," she said.

He sputtered for a moment. "Really, Miss Granger, I--surely you would want no--" Then he seemed to find himself again. "Is Mr. Weasley *insufficient* to your needs?"

Hermione blushed a fiery red, and Moody made to rise from his seat. "Snape! There is no need to impugn--"

"It's fine, Professor Moody. I'm used to it," she said. She turned to Snape and said sweetly, "Why, Professor, I don't know why you'd take an interest in my personal life, but your sources are incorrect. I am not now, nor have I ever dated a Weasley. And I assure you that I have no more interest in your body than I have in the giant squid. I simply meant that a single act--however horrible it may be to contemplate--could hardly be a reason to consign yourself to death."

"Death would be preferable," Snape said coldly.

Hermione rose. "In that case," she said, "Professor Dumbledore, if there is nothing else?"

"Hermione, please sit. Severus, some restraint, if you will? I can't imagine that you had not realized this would be a necessity."

"On the contrary, Albus. I simply thought your regard for Miss Granger would prevent you from turning her into a common whore."

"Severus!" Dumbledore thundered. Moody raised his wand threateningly.

"A wife is not a whore," Hermione said evenly.

"A child is not a wife," Snape retorted.

"Professor Dumbledore, with all due respect, if Professor Snape is opposed, I don't see any reason to continue this discussion. Please Obliviate me so that I can return to my dormitory."

Dumbledore held up his hand for a moment to stay her.

"Severus, *you agreed to this plan*," Dumbledore said fiercely. "It is imperative that you have some means by which to contact Harry Potter. Need I remind you that--"

Snape sat back in his chair and crossed his long legs. His voice was calm and even, but Hermione thought she could hear hatred, pure and cold, in it. "Oh, no, Albus. No. No need to *remind* me of anything. By all means, marry us now if you wish."

Hermione blanched. Now? Here?

Dumbledore turned heavy, tired eyes to Hermione. "Hermione?"

She looked at Professor Snape. There was something odd in the way that he was sitting, the look in his eyes. She sensed, though she could not explain why, that he had just been very badly hurt.

"Professor?" she said.

"I won't save you now, if that's what you're asking." His eyes were blank.

"No, I--no." She rose. "What do I need to do?"

Snape stood up beside her. "Push your sleeves back," he said, and she began to relax. She knew how to take instruction from him if nothing else. He looked at her condescendingly. "You'll need your wand."

She pulled her wand from her pocket and watched as Snape unbuttoned his sleeves and rolled them back. She looked at him questioningly.

"Point your wand at me," he said, and she did, flinching slightly as his wand took aim at her.

"I'm not going to curse you, Miss Granger," he said. "At least not in the traditional sense."

Her lips turned up a bit in a wry smile, and she thought his eyes registered shock and then faint amusement.

"Take my hand," he said, wrapping her left hand in his.

Professor Moody approached them from the left, and Professor Dumbledore from the right.

"Pay attention," he said. "You'll need to repeat the statements." She nodded.

"I, Severus Snape, take you, Hermione Granger, to be my wife. From this day forward my blood will be your blood; my home, your home; my life, your life."

Hermione took a deep breath and repeated, "I, Hermione Granger, take you, Severus Snape, to be my husband. From this day forward my blood will be your blood; my home, your home; my life, your life."

Professors Dumbledore and Moody touched their joined hands with their wands, and a firm, warm pressure traveled up her arm from the point at which their spells had coalesced. She felt the bond take her head, then move over her left shoulder, down into her heart, and through her right arm into her wand, where it exited and, she presumed, entered Snape. She could feel the spell entering her from his wand, creating a magical circle. He bent and brushed his lips cursorily over hers, and the spell concluded.

"May God have mercy on my soul," he said.

## Chapter Three

### Chapter 3 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. Endless thanks to my beta, Shellsnapelover.

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Unwilling to wait for any further comments from Dumbledore, Snape grabbed Hermione's arm, barely giving her time to snatch up her bag before he wrenched her into the Floo. She stumbled after him through the fireplace and into his study where he released her and crossed the room. So he had her here, this child, his wife, in his study. And what on earth to do with her now?

Gods, he had never been so angry with Albus. The worst of it was that he'd allowed himself to be taken in, that he'd actually believed the old man had set up this abominable scenario to protect him. *It is imperative that you have some means by which to contact Harry Potter.* He should have realized that it was all for Potter. And why was he surprised? Hadn't Dumbledore's acceptance of him always been predicated on the notion that he would protect Potter?

The rub was that he would have agreed to it if Albus had put it plainly. He would have fought, of that there could be no question, but in the end he would have acquiesced

as he always did. Dumbledore would have invoked Lily, and he would have been powerless to disagree. What he could not abide was that Dumbledore had seen, had somehow known, how badly he wanted to be saved. And used it.

He turned and watched Hermione goggling at his study. And this girl, this poor, foolish girl, so blinded by her own bravery that she hadn't seen how neatly Dumbledore had folded her into his plan. Merlin alive, by the end of it she'd been fighting *him*, insisting he agree to this travesty. How soon until she realized what she had done?

"Miss Granger," he said formally.

She stared at him, terrified, by the looks of her.

"Are you quite all right?"

"Yes, sir." She was twisting the ring finger of her left hand.

"You've noticed the ring," he said.

"Why can't I see it?"

"It's a charmed ring. Dumbledore and Moody conjured them as part of the binding." He pulled his own from his finger. "They're tangible enough and visible when removed," he said, holding his up for her to see, "but invisible when worn." He replaced the ring and touched it with his wand. "Do you feel that?"

"It's warm," she said.

"Your powers of perception have always astounded me," he said, and she scowled at him.

"The rings hold a Protean Charm. Should you need to contact me, touch your wand to your ring. It will burn until I remove it. Inside, I will find your message."

Hermione removed her ring from her finger and glanced inside. There she read the words he had sent *Happy Birthday*.

She looked at him questioningly.

"Is it not your birthday?"

She nodded.

"Then you'll never have any trouble remembering the day that Albus Dumbledore consigned you to hell."

"Pardon?"

"I pity you, Miss Granger. How easily you let yourself be taken in. He called on every noble impulse in your pathetic Gryffindor heart. Save Professor Snape, indeed."

"Then what--?"

"Potter, you fool! It was all for Potter. He needed to ensure that I'd have means to contact Potter once he is gone. He knows that Potter won't listen to me; the imbecile believes me a loyal Death Eater. Dumbledore has always been the go-between. Now, you will find yourself in that role."

Hermione listened quietly. Snape recognized the look she wore; it was one he had often seen on her face through the years. She was putting the pieces together. This time a bit more slowly than usual. The girl's brains were fine, he admitted. But her Achilles heel was her heart.

"Then it doesn't matter," she said firmly.

"Pardon?"

"It doesn't matter. I would have done it anyway, even if he'd put it like that."

He looked at her now, long and hard, taking the measure of the girl who was his wife. There was a steely, defiant look in her eyes. At least there was some cold comfort in the notion that she'd thought she was doing it for him.

"As would I, Miss Granger."

Her look softened. "You didn't know either," she said.

"Not until the very end."

"Then that explains--"

"What?"

"Nothing."

They stood quietly for a moment. Hermione clearly didn't know what to do any more than he did.

Finally, she spoke. "So we have to--"

"So it would seem." And because he didn't want to frighten the girl any more than was necessary, he asked, "Would you like some tea?"

"Tea?" She looked as if she had never heard the word before.

"Yes, tea. It's a warm beverage made by steeping the leaves of the tea bush in hot water. I'm certain you've heard of it."

She smiled slightly and shook her head. "You never stop, do you? And no, thank you. I think I'd rather we just got on with it."

He nodded and took a step forward, at which she flinched.

"I meant it when I said that I didn't fancy myself a rapist, Miss Granger," he said. "Did you or did you not agree to this?"

"Of course I did. Forgive me if I--" she began archly.

He looked suddenly at her eyes, which were at once shielded and vulnerable. The girl was a virgin; it was written all over her face. Dear God. How on earth to calm her enough to get through this? His thoughts flashed back to Dumbledore's office, how she had visibly relaxed when he had begun to give her directions.

"Would this be easier for you," he asked quietly, if not gently, "if we were to approach it as an academic pursuit?"

"I--I don't know quite what you mean, sir."

"Simply that you have always known me as your Professor. Would it be easier if I... instructed you?"

She looked at him so gratefully that it stung him.

"Yes, sir," she said nearly inaudibly.

"There are potions we could take," he said, but she shook her head.

"How will I learn if I don't know whether you're responding to a potion or to me?"

*And heaven forbid this not be a learning experience*, he thought acerbically, but a tiny, unregistered thought slipped across his mind: *She intends to learn to please me?*

"Very well," he said. "Follow me."

Snape led her into the sitting room and shut the door behind them, warding it. There was no need--no one could enter the sitting room without first entering his quarters, a feat that would be impossible for anyone but him--and then remembering their vows, he mentally added *and her*. But he recognized that she would be exceptionally vulnerable for the next few hours. Any assurances of privacy that he could give her could only ease her discomfort.

He lit a fire in the grate, rare for this room where he received no communications, and sat down on a long, stiff velvet couch, motioning her over. She sat stiffly beside him, staring straight ahead.

"It is important to remember when beginning this type of encounter not to rush ahead to the inevitable pleasure," he said. "The first touch must never be a sexual touch. The first touch is only an invitation."

She nodded, but her posture had not even begun to relax.

"How are you finding Defense Against the Dark Arts this term?" he asked.

She looked taken aback. "Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

He pursed his lips and gave her a long-suffering look. "Yes. Are you enjoying the class?"

"Yes, sir," she said, still appearing confused.

"Do you find it very different from the way it has been taught in the past?"

Slowly, slowly, her spine began to curve as she spoke, allowing her to sink back into the couch. She explained her thoughts on the practical aspects of Defense, times when she felt wand work was more important than spell work and times when she felt the reverse was true. He nodded. She proceeded to launch into an impassioned speech about the differences between simple hexes and Dark magic and how, to truly be defended against the Dark, one must be willing to walk the line in between. Though Snape was sure she hadn't realized it, she had drawn her legs onto the couch as she spoke and was sitting side-saddle now, leaning toward him, a hair's breadth away from pointing in his face as she lectured.

"Do you feel different when you perform spells that you think, as you say, walk the line between light and Dark?" he asked, intent upon keeping her talking and hence relaxed.

"Do I feel different how?" she asked. "Do you mean conflicted, or lured by the Dark, or different physically, like getting a headache?"

"Either one," he said, although inwardly he groaned. How on earth had he ended up with Hermione Granger in his sitting room, and how had he come to the pitiable conclusion that he should seduce her by *letting her talk*? Though, he admitted, he agreed with her point about hexing. He cast about in his mind for some entrance, some justifiable beginning to what they had to do.

"No, but I have noticed that when I perform a wordless hex, it seems to come from a different part of me than when I use the incantation."

"So you've had luck with wordless magic?" he asked, and she glared at him. Deservedly, perhaps. She had been the first in the class to do it successfully, not that he'd commented at the time.

"I have."

"Tell me, then. Where does the spell seem to come from?"

"With an incantation, there's the sense that it's *here*," she said, touching her throat for a moment and then letting her hand drift down her wand arm. "Wordless... it's more like...," she thought for a moment and then rested her hand against a spot just below her ribcage, "*here*."

Tentatively, he reached out and touched her throat where she had indicated. "Here?" he asked.

She gulped audibly. "Yes, sir."

"I find, myself, that an incantation comes from *here*," he said, reaching around to the back of her neck, squeezing her shoulder as he went.

She looked interested in spite of herself.

"You're tense, Miss Granger," he said.

"Can you blame me?"

"Turn around."

Reluctantly, she swiveled on the couch so that her back was facing him. He laid both hands on her shoulders.

"May I?" he asked and hoped she understood. It would be the only time he asked for permission on this night. He refused to go about this like a tentative, bumbling schoolboy.

"All right."

He worked the balls of his thumbs into her muscles, drawing the tension away from where it lurked in her shoulders. He paused to swipe his wand from the couch and cast a Warming Charm on his hands, noting with gratification that when he resumed she leaned into the pressure of his fingers.

"Will you lift your hair?"

"My hair?"

"Its weight, I'd gather, is part of what makes your neck so stiff."

She gathered her hair with both hands and twisted it high on her head. Gradually, he kneaded higher up the graceful curve of her neck, sinking his fingers into the hair at the base of her scalp. He leaned forward, letting her become used to his breath against her skin. He could feel a different kind of tension building under her flesh as he worked, something taut and singing, although underneath it he could feel her muscles unclenching and giving way to his touch. Unwilling to push this particular foray any further, he let his hands return to her shoulders and rhythmically squeezed down her biceps, urging the gathered tension down her arms and out her fingertips. She released her hair, and he rubbed his hands up and down her arms for a moment.

Then, miracle of miracles, she leaned back against his chest, letting her head rest against his collarbone. Surely it was that infernal Gryffindor bravery, her determination to *get it over with* as she'd said, but he was surprised at how grateful he was for her help in moving things along. She'd accepted the invitation. Such a quick study. Somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind, he was registering the soft tickle of her curls on his throat, the warm pressure of her body against his, and the sound of her breath, slow and deep now. He reached up and traced a finger along the perimeter of her face and down her neck.

"And wordless?" he asked. "Where did you say?"

"Here," she said softly, taking his hand and pressing it against her ribs. Her fingers lingered over his.

"For me, it is the same," he whispered, his lips grazing the outer shell of her ear. He felt her fingers tighten over his wrist, at first mistaking it for a top, then gradually realizing that she was responding.

Responding! Sweet Merlin, but the girl was brave. For how often had these lips spoken words meant to sting, and now she was allowing them passage over the tender skin of her earlobe. He used his free hand to guide her head to one side, exposing her neck. He dragged his mouth over the smooth, young flesh until he found the liminal point where her neck joined her shoulder, and... *gently now, mustn't scare*... he bit her.

He felt her gasp and arch into him and was able to turn her slightly in his arms so that he could find her mouth with his. Her kiss was untutored and guileless, her soft lips malleable under his. He was forcibly reminded of Lily, of the one kiss he'd ever stolen from her down in the dungeons during his fifth year. There was pain in the memory, but sweetness, too, in finding it here after all this time. Snape took her hand and guided it to his shoulder to give him a better grasp on her, but she ran it up his throat to his face. Her fingers explored him with hesitant, feather-light touches, over his eyelid, the bridge of his nose, and then along the shape of his mouth where it joined hers. Finally, she thrust it into his hair, and he felt the oddest sense of becoming someone else.

Perhaps he was someone else. What other explanation could there be for the fact that he held in his arms the Princess of Gryffindor, her fingers twining in the slick, baby-fine hair he knew she abhorred? There was heat here, where he had least expected it, heat brewing between them like a cauldron left to simmer. It flared as his tongue penetrated her mouth.

There was some urgency, now, to her kisses, and her tongue explored his mouth with sweet, tentative thrusts. Snape found himself stroking her legs where they were curled on the couch, his other hand cradling her head to ensure that her lips could not escape the ministrations of his. Finally, he broke away. He looked into her dark eyes, expecting to find that once the pressure stopped, the fear would return. He needed to see the fear again, to know that he was Snape and she was Granger and that the world had not somehow ceased to exist.

Gradually, the hunger in her eyes turned into a question. *Instruction*. The girl was waiting for instruction. Never breaking her gaze, he cleared his throat, found his silkiest teaching voice and said, "I see you are ready for the second lesson, Miss Granger."

Ah. That was better. There was the trembling he had expected. She seemed to notice that she was sprawled across the couch and moved to gather herself together, but he put his hand on her arm to still her.

With slow, deliberate motions, he freed the clasp of her robes and eased them back over her shoulders. She was fully dressed beneath, of course; what mattered was the act, the *intention*. She shrugged out of her robes gracelessly, looking every ounce the inexperienced schoolgirl that she was. He looked disparagingly at her abandoned robes, which had settled into a pile in his lap.

"Should I move them?" she asked.

"Leave them. Right now you need to be concerned with mine."

"Yours?"

"Would you rather I left them on?" he asked, cocking his eyebrow at her.

Her fingers shook as she fumbled with the closure. He made no move to help her; she would have to learn how to free a man's robes sooner or later. Finally, she mastered the catch and slid her hands under the heavy black cloth, over the Oxford shirt beneath. He bent and nudged her face upward with his nose, reclaiming the heat of her mouth, dimmed now with fear, but warming. Their kiss bumped and faltered as she urged his robes open.

"Patience," he purred, and she gave him the same open, questioning look as before. He slipped his arms free of the obstructing material and folded her into them, tangling his hands in her hair. He nuzzled the curve of her neck, laving it with his tongue, and tugging her hair slightly to tip her head, he licked the warm hollow of her throat.

He could feel her pulse quickening beneath his lips, but he heard nothing to indicate her arousal.

"Are you holding your breath, Miss Granger?"

She let it out in a long sigh.

"If you will not speak, at least breathe, so that I will know what pleases you."

"Should I... speak?"

"Only if you feel comfortable. As I said, the changes in your breathing can speak for you. You should be listening to mine."

"Yes, sir."

His lips twitched slightly. How odd that she remembered the signifier even now. Not that he had ceased calling her 'Miss Granger.' He wondered what the use of her given name would do to her and made a mental note to experiment with it later.

He returned his face to her neck--she was breathing regularly now--and inhaled deeply, learning the scent of her. She was all parchment and wood with mild undertones of honey, all of which he found... pleasant. He resumed his assault on her skin, nipping the delicate, tender flesh at the base of her throat. He listened as her breathing quickened and deftly began to undo the buttons of her shirt.

"Sir?" she said tentatively.

"Yes?" His fingers stilled. Would she be one of those insufferable women who couldn't stand to be looked at? Well, he would have to break her of that.

"It's just... what should I be doing?"

He paused and sat back, struck again by her bravery. "If there is something specific that I desire, I will let you know. Until then, imagine that we are dancing and let me lead you. If you feel the need to act," he said slowly, "reciprocate."

She nodded. There was a moment in which they were both paralyzed, staring at one another, unable to see the way back to where they had been. Then she grinned and tossed her head, whipping her hair back, and said, "Right, then. As you were."

He snorted--as close to a laugh as he had been in some time, he thought--and plunged his face into the cloud of hair that was already resettling itself over her shoulders. He was mildly surprised to feel her fingers working the buttons of his shirt and burrowing inside. Her touch sent tiny shocks of electricity through him, awakening his nerves and setting them aflame. He closed his eyes and kissed her, suckling first her upper lip and then her lower. When she moaned softly into his mouth, the electricity increased in intensity until he was nearly gasping for air. Good God, where was this coming from? How could this... this *student*... be mastering his senses, leaving him as nakedly aroused as an adolescent? He attacked the buttons of her shirt and wrenched it free from her skirt, sliding his hands over the smooth planes of her ribs. He heard her inhale sharply, though her muscles did not tense under his fingers. His hands traveled up her back, pulling her in and then... oh, the sudden and soft pressure of her lips on his neck. His breath caught in his throat, and seeming to hear it, she quickened her pace, her tongue tracing silky figure eights on his skin.

"No... slow," he breathed, and her mouth turned languorous, snaking upward until she found his ear and gently licked its rim.

*Aahhh, fuck.* His hands scrabbled for the opening of her skirt. *Fuck.* She nipped his earlobe, and he tugged the zipper down, running his hands over her waist. Pressing her lips to his, she eased herself off the couch, dropping her skirt with previously unknown aplomb. Reciprocate, he thought as if it were a spell, *Reciprocate!* And then her hands were at his waist, flicking the buttons apart and freeing the erection that was straining toward her. Still their lips were joined, his tongue plundering her mouth, as she climbed into his lap. It would be so easy--so easy!--to wrench her knickers aside and thrust, to drive himself home into her sweet depths.

No. It was too soon. There must be pleasure for her before the pain. He would hold on until the lesson was complete.

He broke their kiss. "I think we're getting ahead of ourselves, Miss Granger," he panted.

Her eyes shuttered, and all expression fell from her face. He had forgotten how the slightest sense of rejection could wound when everything was laid bare. He cupped her chin in his palm. What to say to reassure her?

"Bedroom," he growled.

She nearly leaped from his lap.

He indicated a door, and she walked toward it. He needed a moment to attend to his clothing, as he refused to be seen crossing a room while holding up his pants. He watched her as she moved, entering his bedchamber wearing only her open school shirt, knickers, and socks. He had been afraid that he would be unable to perform when he saw her uniform and had thought about transfiguring her clothing at the outset. However, now he spared it no more attention than to think that he had best get it off her as soon as possible. Somehow, despite the charade, he had ceased to think of her as his student. At least for the moment.

"Lie down on the bed," he called, picking up their discarded robes and laying them carefully over the back of the couch. He was going to need to calm down for a moment if he was to continue this seduction without shooting off in her hand like a fifth year. He folded her skirt and set it atop their robes and stepped out of his trousers, adding them to the pile. Finally, he took a deep breath and entered the bedroom. It was dark, and his eyes were struggling to adjust. He could see the vague outline of the bed and could hear her breathing, but it went against all his instincts to enter an occupied room in the dark. He lit a sconce with his wand and finding nothing but a still damnably clad Miss Granger, he set the wand on his bedside table.

In the flickering candlelight, her skin was shadowy and warm. He bent and pressed his face to her exposed belly, licking her from navel to sternum. She wriggled under his touch.

"Ticklish?" he said, and she nodded.

He drew her knickers down her legs and dropped them to the floor. When he turned back to her, her knees were pressed together tightly.

He stroked her legs, expecting them to unlock, but they did not. *Ah. It was the light.* Well, that could not be helped. He would need to see her face. Snape settled himself on the bed, drawing her up alongside him. He kissed her--long, deep, open-mouthed kisses that left them both breathless. He slid his hand into her open shirt, cupping the silken weight of a breast, then lowering his mouth to the tip. He suckled greedily, taking her nipple between his teeth and torturing it with his tongue. A sound escaped her, not unlike the whistle of a teakettle, but it was a lovely sound to him in that moment. There was a reedy quality to her breathing that told him he could part her legs without objection now.

Sliding down her length, he slipped between her knees. He could feel her tense as he ran his hands up the insides of her thighs. He rested them there for a moment, letting her adjust to the feel of him near her most intimate parts. Slowly, he leaned forward, letting his hands take his weight and lowered his face to her quim.

"Professor," she whispered.

"Mmm?" he replied, looking up. Her brows had knit, and she had pulled her lower lip into her mouth.

"I need instruction." He could read the trepidation in her face.

He gave her a burning look, a look that was meant to convey how very much he wanted to pleasure her! *I am not in the least disgusted by what I am about to do. This is right between a man and a woman.* "You need only to remember to breathe, Miss Granger," he said and stroked the palm of his hand over her mound, cupping it. She hissed in her compliance as he rubbed her desire-plumped lips. A finger penetrated her seam, sliding easily through the moistened flesh. Again, she sucked in a breath between her teeth, but she did not flinch or pull away. How could she exhibit such trust in him? For here, and he parted her lips with his fingers, here she was as vulnerable as he had ever seen a woman, naked and exposed to his mercy. He bent and licked her, sliding his tongue through her folds, seeking the sounds that would tell him what she liked the best.

His tongue swirled and flicked, dancing close to her clitoris but not quite willing yet to engage it. She squirmed beneath him, urging him higher and higher, until finally he gave in to her desire and circled it with the point of his tongue. Quickly, he retreated, now sucking her labia between his lips, now plunging his tongue into her core. He kneaded her thighs restlessly with his hands, pulling her closer, grinding his face against her, and she arched into his touch, quivering with mounting tension. He could feel her straining toward release, actively seeking it now, though he wondered if she knew just what she was seeking. He allowed himself to return to her clit, lavaging it with long flat strokes, then suddenly circling and sucking.

He glanced up at her, her chin raised and the muscles of her neck pulled firm and taut. Her fists clutched the bedclothes into a wad, and her face looked both intense and mindless, as if she had become unmoored from everything save the sensation between her legs. He returned to his task with renewed fervor, slipping two of his long, slim fingers inside her, relishing the high, keening sound of her welcome. Still, his tongue danced over her clit, and he could feel how close she was, how quickly she would come apart for him, for they had sailed out far past the shallows now, past what she would do for him or for Potter, and were tumbling, in their tiny boat, on the huge swells of desire. Triumph surged through him as she shuddered beneath him, at the tiny cry that accompanied her release--this was his boat, he the captain and the master of this vessel, her body.

He laid his cheek against her thigh and waited for her breathing to become regular. One of her hands roamed idly about in his hair. When her pulse slowed, and her muscles began to tense and tighten beneath him, he asked, "Are you ready to proceed, Miss Granger?"

# Chapter Four

## Chapter 4 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything is JKR's. Chocolates to my beta, Shellsnapelover.

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His words took some time to filter through her consciousness. She lay across his bed without a thought for her nakedness, or the oddness of being in Snape's bedchamber, or for Snape himself, his head impossibly pillowed on her thigh. Her mind was deliciously empty as her body finished pulsing and contracting. For a moment, it had seemed that she'd understood some very fine point, or had run faster than anyone had ever run before. Now, she lay in the aftermath and tried to remember to breathe.

But slowly his words began to register. "Are you ready to proceed, Miss Granger?"

*Proceed.* There would be more? She knew they hadn't bound the marriage yet, but it seemed impossible that there could be more pleasure in the world than he had just given her.

Her voice felt rusty with disuse, but she managed to gasp out, "Yes."

Yes.

Snape removed himself from between her legs and eased up beside her. As he leaned in to kiss her, she could smell the scent of herself drying on his face. It was a sweet, rich smell, much more pleasant than she would have thought. *That's what glory smells like*, she thought nonsensically as he captured her mouth in his, parting her lips with his tongue.

She ran her hands over the length of his body, noticing that his shirt was gone, shed, she supposed, sometime during those lost 15 minutes during which she registered nothing but his hands and tongue and breath. His skin was softer than she had imagined, more supple and warm. Greedily, she took in the facts of him with her hands: the downy hairs of his chest, the sharp point of a shoulder, the gentle curve of his arse.

"Touch me," he whispered.

She froze. She had no idea how to touch him. No idea how to do what he had done to her, to reduce him to some shuddering limbic core, barely human, all raw nerve endings strung together with heat. And she would have to do it without magic, just some skill of her hands or mouth that she had not yet learned. She couldn't bear to disappoint him, but neither could she deny him.

She looked at him, wide-eyed and frightened, and he tipped his face away from her. The look in his eyes was... resigned? Did he think she didn't want to, that she wouldn't try? She dug her fingers into his skin, pressing herself against him as fully as possible. She nudged his head up and brushed her lips over his.

"Show me," she breathed into his mouth.

His kiss turned fierce and wanting, and his lips ground into hers as he felt his way down her arm for her hand. Once he had it, he guided it to the erection that was pressing insistently into her hip, curling her fingers around his shaft. He wrapped her fingers in his, squeezing slightly to indicate the pressure. Slowly, he began to move her hand up and down his length, squeezing on the down stroke, swirling on the up. When he released her hand, she couldn't help but explore him, mapping out the texture of his balls, the thicker skin at the base of him and the velvety soft flesh of his head. She watched his face as she touched him, his eyes squeezed shut, and his lips pursed. She'd have thought he was in pain if she couldn't feel the quiver of his response in her hands. When she resumed stroking him, he let out a ragged sigh, and she marveled at the effect she was having on him. Professor Snape at her mercy. For she could see that he was defenseless now, open to her touch, allowing her to control his senses. It was a heady thought.

Tentatively, she scooted down the bed. He looked at her sharply, and she looked back with a mixture of fear and determination. When her face was level with his cock, she glanced up at him and whispered, "You'll have to help me," and he nodded.

She dragged her lips over the impossibly soft skin of his head, slipping her tongue out to taste him, and he groaned. She smiled as she licked him, learning the musky, salty taste of skin there. Moving down, her tongue flickered over the tight seam between his balls and stroked up his shaft once more.

"Could you... in your mouth...?" he gasped.

Her hand continued the motion he had taught her as she took his head between her lips. The muscles of his thighs clenched as she tentatively began to suck. Slowly, she began to move, guided by instinct alone and the jagged sound of his breathing. She took him into her mouth as fully as she could without gagging. The feeling of him striking the back of her throat was not entirely pleasant, but the sight of him suddenly silent and rigid, was enough encouragement to continue. She swirled her tongue around his shaft as she retreated and sucked again at his swollen head. As she worked, she took in the smell of him, something wonderful and unfamiliar and thoroughly male. It was trapped and released by the thick patch of wiry, black curls surrounding his cock, and she used her free hand to rub them, immersing herself in the thick scent of his arousal.

Suddenly, he half rose and touched her shoulder. Her eyes darted to his face.

"Stop."

"Stop?" She answered uncertainly. She had thought that she was doing well. His breathing--

"Well done, Miss Granger," he said, after taking several shuddering breaths, and she relaxed. "But it's time for the final lesson."

A thrill ran through her at the thought. There was still terror, but it was buried underneath layers of pleasure; right now she longed to feel his warm skin rubbing against hers, to feel his cock filling her, to gaze into his bottomless, black eyes and know that the desire she saw there was for her. She rose, sitting back on her heels, half embarrassed to be so wantonly exposed, half enjoying the way he was staring at her body with the fierce look of a predator who had found his prey.

"Come here," he said. She was reminded of his teaching voice and commands she was powerless to disobey.

She crawled up beside him, nesting her head in the crook of his shoulder. How odd that she seemed to fit there, how impossible that he was using that ridiculous nose to nudge her face into position so that he could find her mouth with his, how unthinkable that the pressure of his lips seemed to wake an insatiable hunger in her. She slipped her hand over his neck to the base of his scalp, digging her fingers in, holding his mouth to hers, silently begging him to move on to the next lesson.

He turned as he kissed her, rising up on one hip, looming over her slightly, and she was afraid. But it was good, too, to see the scone light playing across his chest; to see his face, mindlessly hungry, curtained by his long black hair; and his erection, jutting toward her proudly. She reached up and took his shoulder, pulling him over her and parting her legs to make room for him between them. He settled onto his hands and knees above her, and she looked into his eyes, trying to reason out the impossible. She was trembling, but it was as much from anticipation as fear.

He balanced on one hand, and the other disappeared for a moment. Then she could feel him positioning his swollen cock at her core, the pressure that screamed, right *here*.

"Are you ready?" he whispered, and she nodded.

As he pushed his head inside, his face contorted, and he breathed the words, "Oh, yes--oh, fuck," without seeming to know he had spoken. There was pain, quite a lot--she felt as if he were tearing her open--but the words were a balm that eased the hurt, and she played them again in her mind, "Oh, yes--oh, fuck." And in her memory, she could see the sweet grimace on his face, and she knew that she had finally pleased him beyond measure. This was power; this was triumph. And if there was not yet pleasure, there was a kind of mental ecstasy in the fact that he was inside her, moving slowly now, and she arched her hips to let him occupy her more fully. He sucked in a breath as he filled her, and she smiled fiercely and thought that she finally knew what all the fuss was about. To reduce a man like Snape to gasps and whimpers, what greater magic could there be?

He rocked his hips against hers in a rhythm that she could feel in her very cells. Gradually, the friction between them grew until it surpassed the pain, and she gave in and followed him to that place between their minds where the only thing that existed was the aching pleasure of their bodies joined. She closed her eyes and raised her knees, hooking her calves over his back, driving him deeper inside her with her heels. He slipped his arms beneath hers and took hold of her shoulders, pulling against her push, and the grinding of his pelvis into hers was bringing back the heat that she had lost to the pain.

He lowered his face, and their cheeks pressed together. Sweat ran slick between them, and his skin felt feverish and tight against hers. His hair had made its way into her mouth; she could taste the spicy fragrance of it. She ran her hands down his back, over scars that she could feel but had never seen, and memorized the contours of his spine.

He rose up on his hands again as their rhythm faltered, and she opened her eyes. His lips were moist and parted, his eyes squeezed shut, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

"Hermione!" he cried, and her heart exploded.

There was no wave of pleasure, not like before, but she could feel that he had found it, for he shuddered above her, wracked by something she could not see. And the feel of him undone in her arms and the sound of her name had brought her a different kind of satisfaction. She had made this; she had done it, and it was better than magic, better than victory, better than anything.

She watched with sorrow as he came back to himself and rolled off of her. His face was blank now, but not with the kind of single-minded blankness he had worn as they coupled, but the studied blankness she had always known from him. She shut her eyes again and pressed against his side, determined to draw out the sweetness for as long as she could. He tucked an arm around her, and she lay quietly, afraid that if she made a sound he would remember, as she was beginning to, how they had ended up there and would insist she leave.

She listened to the sound of his breathing and thought about what they had done. She was his now. There was no way to take it back. She waited, expecting to feel the panic return, but it did not. All she felt was a kind of mental and physical exhaustion that precluded thought. It is done, she thought, and then, briefly, she slept.

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When she woke, she saw that he was lying exactly as he had been, staring...*angrily?*... at the ceiling. She looked at him curiously. His black hair was pooled on the pillow; his long, pale body fully extended; his wilted cock resting against the fur of his thigh. *Who is this man that I have married? Where does he go and what does he love?* She thought, and felt, to her amazement, desire bubbling up again, warm and effervescent in her limbs.

"Welcome back, Miss Granger," he said evenly, and then she panicked. How would they speak to each other now?

"Sir," she said.

"Are you all right?"

Was she all right? She had no idea. "Yes."

"Do you think you will need a healing potion?"

"Sir?"

"Are you in pain? Do you feel... bruised? I can hardly send you back to Gryffindor Tower covered in welts."

Send her back to Gryffindor Tower. The words stung her, but that was senseless, for where else was she to go? Of course she was going back to Gryffindor Tower. This was not a marriage; this was a plan, and they'd completed the first step of it without killing one another, thank God.

"I'm fine, sir. But perhaps I should take some with me, in case anything arises?"

He nodded and rose, and she was grateful for his leaving so that she would not have to dress in front of him. She buttoned her shirt, stepped into her knickers and entered the sitting room, where she found her skirt and school robes folded neatly on the couch. She was just fixing the clasp of her robes when he returned, mercifully dressed himself. He handed her two phials.

"Drink the first one now. It is a contraceptive potion," he said. "The other is a general healing potion."

She nodded and uncorked the phial, tipping the contents down her throat. It was viscous and unpleasant. She turned and tucked the other phial into her schoolbag, which was sitting beside her like a relic of some former life.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Eleven o'clock," he said crisply. "I'm sure Potter and Weasley are frothing at the mouth by now. You'll have to Floo back to your dormitory. A Prefect shouldn't be seen wandering the dungeons after hours."

So his quarters *were* in the dungeons. She had always thought so, but these rooms hadn't felt as chilly and dank, *asforbidding*, as she had expected.

"But how could I Floo?" she said, "The network doesn't--"

"Our vows, Miss Granger. Or weren't you paying attention? You pledged your home to me. Your rooms are now but an extension of mine. The Floo will take you there."

"Yes, sir," she said. It seemed unreal how quickly they had returned to their former selves--and oh, God, Harry and Ron! How on earth was she going to explain where she'd been? And class! Tomorrow was Defense Against the Dark Arts. How could she sit beside Harry and look at Snape without...

"Professor?"

"Yes?"

"Could I... that is, would it be all right if I missed Defense tomorrow?"

"I hardly think that Prefects should be skipping classes. And you don't seem the type."

Was he being deliberately obtuse? She needed time to let this become a memory, to absorb it and move on before she could return to class and to her former role as his terrified student. "I know sir, but under the circumstances--"

"Under the circumstances, there is more need for you to be in class than ever. You said yourself that you must learn to walk the line between the Light and the Dark. The Dark Lord has risen and--"

"Oh, come off it!" she exclaimed. "No one knows that better than I, and though you'd never admit it, I could hex everyone in that room six ways to Sunday. There's nothing you'll cover in that goddamned class tomorrow that I haven't already learned and you know it."

"50 points from Gryffindor for use of inappropriate language," Snape purred. "I am still your professor, Miss Granger."

That was rich. That was truly rich, given everything they'd--

"That's right, you are," she snapped as she grabbed the jar of Floo powder on his mantle and wrenched the lid off. "And I've very much appreciated your lessons *ifucking*, Professor Snape."

"Has it not yet dawned on what passes for your mind that you must learn to hide your feelings? The rest of our lives will be predicated on this charade, and you *must* cope. Starting with Defense Against the Dark Arts tomorrow--"

She tossed the powder into the flames and watched as they flared green. The last thing she heard as she stepped through was Snape's smirking tone as he said, "50 more points--and I rather thought I'd given you lessons in making love."

## Chapter Five

### Chapter 5 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. I make no money. Thanks to Shellsnapelover, my lovely beta.

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When she emerged from her room the next morning, she found Harry and Ron waiting anxiously in the Gryffindor Common Room.

"Hermione!" Ron said, striding toward her as she descended the steps. "Where were you? You never came back from Dumbledore's office. We waited here until midnight!"

Harry was looking at her warily. She knew that he must be wondering whether Dumbledore had, in fact, given her information or privilege that he did not have. She knew she should sympathize; poor Harry had no one but the old wizard to guide him, and he guarded his relationship with Dumbledore jealously. But at the moment, she had no sympathy to spare for anyone. Harry could stuff his jealousy. He had no idea what she'd been asked to do.

She sighed. "I'm sorry. Professor Dumbledore wanted to see me about Muggle crossword puzzles of all things. He's taken a fancy to them and thought I'd enjoy helping him. He seemed to think it would be a birthday present of sorts. He kept me up late, so he agreed to Floo me back to the Tower. I was so exhausted, I fell straight to sleep."

In fact, after thanking whatever gods had allowed Lavender and Parvati to be asleep when she returned, Hermione had lain awake half the night replaying her evening in Professor Snape's chambers and trying to come up with an excuse so simple and boring to Harry and Ron that they would forget about the whole thing. She had finally decided that crossword puzzles were sufficiently academic to put them off: Muggle enough to be beneath their interest, and absolutely something that Dumbledore would love. Still sleepless at 3 am, she had crept through the corridors of the school to the owlery and sent the Headmaster a message explaining her story.

Harry laughed and told them again about the knitting patterns that Dumbledore had professed interest in when they visited Professor Slughorn over the holiday as if to show that he, too, had intimate knowledge of the Headmaster's unusual interests. Hermione sighed. At least they'd bought her story.

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At breakfast, Hermione received another owl from Dumbledore. She untied the parchment from the bearer's leg, offering up her toast as a reward. She didn't have much of an appetite.

*Dear Miss Granger,*

*Thank you for your help last evening with the crosswords. You were indispensable. I shall have to research the works of the Muggle Goethe that you recommended, as I was quite taken by the quote referenced in the clue, "According to the Faustian author, what is an infinite debt, which can only be discharged through eternity--8 letters," (in case you've forgotten). I would have never reached the answer on my own. I am infinitely in your debt, my dear.*

*Albus Dumbledore*

Harry read the note over her shoulder. "What does it mean?" he asked.

"Just a Muggle saying," Hermione said, and she turned away for there were tears in her eyes. She blinked them back.

"I've never heard it. What was the answer?"

"Marriage," she said quietly.

"Hermione, are you ok?" Ron asked. "You look peaky."

"I'm just tired. It was a long night," she said.

"You look like you weren't the only one who had a long night. Snape looks even more disastrous than usual," Harry said, indicating the high table with his fork. "Doesn't the man realize he needs to shower?"

Rage bubbled up in her chest--*How dare he?*--Until she remembered that she, too, was furious with the former Potions master.

"Greasy old git," Ron said amiably. "Speaking of which, Hermione, now that you're done helping the Headmaster with his homework, could you look over my essay for Defense?"

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She entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom flanked by Harry and Ron. She slid into her usual seat between them without looking up and pretended, for a few long moments, to be searching through her bag for a quill. Anything to keep from looking into the face of the man she had so hastily agreed to protect, who had driven her to such wanton peaks the night before and then sent her on her way without a word of advice or comfort.

"Silence," he said, by way of commencing the class.

Hermione glanced quickly around her and saw that, as usual, the room had fallen quiet; every face was turned to Snape. She hastily complied.

"As so many of you proved to be incapable of wordless magic, it seems prudent that we spend some time on Shield Charms."

The class remained silent, waiting.

"The most common type of Shielding Charm is, of course, Protego. However, there are three distinct variations on the Charm. I don't suppose any of you know what they are?"

Hermione took a deep breath and thrust her hand into the air. He wanted normal? He would get normal.

Snape made an exaggerated show of looking around the room before he sighed and said, "Very well. Miss Granger?"

"The three types of Protego Shield Charm are: simple Protego, Protego Horribilis, and Protego Totalum."

He nodded curtly at her.

Well, that's a far cry from his usual cutting remarks, she thought, but instead of feeling grateful, she felt concerned. He knew there must be no deviation from their normal behavior--he'd told her that himself, the bastard. That's why she was sitting here in class instead of in her dorm room, licking her wounds.

Her hand shot back up.

"Yes?" he snapped.

"I-I--" she said, adding some tremor to her voice for show, "I thought you'd want to know what each one does."

"I assure you, Miss Granger, I know very well what each one does. Perhaps, dare I suggest it, better than someone who has simply memorized their definitions from a textbook? And I'll thank you to let me teach this class."

There. That was better. Her cheeks were burning naturally, a nearly Pavlovian response to his ire. Now they were on even footing again.

"The *simple* Protego Charm," Snape said, seeming to taunt Harry, who was, of course, proficient at it, "is a one-shot Charm. It repels the hex that is thrown at it and then dissipates. It has some lasting effects against physical or Muggle attack, but as none of you should be so crass as to resort to fisticuffs, its usefulness is limited. Far more worthy are the two variants, Protego Horribilis and Protego Totalum."

Harry's hand was in the air. Hermione watched him out of the corner of her eye and noted with pleasure that he was clutching his wand angrily.

"Potter?"

"You didn't mention that the Protego Charm can repel a hex thoroughly enough to launch it back at the caster," Harry said. She knew that Harry was recalling his disastrous Occlumency lessons with Snape.

"I hardly feel that accidents are a necessary part of the curriculum," Snape said. "I've never known the Charm to display those results consistently."

"Perhaps you're not very good at it," Harry muttered darkly. Snape shot him a murderous glare that told Hermione he'd heard.

"Shall we try it, then, Potter?" he asked, eyebrow raised.

Harry rose at once, swiping his wand back to throw a hex, but Snape chuckled coldly. "Oh, no. Surely you didn't think I'd allow you to hex me? If you are so confident that the Charm will do as you say, why not allow me to hex you?"

Harry nodded stiffly, preparing to cast the Shield Charm.

Snape twitched his wand in Harry's direction as Harry yelled, "Protego!"

Suddenly, Harry was flying through the air. Hermione watched in horror as he was upended, dangling in the air by a single foot, his robes pooling about his midsection.

"Perhaps you will value wordless hexes a bit more now that you've witnessed their advantage first hand?" Snape smirked.

Thank God he was wearing trousers, Hermione thought wildly, whipping out her wand and shouting, "*Liberacorpus!*" Her thoughts darted to the Half-Blood Prince's potion book. Harry had learned this spell only recently. Perhaps she should be grateful to the book after all. At least she knew how to counteract the jinx.

"Miss Granger!" Snape shouted as Harry fell unceremoniously to the ground.

"Sir?" she asked angrily.

"I don't recall giving you permission to release Potter."

"I don't recall hexing students to be an accepted part of the Hogwarts course of study," she retorted.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor," Snape thundered, "and detention in my office at eight."

"For releasing a jinx?"

"Hermione," Ron hissed, laying a hand on her arm. Suddenly, Snape seemed to flinch, and an odd look crossed his face. He crossed his arms, tucking his hands into the folds of his robes.

"Sit, Miss Granger, before you lose your house any more points," he ordered, turning on his heel and striding to the front of the classroom.

What had just happened? She glanced at Ron, but he didn't seem to have noticed anything unusual. Harry had collected himself from the floor and was sliding back into his seat beside her.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

He nodded, staring straight ahead. "Sorry you got detention," he said, sotto voice, and she nodded as if to say, "It's nothing." She turned toward Snape, arranging her face into its usual angry-but-interested expression.

Oh, God, detention. What perverse form of torture would he dream up for her, given their circumstances? She tried to concentrate on Snape's lecture, even taking some notes on the benefits of the Protego variations, but her mind had drifted to the dungeons.

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She knocked at the door to Snape's office promptly at eight. The door swung open at her touch. *My home, your home*, she thought ruefully as she strode into the room. She refused to cower before him in private, though she had to do so in public.

Snape was seated at his desk, which was littered with parchment.

"Good evening," he said without looking up.

"Sir," she answered.

"I apologize if I was harsh with you last evening," he said, still not raising his face from his marking. "You performed admirably today."

"Thank you, sir. Though it was hardly a performance. I would have released Harry from the hex regardless."

"Exactly, Miss Granger. Had you deferred to me in any way I would have been... disappointed. I trust you see now why I insisted you attend class?"

"Did you assign me detention in order to gloat?" *Bastard*.

"Certainly not. I assigned you detention because assigning detention is what I do. And because the first year cauldrons need attention."

Hermione fought not to smile. At least he was honest about it. "I see. May I use magic?"

"Naturally."

Hermione set to work cleaning the cauldrons. Snape continued marking parchment at his desk. She was amused to note that he hummed slightly as he worked. It wasn't a tune so much as a constant thrum of disapproval.

Several of the cauldrons were nearly melted through. She was reminded of Neville in their first year, how he was unable to brew even the simplest of potions without horrifying results. Wordlessly, she cast a Reinforcing Charm on the weakest of the cauldrons, hoping that some poor student would have a better time of it next week.

"Tell me, do you reinforce all the Gryffindor cauldrons, or just Longbottom's?"

She jumped at the sound of Snape's voice cutting across the stillness. When she turned, guiltily, to face him, she saw that he had rolled the last parchment and was sitting motionless in his chair. She wondered how long he had been watching her.

"Sir?"

"I wondered how Weasley's cauldron had survived his last attempt at the Hiccoughing Draught."

She smiled, remembering. Ron had added the hellebore before the fluxweed, which had rendered the potion unstable. When he'd added the powdered porcupine quills, it had caused a terrific explosion.

"I thought you said there was nothing between yourself and Weasley," Snape said, settling back in his chair.

"There isn't," she replied.

"Really?" he said, sounding bored. "Most people don't stare fondly off into the distance at the mere mention of those they care nothing for."

"I never said I cared nothing for him. Ron is one of my dearest friends. I simply said that there's nothing... romantic... between us."

"Liar."

"I'm not! And frankly, I don't see why you care."

"Why do I care if you lie to me? Because my life is in your hands! I must be able to trust you."

She nearly growled with frustration. "You *can* trust me. I don't see why you care about my relationship with Ron!"

"Because I don't like people handling my possessions, Miss Granger."

His *possessions*? "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"When he touched you in class, my ring flared gold," Snape said. "It was visible, if only for a moment. The rings are charmed against infidelity as I'm sure you must have realized. Anyone who touches you with... amorous intentions... sets off the charm."

Hermione was gobsmacked. Ron... had feelings for her? He had touched her *with amorous intentions*? For a moment, her heart leaped into her throat, and then it crashed down through her ribcage as she realized that it didn't matter anymore. All the hours of looking over his work, of charming her hair, of dating that ridiculous Viktor Krum--all

of it was worthless. She'd won him, and now she couldn't have him. She pursed her lips and set her jaw, willing herself not to cry.

"I won't lie to you, Professor Snape. There is nothing between Ron and me and never has been. I--well, I harbored a crush on him for several years, but he never returned my feelings. That's all."

Snape sat forward, and some of the lines on his forehead slackened. A look like shame darted over his features and then vanished so quickly, she thought she might have imagined it.

"Apparently, you were mistaken," he said quietly. "However this complicates matters. We cannot have my ring becoming visible every time Weasley passes you the butter."

She nodded. "I know, sir. I'll--Well, I don't know what I'll do. I'll harp on him about his homework and refuse to look over his essays. I'll disparage the Chudley Cannons--"

The corners of Snape's lips turned up. "I'm afraid that won't do. If the boy has taken a fancy to you, he'll simply take those things as a challenge. No, what you need to do is to find him someone else to snog."

"Someone to snog?"

"Surely there is some female in your year, besides yourself, who would take pity on him?"

"I don't know, sir. But I'll ask around."

"Do that. And Miss Granger?"

"Yes?"

"Do it quickly. It will hurt less that way."

She looked at him, wonder written on her face.

"You're dismissed," he said curtly, gathering his parchment and rising from the desk.

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As Hermione clambered through the portrait hole, she saw that Harry and Ron were again waiting for her in the Common Room. Though she knew that they were simply doing as they had always done, waiting to commiserate with whichever of the three of them had suffered detention with Snape, inwardly, she sighed. To simply climb the stairs to her room without having to invent the last hour and a half would be...well, it would be heaven.

"What did he make you do?" Harry asked, the moment she joined them. She suppressed a weary smile. *What did he make me do, indeed?*

"Nothing too terrible. Just cleaning the first year cauldrons."

"With or without magic?" Ron asked.

"Without, of course," she said. "And from the looks of it, the new first years are about as talented at potion making as Neville. But still, it could have been worse."

"I can't believe him!" Harry said. "Hexing me in the middle of class--he planned that! He knew I wouldn't be ready."

"I agree that it was wrong," Hermione said, "But it does kind of prove his point about wordless magic--the caster really does get a split-second--"

"I know that!" Harry yelled. "Do you think I'm not doing it because I just don't care? *I can't* do it."

"You can do it, Harry," Hermione soothed. "You just haven't got the hang of it yet. We'll work on it. I'll even let you practice on me."

"Can I practice, too?" Ron asked, and Hermione wondered how she could have been so blind. Ron Weasley, asking for extra lessons? It should have been obvious that he'd finally fallen for her. How long had this been going on? She would have to work quickly to redirect his attention.

"Of course you can," she said. "Maybe I'll ask--"

Just then, Lavender and Parvati entered the Common Room, reeking of incense and giggling madly.

"We've just come from Professor Trelawney's," Parvati said. "She predicted that Lavender would be swept off her feet by a handsome Quidditch star."

Harry looked at them uncomfortably, a blush creeping down his neck.

*Lavender.* That might work. She was pretty and vivacious and as uninterested in school--save Divination, of course--as Ron himself. Naturally, Parvati was out. Ron had so terribly botched his date with her sister, Padma, at the Yule ball back in their fourth year that Parvati was barely on speaking terms with him.

--Lavender!"

"Yes?" the blonde witch said, eyeing Hermione suspiciously.

"Oh, I was just saying the boys need some extra help with wordless magic, and I was thinking, maybe you could practice with us?"

Lavender looked warily from Harry to Ron. Then she seemed to remember Trelawney's "prophecy" and her expression brightened. "Sure! I could use the extra practice, myself!"

"Brilliant!" Hermione said, ignoring the questioning looks from Harry and Ron.

"Well, we were just on our way upstairs," Parvati said, clearly ready to extricate herself from Ron's presence.

"I'll come with you," Hermione said, leaping from her seat. She knew that everyone in the room must be wearing identical expressions of confusion, so she didn't look at anyone as she hurried up the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

"So, what's up, Hermione?" Lavender asked awkwardly when they'd reached their room.

"Nothing. Just ready to be done with them for the day." She sighed heavily, as if to convey what a burden Harry and Ron could be. Parvati snorted her approval. *Take the bait, Lavender,* she thought. *Take it.*

"Oh, but I think you're lucky," Lavender said. "Harry and Ron just follow you everywhere."

*Sold!* she thought triumphantly. "Well, it would be different if we were dating," Hermione said. "As it is, they just want me to look over their homework."

Lavender nodded sympathetically. Then she asked, "Do you... you know, fancy either of them?"

"Oh, no. No, I'm still with Viktor," Hermione lied.

"I wondered!" Lavender exclaimed. "Tell me, is he as dark and mysterious as he looks?"

Viktor? Dark and mysterious? Well, she supposed he might appear that way to those who hadn't fought to understand a word that he said for six months. "Yes, he's very... intense," she said.

"You're so lucky!" Lavender squealed again.

Hermione looked down, smiling slightly, and hoped she looked modest and smitten. "Yes, well, he makes me feel lucky. But if I didn't have Viktor," she added, "I'd think that Ron would make an excellent catch."

"Ron?" Parvati said. "Ron is the most inconsiderate clod! At the Yule Ball, he--"

"But that was years ago," Hermione interrupted. "He's... matured a great deal since then..." She let her voice trail off, suggesting all sorts of inappropriate things that were probably untrue.

"Really?" Lavender said. "I would have thought Harry--"

"No, not Harry," Hermione said. "Harry's too preoccupied, you know. Between He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and Quidditch... well, I just don't think he'd be the most *attentive* boyfriend. And he's a little short, don't you think?" she added, feeling traitorous.

"Well..." said Lavender. "I hadn't thought of that. And he's always sort of coming in and out of fashion, isn't he? Ron's much more consistent."

"Yes," Hermione agreed, baffled that anyone could consider a person to be fashionable or not.

"Thanks, Hermione!" Lavender beamed as she shed her robes. "And you know, if you ever need any advice with Viktor or anything..."

"You'll be the first to know," Hermione said.

Hermione sank onto her four poster, the day's events chasing each other through her mind. So, she'd thrown Ron to Lavender. It stung less than she'd thought it would, though she realized that she wouldn't really know until she'd seen them together. But surely Snape was right--best just to get on with it. And how odd that had been when he'd suggested it to her. He'd looked so... nostalgic... somehow, as if he were passing along advice that had been hard-won. *Are you feeling sorry for him, Hermione Granger?* she thought. *After he hexed Harry and gave you detention... not to mention... well...* But he hadn't been so bad, had he? He'd even joked with her, in his way, telling her that he'd given her detention because he didn't want to clean the cauldrons himself. *He's softening you*, she thought sharply to herself. *He's softening you so that he can hit harder the next time, and you mustn't let him.*

She drifted off to sleep amid the confusing tangle of her thoughts.

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Back in his quarters, Snape moved restlessly from room to room. Why had he let her see so much of his home? Now there was no place that he could sit and simply be without being accosted by memories of her pale, delicate hands and her warm, eager mouth. *And that ridiculous bush she calls hair*, he thought fiercely. *Not to mention her teeth. Clearly she's not as brilliant as everyone says if she hadn't even realized that Weasley was after her.*

He played back her detention in his mind, trying to satisfy himself that he had acted the part of the dark-hearted Potions master as well as usual. However unconventional their circumstances, he could not allow her to penetrate his image. Perhaps he should have been more harsh with the girl. It was simply a comfort to him to think that there was finally someone else within these walls that was living a double life. Someone, perhaps, that he could trust.

*You must not come to rely on her. She may trust you*, he told himself sternly, *but she will never want you--for friendship or anything else. It would be inconceivable to her.* And that had never been more obvious than during their discussion today. It hadn't even crossed her mind to ask who might have interest in him, who might set her godforsaken ring ablaze. *Who could love Severus Snape?* she would think, if he suggested it. No one, it seemed. Not even his wife. But what did it matter? There would be a few more months of torture and then the blissful silence of infinity.

Finally, he settled at his desk and began to work.

## Chapter Six

### Chapter 6 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything you recognize is JKR's. I make no money. Warning for off-screen torture in this chapter. Thank you to Shellsnapelover for being an excellent beta and for lending me the cursed whip from Love is a Fire. This one's for you, Shell.

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After the evening of her detention, life at Hogwarts went on as usual until the whole incident began to seem like a strange dream. Classes continued--she particularly enjoyed the introduction of rune triangulation in Arithmancy, and even Defense Against the Dark Arts was going smoothly. She and Snape continued to snipe at one another in class, and she was becoming quite adept at nonverbal spells. Of course, she was avoiding Ron studiously and was more grateful than ever that she had... er, assisted... his joining of the Gryffindor Quidditch team as he and Harry were often at practice.

Professor Slughorn's gatherings were also a refuge for her, and though she often thought she would die if she had to consume another ounce of crystallized pineapple, she was grateful for the time to spend with Harry and Ginny without having to duck Ron's touch. In fact, the only thought she had been giving to her situation lately was to hope that Lavender would hurry up and make her move so that the rest of her life could return to normal. She missed the easy camaraderie between herself and Harry and Ron.

One Friday night, after Astronomy, as Hermione was walking back from the kitchens where the three of them had been taking in an evening snack, she felt her ring begin to warm and finally, to burn. She clenched her left hand into a fist and began to look around for somewhere she could disappear to.

"I don't know," Harry was saying, "He's good, of course, but I didn't want to ask him until I checked with you... you know, being Ginny's boyfriend and all..."

Ron was scowling and had thrust his hands into the pockets of his robes. "I guess it doesn't matter," he replied darkly. "I mean, the point is to defeat Slytherin... so, if you must... Though I still wish you'd let me quit the team."

Suddenly, she saw the answer up ahead. "You two go on. I'm just going to make a quick trip to the loo," she said, anxious to get the ring off her finger. She wondered if a magical burn could leave a scar.

"See you back at the Tower," Harry said, and turning back to Ron, "I know, but, mate, we've got to show Malfoy, even if..." His voice trailed off as the door swung shut behind her. She hurried into a stall, yanking the ring off and holding it up to the light.

*Headmaster's office. Alone. Hurry.*

A chill swept through her. Never once in the last four weeks had Snape used the ring to contact her. And come to think of it, she hadn't noticed him in the Great Hall for meals since... since Monday? Panic began to jangle her nerves. Where had he been? She shoved the ring back onto her finger and took off trotting for the Headmaster's office, doubling back down the Charms corridor so that she wouldn't meet Harry and Ron on the way.

As she pulled up in front of the gargoyle, Hermione realized that she didn't know the password.

"Fizzing Whizbees?" she asked hopefully. The gargoyle continued to look at her sternly, unmoving.

"Damn it," she hissed, pulling her wand from her pocket. She touched it to her ring and thought *Password?* with all her might. Seconds later, the invisible circlet warmed, and she looked inside it. The corners of her lips turned up in spite of her fear.

"Ice Mice," she told the gargoyle, and he leaped aside.

She took the stairs two at a time and burst through Dumbledore's office door without knocking. She found him standing over Professor Snape, who was draped, unconscious, over an overstuffed chair. His robes were soaked with blood, though she could not see the source of it. Dumbledore was holding Snape's ring in one hand and his wand in the other. Hermione realized that he must have used the ring to summon her as Snape was clearly gravely injured, but she still felt a curious relief when he replaced the ring on Snape's finger.

"Professor Dumbledore--what--?"

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Hermione," Dumbledore said, crossing behind her to close the door. "As you can see, Professor Snape has been injured."

"Did he--was it--Voldemort?"

"Yes. Professor Snape was summoned early Tuesday morning. He only just now returned to the castle. I'm grateful that he was able to make it here."

"Why isn't he in the hospital wing? Should I fetch Madam Pomfrey?"

"I think not," Dumbledore said. "Madam Pomfrey is an excellent healer, but she is inexperienced in dealing with such Dark magic--and the Cruciatius Curse is rather unmistakable in its effects. She would be sure to be alarmed and to ask a great number of questions. No, I usually attend to Professor Snape myself."

Hermione felt her entire body numb as Dumbledore spoke the words 'Cruciatius Curse.' "Then what is it, sir? Do you need help?"

"I'm afraid I need rather a lot of help. I've been called away on some of... Harry's business," he said, looking at her significantly. "It cannot wait. I will have to ask you to care for Professor Snape."

"Care for him? But if Madam Pomfrey can't--"

"I have the utmost confidence in you," Dumbledore said, ignoring her protests. "I've laid out what you will need here: some healing spells, though I'm sure you're already familiar with them; essences of Dittany and Murtlap, to soothe and heal wounds, though be careful not to administer too much of either, as they can sometimes react to each other in nasty ways; and Dreamless Sleep. I've already given him a dose, as you can see. You'll need to be on the look out for chills and fever. Chills spell shock--keep him warm with his limbs elevated. Fever usually indicates infection. You'll want to stop the Murtlap and up the Dittany if you see a fever. And cold compresses are never amiss."

"But, sir--"

"Hermione, I would not ask this of you if the need were not great," he said firmly. "The Cruciatius Curse usually manifests itself in nightmares and muscle spasms. Keep a careful watch over him and massage out any cramping that occurs."

"But, sir, the wounds? What are they from?"

"Whipping," Dumbledore said quietly. "Of a particularly nasty variety. Voldemort possesses a whip that continues to torture for hours after the beating has ceased. He will feel every strike again, this time as if they were made by flame. That is the reason for the Draught of Dreamless Sleep. I have found no cure for that pain except time. He will scream, so be sure to soundproof his chambers."

"His chambers?"

"He needs bed rest. And keeping him in his own rooms will keep the two of you off Harry's map. I will help you take him through the Floo, and then I must depart."

Hermione was nearly paralyzed with fear, but she dared not disobey the Headmaster, nor leave Snape in agony, so she hoisted his left arm up over her shoulder as Dumbledore took on the right. She nearly stumbled under his weight, but braced herself and bore it, inching toward the fireplace.

She looked to Dumbledore to activate the Floo, but he shook his head and said, "You are the only one who can do it." Ah, yes. Her other home. Was this why he had called her? Because he couldn't get into Snape's chambers without her? Hermione pushed that odd thought from her mind. Whatever the reason, Snape was in terrible need of care.

After they'd settled him into his own bed, Dumbledore turned and addressed her. "You'll need to clean and close the wounds quickly before the spasms begin. I hope to return by morning. If he wakes, Hermione, he may be blind. Try not to panic. It has always passed."

"Professor Dumbledore--what about Harry and Ron? They're sure to come looking for me!"

"I'll see to it, Miss Granger," he said shortly. "Now--Professor Snape needs you." And with that, he stepped into the fireplace.

In a moment, he had vanished, and Hermione was, once again, alone with Snape in his bedroom. *Do not think*, she told herself. *Just act*. She used her wand to place a Silencing Charm over his suite and to strip his clothes from his body, gasping as she saw the extent of his wounds. Nearly every square inch of him was covered in

swollen, reddened welts, most of them still oozing blood. *He looks like a Muggle road map*, she thought and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, unable to look at the flayed abomination that should have been her professor's--her husband's--skin.

Hermione steeled herself and conjured a basin filled with water and the softest cloths she could manage. She cast a general Cleansing Charm over his body and then gently set about the work of cleaning each individual wound. Snape whimpered slightly as she blotted his tender flesh, and the sound, faint as it was, tore at her ears. Snape was not supposed to be in pain--he was supposed to dole it out. She glanced over Dumbledore's notes, which he had left on the bedside table, and, confident that she knew the Charm well, she used her wand to begin binding his skin together.

It was painstaking work, and she knew she was running out of time. The wounds had to be healed before the convulsions began--not just because he would be in motion, and she couldn't trust herself to heal a moving target, but because of the risk that he would worsen any open gashes. She tried to work quickly, thumbing open the jar of Murtlap in her left hand as she healed with her right. She would save the Dittany until it was absolutely necessary. Without someone to help her, she was terrified of causing a reaction. With whispering touches, she spread Murtlap over the seams of his newly healed skin. He made a slight hissing sound between his teeth, but Hermione couldn't tell if it was from pain or relief. As gently as she could, she grasped him by the shoulder and hip and rolled him over.

At that, he did cry out, and she stammered a hasty apology. She found that talking to him calmed her, so she kept up a steady stream of chatter as she worked over his back, where the wounds were longer and deeper.

"I'm so sorry, Professor Snape. I promise that I'm not trying to hurt you. Professor Dumbledore had to leave; I know he usually does this for you. I'm sure that would make you a lot more comfortable than having me here!" She paused and laughed shrilly, "Though it's nothing I haven't seen before. Your body that is, not these wounds. I've never seen anything like these wounds. Professor Dumbledore said that you were whipped. I can hardly believe that anyone--*anyone*--could be so cruel as to do this to another person. You don't deserve this, Professor. I can only hope that I'm bringing you some relief from the pain."

She babbled on, letting her voice act like a salve, driving out her thoughts. She was so afraid that she knew she would not be able to go on if she considered the situation too closely. What if she was causing him even more pain? What if he died before Dumbledore returned? What if, and this struck her so deeply that she could not even think the thought straight on, but could only edge around it in her mind, what if this had happened because Voldemort had somehow found out about *her*?

She had barely closed the last of the rents in his skin when his hands began to twitch convulsively. Quickly, she returned him to his back and lay her cheek against his forehead to check his temperature as her mother had done when she was a small child. Warm and clammy, thank Merlin. A fever would burn hot and dry. So he could have more Dreamless Sleep and more Murtlap. She measured out a dose of the Sleeping Potion and eased it between his lips, letting it dribble down his throat. He coughed slightly, but swallowed when she massaged his neck.

"It's all right," she whispered. "I'm here, and I won't leave you."

His right hand was still twitching, so she took it in her own and rubbed it with her thumb, loosening the ball of muscles. Gently, she worked his fingers open, squeezing each one and warming it in her palm. Though she could see now that two of the digits were broken, some of the hard lines in his face slackened. The massage was working. She would set the bones later.

He began to draw his legs up, and Hermione could see the muscles bunching into tight knots in his calves. There was a keening, pleading sound escaping from his lips, and she used all her remaining will to block it out as she grasped his left foot and pulled his leg straight against his protests. She leaned the heel of her hand against his toes, forcing his foot flat. She knew it must hurt, but it was the only way to combat the clenching of his muscles--she had to keep them elongated. Slowly, she eased his right leg into the same position, bracing his feet against her ribs as she rubbed her hands up and down his legs to keep the muscles warm and supple. As her hands ran back and forth over the ridges of scar tissue that she had just created, she thought of that night... their wedding night... and the scars that she had felt on his back. How long had he been enduring this agony? She was ashamed that she had never thought about what life as a Death Eater must truly be like. Oh, she had known that he was protecting her and the other students, but from what she had never considered. How often did he collapse in Dumbledore's office? How often had she made snide remarks when he was absent from meals when really he was down here, screaming in pain, tortured by an invisible master whose hold on him never slackened?

Sitting down on the side of the bed, Hermione began on his hands again, which had knotted into fists, slowly working up his arms into his shoulders. His head rocked fitfully on the pillow, and she knew he must be suffering one of the world's worst headaches. She paused in her ministrations long enough to freshen the water in the basin beside the bed and soak one of the soft towels in it. She rolled it and lay it across his forehead, smoothing his hair away from his face. Oh, God, his nose was broken, too. That she set quickly, refusing to hear the *snick* of his bones realigning. She figured that, unlike his fingers, there was little likelihood of his breaking it again during the seizing.

Finally, she could no longer keep up with the pace of the spasms. Snape's knees were drawing up while she was still dealing with the muscles of his neck, his arms clenching and folding while his abdominals drew him into a tight and twitching ball. He was grunting with effort and pain. She had no idea what to do. Suddenly, he screamed, and his whole body seemed to go rigid, bracing itself against a blow that she could not see.

No, she thought. No. Not the aftershocks already. I am no match for this.

Tears were leaking from his eyes, though he did not sob. Her hands worked futilely over his legs; already she could see that his hands were once again scrabbling over the bedclothes, reduced to useless claws. In frustration, she kicked off her shoes and stretched out beside him, bracing his feet with hers, using her length to keep him extended. His body felt cold to her touch. *Cold--shock!* she thought and turned, grabbing her wand and casting Warming Charms over the bed, his body, even herself. She couldn't elevate his limbs while he was like this, but she could try to keep him from freezing.

His cries were deafening with his mouth in such close proximity to her ear, but she dared not muffle them. She needed to know what he was feeling so that she could try to help. Easing her arms around him, she began massaging the muscles of his back. She felt every lash of the whip as he wrenched into her body. At times his fingers dug into her skin; other times he kicked and flailed, striking her with alarming strength for a man so compromised.

"Shhhh," she soothed senselessly into his ear. "It's over now. You're in your own bed. These are just the aftershocks. No one is hurting you now." It felt like a lie. Someone was clearly hurting him very badly, and despite the beating she was taking by proxy, she longed to stand between him and that ghostly whip, to bear at least a little of the pain for him.

He struggled for hours. There were brief periods when the burning whip would cease, and she could return to loosening the muscles of his neck or thighs, when suddenly the whole thing would begin again with renewed strength, and she would find herself once again acting as a human straightjacket. At one point she saw new rivulets of blood trickling onto the pillowcase, and her heart nearly stopped in her chest until she realized that it was her own. He had caught her brow with his chin hard enough to split it. Not daring to try a healing spell on herself, especially when she couldn't see the wound, she wiped the blood from her face and pressed one of the cloths over it. It would have to do.

She checked the time. Four a.m. Where in bloody hell was Dumbledore? Hermione was so exhausted that her own muscles were twitching. Her skin felt taut and papery with fatigue, and her eyebrow was burning where it had been cut. Snape's cries had slackened for the moment. She looked into his face and saw that his eyes were open.

"Professor," she whispered. "Are you awake?"

He did not answer, but clutched her tightly and squeezed his eyes shut once more. *Light!* she thought, remembering his headache. Quickly, she extinguished the lamps, which left her to lie in the darkness, listening to his breathing until her eyes adjusted.

Snape seemed to have, at last, relaxed. He shifted, she presumed, to take the pressure off his savaged back and moaned slightly. His breathing was laboured but regular. Hermione began to sob then, finally released from duty by the fact that he seemed to have fallen into a more natural slumber.

She cried until she felt like a hollowed stump and then tumbled gracelessly after him into sleep.

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When he woke, he had no sense of where he was or what time it might be. It was dark, but that was no guarantee of anything at all, for he had woken many times into darkness only to find that he was suffering the temporary blindness that follows the Cruciatus.

Cruciatus, yes. Slowly, it came back. He had left on Tuesday morning, summoned by the infernal burning of the Dark Mark. He'd had no sense for three whole days that anything was amiss. Voldemort often called his Death Eaters to him simply to inconvenience them. He liked the notion that they were forced to drop everything to cater to his whims. He'd passed the time brewing the potions that Voldemort desired and amusing him with memories of bullying young Potter. But on Friday, Voldemort had turned sneaky and sullen, and Snape began to suspect that he had run afoul of the disgusting wizard in some way.

"I've been thinking of removing you from Hogwarts," he'd said, his red, reptilian eyes watching Snape carefully for a response.

"Really?" Snape said in a bored tone. "If you no longer feel you need a spy at Hogwarts, I can't say as I'd shed a tear. This year's new students are particularly hopeless."

"It's not that I don't feel the need for a spy at Hogwarts, Severus," Voldemort hissed, "but that I am beginning to wonder if you are doing any spying."

"You are unsatisfied with the job I am doing, my Lord?"

"Why is there no more news? What do they plan for Potter? Why do I hear nothing but the location of the werewolf, the doings of that old fool, Moody?"

"Because they *are* foolish, my Lord. They make no plans; they only try to guess at yours with their feeble, childish minds. They think only for the safety of their numbers--where to hide those like Lupin and Moody--and spare no thoughts for war. They don't possess your talent for power and domination."

Voldemort looked vaguely mollified, but suddenly, he had lunged for Snape and seized his face in his cadaverous hands. Red eyes boring into black, he had hissed, "*Legilimens!*"

The walls had been half up already. Snape never appeared before the serpentine bastard without some rudimentary Occlumency in place. But Voldemort had taken him by surprise, and as he shielded his mind against intrusion, he knew that some secret chamber had already been breached.

"Who is the girl?" Voldemort said.

Snape knew there was no point in dissembling. If Voldemort was interested, he'd seen more than just a face in a classroom.

"Potter's friend," he said neutrally.

"What was she doing in your rooms?"

"I was under the impression that you wanted me to spy," Snape said smoothly. "I was spying."

"*Crucio!*" Voldemort hissed. "I will not tolerate impertinence. Explain yourself."

When Snape could speak again, he stammered, "She is Potter's friend, my Lord, and she believes me to be trustworthy. I have allowed her to see me acting as a member of the Order. She will have news, the news you crave, perhaps more than those who are afraid to speak it in my presence. I have been worming my way into her good graces."

"Worming your way, you say? For how long, Severus?"

"The beginning of the school year, my Lord."

"Then why is this the first I'm hearing of it?"

"I thought--I wanted to find out what I could from her and bring it to you as a gift."

"To spy is your job--what you find in doing it is not a gift, but a duty."

"Yes, my Lord."

"I will have to punish you, Severus. I cannot have you ruining my plans with your foolish toadying."

"Yes, my Lord."

"But you may keep on with the girl, so long as it does not interfere with your other duties. I expect a full--and immediate--report on anything that she might know that is of interest."

Snape's last, "Yes, my Lord," was drowned in a scream as Voldemort applied the Cruciatus Curse once more.

He'd barely been conscious by the time Voldemort had removed the clothes from his twitching body and begun with that cursed whip.

After that, there was nothing. But the fact that he was in a bed and could move slightly without screaming told him that he must have made it back to Hogwarts. He could hear soft breathing coming from somewhere to the right of him. He must have been in quite a condition if Dumbledore had stayed the night.

Suddenly, he was consumed by fire, a terrible, biting burn snaking up his back from his buttocks. He gasped and rolled away from the pain, kicking at whatever its source might be. *It's the whip*, he thought, *Save your strength*, but it bit again, this time on his right shoulder, and he could not help striking the air, desperate to escape his molten attacker. His fist struck something soft and yielding, something that yelped, and he was seized with triumph--there was something there! He would beat it--he would kill it!

He could feel the soft thing moving away, but still the burning did not stop. Now, it lashed at his legs, the soles of his feet; now, his neck and chest. He tore at his skin, at his scalp, trying to root out the fire; he pounded the bed with his fists. Pain! Where was it coming from? Why couldn't he stop it? The room dissolved, overtaken by flame and agony. He flailed helplessly as he succumbed to delirium.

After hours?... minutes?... he could not tell which, he felt ice chips being pushed gently into his mouth and moist fingers running over his lips. Water. Yes. Water. He sucked at it greedily and found himself choking, his throat working convulsively.

"Shhh," a female voice was saying. "Slowly. I want you to get some of this down before it starts again. You're dehydrated."

"Lily?" he croaked, but the world was gone again, blotted out by the sound of his own hoarse cries. The fire had returned full force, though he thought he could feel gentle hands kneading his skin, driving out a tiny fraction of the pain.

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The next time he woke, someone was there. He couldn't see well, but he could just make out a dark shape leaning over him.

"Albus?" But that could not be right. He smelled parchment and honey beneath sweat and fear. It was oddly familiar.

"No... it's me. It's... Hermione."

"Miss Granger," he whispered, and the dark shape that was Hermione seized his hand in both of hers and sank to her knees beside the bed.

"Professor Snape, thank God!" she said, drawing his hand up to her face. "Thank God, you're all right." The pain was swift and brilliant—he would have to tell her that two of his fingers were broken—but there was a different pain at work, something that cut and stung more deeply than the whip: her tears. He could feel them trickling over his hand, and her breath came in short gasps, cooling the moisture on his skin. "I was so afraid; I thought you'd never wake up. What can I do? What do you need?"

He could not speak. It seemed his heart had become dislodged from his chest and was choking him. She seemed so sincere, so genuine in her concern. Had she really feared that he would die? Wouldn't she have welcomed his death as it would release her?

"Tell me, please, sir; I've been guessing for too long, and I'm so afraid I've caused you pain. What should I do?"

Somehow he found his voice, rusty and cracking from the screaming, and said, "My fingers, Miss Granger."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, releasing his hand and making him wish that he had never said anything at all. "I'm so sorry! When the aftershocks started I completely forgot." She rose and took hold of his hand again, this time with a different kind of pressure. "Sir, I hate to hurt you any more, but I'm going to have to set your fingers before I mend the bones."

He nodded, whispering, "Please be careful. That's my wand hand."

"I know, and you need your dexterity for potion making. I promise that I will do this as quickly and cleanly as I can." With that, she gave a sharp tug, and he winced as the bones settled themselves together properly.

"Well done," he said as she murmured an incantation to set the breaks to knitting.

"What can I give you for pain? Would you like more Dreamless Sleep?"

"Yes. But first, why are you here? Where is Dumbledore?"

"He was called away," she said. "He said something about Harry's business."

Of course, he thought bitterly. Then, "How long have you been here?"

"Almost two days."

"He left you here for two *days*?" Good God, what she must have seen.

"He didn't say how long to stay—and there was no way that I would leave you like this. Though I don't know what good I've done."

"You've done plenty. I'm still here," he said simply.

"Will you be all right? Can you see?"

"I will be fine, Miss Granger. When was the last bout of... aftershocks, you called them?"

"An hour ago. I think you've been asleep since then."

"That may have been the last. I can see light and dark right now. It will be better after I've rested."

He heard her moving and felt a spoon rest against his lips. "It's the Dreamless Sleep, Professor."

He hesitated and thought again of the fact that her life now neatly paralleled his own. She, too, led a separate, secret life, a life filled with horrors like those she must have witnessed over the last two days. Before long she would serve as a spy, a bearer of messages from the other side. How badly he wished to trust her. "Will you stay?" he asked.

"Of course."

He sipped it down and let oblivion take him.

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"Professor?" A tentative hand was prodding his shoulder. *Miss Granger*. "Professor?"

"Yes?" he said, feeling as if he were swimming up from the bottom of a very deep lake. He heard her sigh with relief.

"Professor Dumbledore is back. He's called through the Floo. I'm going to go and get him. I'm sorry to have woken you, but I didn't want you to wake up and find yourself alone."

"Thank you," he said shortly. He had not yet opened his eyes. He heard her cross the room before he slipped under the water again.

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"He looks well, Hermione. You did a fine job." Snape could hear Dumbledore's voice as if from somewhere far away.

"I don't know, sir. I'm afraid I didn't do enough for his pain."

"Nonsense. I know you did all you could. Now, if you'll gather your things, I'm sure Harry and Ron are very anxious to see you."

"What did you tell them, sir?"

"Time was on our side, for once. I didn't have to tell them very much. As you may remember, there was a Quidditch match yesterday. Harry and Ron were rather preoccupied. Gryffindor won, you see. And I scheduled Harry's lesson with me for this morning, so he has had much to consider. I feel certain he'll have many tales to regale you with upon your return to the Tower."

"You got back this morning?" was all she said.

"Rather late last night."

"I see."

Snape opened his eyes so as to better glare at Dumbledore. He'd been back since last night, and he'd left the poor girl here, caring for a madman, functioning on nothing but nerves? Dumbledore's betrayal of Miss Granger's trust served only to remind him of how the old wizard had wrangled them into this position in the first place, and how careless it was to believe in anyone at all.

His eyes focused slowly, taking in Albus and the shriveled, blackened hand that always caught him by surprise.

"Professor Snape," Hermione said quietly, noticing him.

*Sweet Merlin, what had happened to her?* He searched his memory frantically. Had he taken her with him for some reason? Had she been tortured? Who had been looking after her all this time? His mind came up blank. He could think of no reason for the blood caked over her right eye, or the vicious bruises that littered her arms and face. Her hair was a fright, but that wasn't new. What was new was the funny way she was standing, cradling her left arm and seeming to favor her right foot. What in God's name was going on?

"Miss Granger, what on earth has happened to you?" he whispered.

She blushed and shifted slightly, looking both embarrassed and determined. "Nothing. I'm fine. Professor Dumbledore will sort me out before I return home, I'm sure. How are you, sir?"

What was she hiding? Why wouldn't she tell him? She could hardly have any secrets left after ... that night. Then the answer began to creep into his mind. He had done it. Somehow, he had done this to her. She had been foolish to trust him, foolish to care for him. He'd managed to destroy anyone who ever had. Even unconscious, he would tear her apart.

"Were your injuries a result of--?" he began stiffly.

"It was my own fault," she said. "You were delirious; I know you didn't mean me any harm. I was trying to keep you from hurting yourself and I--well, I got in the way."

"You got in the way? Of all the asinine--Miss Granger, I thought you had better sense--"

"I'm sorry," she said, and that hurt worse somehow than the knowledge that he had betrayed her against his will. He had hurt her, and still she apologized to him. When would she *learn*? When would she guard herself against the pain that people would cause her again and again?

"Get your things," he said sharply.

"Sir?"

"Out."

"Severus," Dumbledore began.

"No. You've left me in the care of someone who can't even take care of herself. I want her out of my sight."

She looked at him nakedly then, and he nearly took it back.

"I'm sorry," she said again, and he rolled away from them to face the opposite wall, unable to look at that open face any longer.

"You will speak of this to no one!" he shouted, hearing them retreat.

"No," she agreed. "Get well, Professor Snape." She said it like a prayer.

"OUT!"

His head sank back onto the pillow. She would never trust him now.

## Chapter Seven

*Chapter 7 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All fully italicized text comes from JKR's Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince. Everything you recognize is hers. I make no money. Thanks, always, to my wonderful beta, Shellsnapeluver.

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Lavender, thank Merlin, had finally made her move. It had happened, Hermione supposed, sometime during those lost two days in which she had toiled over the body of Professor Snape. It was fortunate in more ways than one, as Ron would have little interest, now, in where she had been or what she had been doing that weekend. In fact, he seemed to have little interest in anything except examining Lavender's tonsils from the look of him as she passed them in the hall on her way back to Gryffindor Tower. Hermione felt a sharp twinge of jealousy when she saw them together, but it quickly resolved itself into relief. It was simply one less thing to worry about.

Harry showed little more interest in her whereabouts than Ron had done. He seized her arms, directing her to the couch upon her return, seeming not to notice the pallor of her skin, the bags under her eyes, or the thin scar that now bisected her right eyebrow. Dumbledore had erased the bruising and mended the gash above her eye. He had even thought to freshen her clothes and tidy her hair with a spell before she returned, but he could not erase the bone weariness that she felt as her friend prepared to unburden himself to her.

"Hermione! Where have you been? I met with Dumbledore this morning!"

She gathered up the last of her reserves of strength--funny, she had thought them gone--and prepared to listen. "You did? What happened?"

"He showed me Voldemort--*as a child!*"

"In the Pensieve?"

"Yes! He was an orphan. Dumbledore went to the orphanage himself to give him his letter--"

As Harry related the contents of Dumbledore's memory, Hermione willed herself to pay attention. This was intelligence she would need to remember and guard as surely as she would have to guard the secrets of Professor Snape. Suddenly, she felt very young and small, defenseless against the Dark Wizard that threatened and controlled their lives.

So he, too, had once been a child, orphaned like Harry, and raised in a loveless place. It seemed impossible that the young man Harry was describing, no matter how cruel and cold, could have grown into something so inhuman. How would they ever defeat him? It felt like madness to try. There was a part of her that wanted to throw down her wand and go home, to pretend this had all been a long and sometimes wonderful dream. But then she looked at Harry's serious face, so lovely and familiar to her but bearing the mark of that hateful bastard. She thought of Professor Snape, tortured and beaten, but still human, still fighting.

*I will never give up, she thought fiercely. If it kills me, I will see him destroyed. And I will get you both out of this alive.*

"Hermione?" Harry said. "You seem a million miles away."

"I'm fine," she replied. "Just thinking about you. You were an orphan, too. No one showed you how to be decent or true or kind. And yet here you are."

"I don't like to think of it, the ways that we're the same," he said.

"You're not the same," she said. "You couldn't be more different." And then, perhaps because she was so tired, she began to cry a little.

"Hermione!" Harry said, alarmed.

"It's okay, Harry," she said, wiping her eyes. "I think I just need to have a lie down. It's been an awful lot to process."

"Is it--are you upset about Ron?"

"Ron?" she asked.

"Well, erm, Ron seemed to think that you might be upset about him and Lavender."

"Is there something I should know about Ron and Lavender?" she asked, feigning ignorance.

"I guess... after the match... well, they've become something of an item."

She tried to look thoughtful. "Ron and Lavender? I guess I can see it."

"But you're not upset?"

"Why would I be upset?"

"Well, it's just... Ron said you had a bit of a crush on him."

*"Ron said I had a bit of a crush on him?"* Well, that was just humiliating. How long had he known?

"Look, don't be mad, Hermione. He was just worried that you--"

**"Ron said I had a bit of a crush on him?"** And then the bastard felt *sorry* for her? Unbelievable. She shot up from the couch.

"Crap. Hermione. Obviously, I've stuck my foot in it somehow. Just forget I said anything."

"Thought I had a bit of a crush on him, did he? Well, he couldn't have been more wrong. And just to show him how completely fine it is with me if he wants to suck the face off Lavender Brown, I think I'll ask Cormac McLaggen to the Christmas party."

"Don't. Come on--Hermione!" Harry yelled as she spun on her heel and took off for the steps to the girls' dormitory.

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It was a terrible idea, of course. Nothing could have convinced Ron more completely that she was pining away over him, which infuriated her every single time she saw him. And now she had McLaggen to outrun every few minutes. *You couldn't have just said, "Why on Earth would he have thought that?"* She asked herself angrily as she yanked a comb through her curls. When she had taken out enough of her frustration on her hair, she took out her wand and charmed it smooth again, twisting it into a loose chignon.

She stepped into the green, silken dress robes that her parents had sent for her birthday and admired herself in the mirror *Eat your heart out, Ron Weasley*, she thought. Then she remembered McLaggen, who was probably already waiting for her at the foot of the steps and sighed. Maybe she should have put a bit less effort into her appearance tonight. She hardly needed anyone's "amorous intentions."

McLaggen was, in fact, waiting for her in the common room when she emerged from her dormitory. He took her in with a hungry look, and she had to fight not to turn and run back up the stairs. *Merlin, what have you done, Hermione?* she thought.

"Cormac," she said cordially.

"You look smashing," he said, and it was hard not to feel pleased. He offered her his arm, but she knew she could not touch him.

"Don't be silly," she said. "A witch in this day and age can walk without assistance."

He looked slightly put out, but walked beside her without further comment on the subject.

It was odd; she had spent so much of her time these last few years thinking of Ron, and when she had begun to fear that he would never return her feelings, she had taken up the habit of sizing up various wizards of her year as potential boyfriends. Now, she walked with McLaggen wishing only that he would somehow Disapparate on the spot. She tried to tell herself that it was because he was so arrogant--when she turned her attention toward him for a moment, she found that he was reliving various Quidditch triumphs, and she quickly resumed her own thoughts. But truly, she'd had little interest in any wizard since the beginning of the year. *And a good thing, too*, she told herself sharply. *The last thing you need is to develop some silly crush. You're a married woman.*

Married. The thought was still as foreign as eating snails. She tried never to think of it, as the notion made her feel as if she were suffocating.

"So, I grabbed his bat and hit the Bludger as hard as I could. Of course, I was still hanging upside down from my broom at the time, but--"

She sighed. This night could not end soon enough.

Professor Slughorn's office had somehow tripled in size since the last time she had seen it, and it was packed to the gills with adults and students in their Christmas finery.

"Could you get me something to drink?" she asked McLaggen, frantically scanning the room for Harry and Luna. When he had disappeared into the crowd, she began edging along the wall to the left, hoping to run into someone she knew.

"Miss Granger!" bellowed Professor Slughorn, seizing her arm and pulling her into a circle that included Glenog Jones of the Hollyhead Harpies; Arsinus Jigger, the famous Potioneer; and, rather improbably, Professor Trelawney. "This is Hermione Granger," he said. "She's a dear friend of Harry Potter, you know, and quite the student! They say she's the brightest witch to come through Hogwarts in two decades!"

Hermione blushed and froze, having no idea how to enter the conversation after such an announcement. "How do you do?" she said politely, but just then Slughorn reached into the crowd and seemed to pull Harry from thin air. He was grasping Luna's hand tightly and had a fixed smile on his face.

"And here's the wizard we've all been talking about!" he crowed. "Harry Potter! So glad you could join us, my boy!"

Harry shook hands all around and then leaned toward Hermione. "Where have you been?" he whispered. "Slughorn keeps parading me about like a circus animal. I've lost Luna twice already!"

"I've been ducking McLaggen," she replied. "He's been trying to get me under the mistletoe all night. When he's not talking about Quidditch, that is."

"I still don't see why you had to ask him--" Harry began, but Hermione was already slipping through the crowd, squeezing between two enormous witches who were screaming with mirth. She had seen McLaggen making for Harry, so she headed for the doorway, only to be confronted by Argus Filch leading Draco Malfoy by the ear.

Almost everyone in the vicinity stopped what they were doing to watch as Filch deposited Draco in front of Professor Slughorn. "I found him in the upstairs corridor," Filch said. "Says he's been invited to your party, though he looks a bit underdressed."

*"All right, I wasn't invited!" Draco said angrily. "I was trying to gate-crash, happy?"*

Hermione recognized the commotion as an excellent opportunity for escape and slid out the door, hurrying down the hall. She doubted she could get away with leaving entirely; it would require too many apologies and explanations later on. If only she could find someplace to hide out for a bit, but the classrooms were sure to be locked at this hour. Then she remembered. *My home, your home.* Snape's office was only a few doors away. If the wards would admit her...

They did. She slipped into the office, shutting the door behind her, and found that now that she was in the office, she had no idea what to do with herself. She could hardly sit in his chair, though the thought of sitting at his desk amused her. She crossed the room to examine Snape's bookshelves. The man himself hadn't spoken a civil word to her since the afternoon that Dumbledore had relieved her of her nursing duties, though he had assigned her no further detentions. If only he would give her access to his books... it seemed the least he could do, and there were so many interesting volumes here that she had never seen in the library... She let her hand skim over the spines, enjoying the feel of the worn leather bindings beneath her fingers. Just then she heard footsteps, and panicking, she ducked behind Snape's desk.

Her heart seemed to be trying to beat its way out of her chest. There was only one person in the world who could be coming through that door. The question now was whether she should reveal herself immediately and hope that he didn't kill her or--

*"...cannot afford mistakes, Draco, because if you are expelled--"*

*Bigger!* she thought. That answered that question. She would be trapped here, hiding beneath his desk. She could not show herself in front of Malfoy. He would know that she had somehow breached Snape's wards. As quietly as she could, she disillusioned herself, grateful beyond belief that she had mastered wordless spell casting.

Her blood was pounding so hard in her ears that it was difficult to hear at first. Snape and Malfoy seemed to be arguing, though she could not make sense of their words.

*"What thoughts are you trying to conceal from your master, Draco?"*

*"I'm not trying to conceal anything from him. I just don't want you butting in!"*

*Him.* Harry had been insisting for months that Malfoy had joined the Death Eaters. Perhaps now she would have to admit that he was right, as unthinkable as that seemed. How could someone she knew, someone she had shared classes and meals with, take the Dark Mark? It didn't matter that she disliked Draco; she disliked a great many people--Cormac McLaggen included--but she wouldn't expect them to join Voldemort. Even though she knew she should abhor him, what Hermione felt in those moments was an incredible surge of pity. *Poor Draco. How long before he knows what he has done?*

*"Listen to me," said Snape. "I am trying to help you. I swore to your mother I would protect you. I made the Unbreakable Vow, Draco--"*

At his words, everything inside her went dark. The Unbreakable Vow. Her mind was a thick and hissing expanse of black. She glanced down, as if to check that she still existed, and was unsurprised to find that she saw only the floor. Snape had made an Unbreakable Vow with Narcissa Malfoy. The rigid posture she'd been maintaining fell away, and she slumped into a heap and closed her eyes. No.

From the deep recesses of her mind, Dumbledore spoke. *I would need to believe that your faith in him would not be broken, no matter what he had to do to leave the Order. I would have to be confident that you understand perfectly that all Professor Snape does, he does for the Light...* But did he know? Whatever it was that Snape had promised--and it was clearly to do with Draco's orders from Voldemort--did Dumbledore know? Was he betraying them? What had she married?

*"What does it matter?" Malfoy was saying, "Defense Against the Dark Arts--it's all just a joke, isn't it, an act? Like any of us need protecting against the Dark Arts--"*

*"It is an act that is crucial to success, Draco!" said Snape. "Where do you think I would have been all these years, if I had not known how to act?"*

Her heart felt twisted and burned. She had not realized how much she had come to rely on Snape, how her mind had somehow stretched to accommodate their bond, however strange. Now, she felt like a kite untethered, set adrift from things she had held true.

*You don't know,* she babbled silently to herself. *You don't know. He said himself he's an actor; maybe he's acting! Perhaps Dumbledore has sent him to find out Draco's plan...* But why wouldn't he know Draco's plan if he was spying on the Death Eaters?

She heard the click of the door shutting as Snape and Draco left his office, presumably to return to the party. She would have to go back, too. She could not hide out here. What had Snape told her? *The rest of our lives are predicated on this charade and you must cope.*

Hermione rose shakily and removed the Disillusionment Charm from her body. Smoothing her dress, she strode from Snape's office, head held as high as she could manage under the circumstances.

When she reentered Professor Slughorn's office, the dancing had begun. McLaggen was standing anxiously by the door, apparently waiting for her return.

"There you are! I was beginning to think you'd run out on me!"

"Oh, no. You know... the loo..." she said vaguely.

"Would you like to dance?"

She knew that she could not allow him to touch her, and yet she had no more energy for evasion. And besides, she was feeling a bit rebellious. Who was Snape to dictate rules? It was clear he hadn't been holding Malfoy to any.

"Certainly," she said, offering him her hand.

McLaggen led her to the recently cleared dance floor and put his arms around her. The band played a foxtrot, and Hermione found herself being led about by a rather bumbling, though enthusiastic, partner. As he twirled her around the floor, her thoughts drifted back to Snape's office. What on earth was Malfoy planning? Hermione wondered about the prudence of speaking to Harry on the subject. Not only was Harry predisposed to believe the worst where Snape and Malfoy were concerned, she'd have to think of a way to explain how she had come to be in Snape's office. And then... what if by alerting Harry (and Dumbledore by proxy) she endangered Snape in some way? She sighed and closed her eyes.

When McLaggen took a faltering step to the left and stopped, she opened her eyes and found herself staring directly into the black eyes of Professor Snape.

"May I?" he said, extending his right hand. The left was tucked into his sleeve.

"Professor Snape..." McLaggen said uncertainly.

"Indeed," Snape said. "Miss Granger?"

"Um... yes, of course." Quaking slightly, she took Snape's hand and was surprised to find that he folded her into his arms with ease, quickly leading her into a waltz.

"Shall I assume that you've chosen to allow that bumbling fool to touch you because you are in distress over what you just heard in my office?" he said, sotto voce.

"What? I--"

"Don't bother denying it. And should you decide to try my patience by exposing the ring again, kindly do so when we are not in a room full of people."

"Yes, sir," she said. "Though, if you wished to be inconspicuous, I would not have recommended dancing. People are staring."

"Let them stare. There are matters we clearly need to discuss. I will dance with Professor McGonagall next, then Professor Sprout, and then, perhaps, the bizarre Miss Lovegood. No one will remember anything but the fact that I danced."

"Your colleagues may not notice anything amiss, but I can assure you, Harry will."

"Consider it tit for tat, Miss Granger. You've inconvenienced me, and now you, too, will be inconvenienced. And while we're on the subject of indiscretions, your snooping has trapped you in quite the conundrum, has it not? Either you trust me and say nothing of what you've heard, concealing what is perhaps my treachery, or you run to Dumbledore and, in doing so, prove to him that you have already failed at what he asked of you."

Hermione could think of no cutting reply to this, as he had quite succinctly outlined the problem as she saw it. "I wasn't snooping," she said, glowering at him.

He took a sharp turn, and she followed, her dress floating out behind her. "No?" he said. "What would you call invading someone's private office without his prior knowledge or consent?"

"I was trying to escape McLaggen," she said. "So as not to *inconvenience* you."

"And have you considered how shabbily you've treated poor Mr McLaggen? First, you invite him to this party, I assume to enrage the Weasley boy; then you spend the evening running from him, only to launch yourself into his arms the moment you are discomfited? How very... Slytherin... of you, Miss Granger."

She felt herself coloring. She hadn't thought of it quite that way. "Heaven forbid his feelings be hurt," she retorted. "Shall I go and snog him to make up for my dreadful behavior?"

"I think not," Snape said. "At the moment, I am intent upon making sure that our... contract... is intact."

"Well, sir, if you would just explain--"

"Why should I explain myself to you? You heard something that is none of your concern, and now you've worked yourself into a tizzy over it. I see no need to comfort those who--"

"I don't need comfort; I just need to believe that--"

"What you *believe* is of not the slightest consequence to me. I am interested in what you are willing to keep to yourself."

"Give me one reason why I should."

"Oh, I can do better than that, Miss Granger. I'll give you three. First," he dipped her slightly as he turned on his heel, "and this should be the most important--because you made a promise. Second, because you don't understand what you heard. And third," he whispered, leaning in close to her ear, "because I am on your side, you insufferable little twit."

Despite his words, her hand tightened in his. The music was picking up, and he was leading her faster and faster around the room. She tried to weigh the pros and cons of the situation, but it was so hard with the music and the dancing and his breath on her neck. Perhaps that was what he intended. She thought she caught a glimpse of Harry's incredulous face as she spun. Snape was right, of course. She *had* promised. And Dumbledore believed in him, she was sure of it; otherwise, he would have never asked her....

"Shall I take your silence for compliance?"

"Yes, sir," she said quietly, though she thought, *For now.*

"Very well. Professor Dumbledore has asked me to inquire as to your holiday plans."

"My holiday plans?"

"How charming it is when you repeat everything I say."

She glared at him but did not loosen her grip on his hand. "I had planned to go home to my family."

"That will not do."

"Pardon?"

"I am sure you have realized that as a Muggle-born and a friend of Potter, the Dark Lord has taken a special interest in you."

She paled slightly and waited for him to continue.

"Dumbledore feels it would be best if you remained at Hogwarts for the holidays, both for your own protection and to put some distance between yourself and your family."

"But, why would I--"

"Your first lesson in duplicity, Miss Granger, is this: you must appear to abhor that which you hold most dear. It is the only way to keep it safe."

The music ended, and she stepped out of Snape's grasp.

"What shall I tell the Headmaster?"

"Tell him I'll stay."

"Good. We'll discuss this further then," he said and left her standing, dumbfounded, in the middle of the dance floor.

"Minerva," he said smoothly, "would you care to dance?"

*You must appear to abhor that which you hold most dear.* Snape's words echoed in her mind as Harry approached her from behind.

"Hermione," he hissed. "What in bloody hell was that?"

## Chapter Eight

*Chapter 8 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: This world belongs to JKR. I make no money. Thank you, always, to my beta, Shellsnapelover.

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Harry wrenched her through the portrait hole. He had marched silently, lips pursed, through the hallway and up the stairs, her arm held firmly in his grip. She had only managed an apologetic look at McLaggen before Harry had swept her from the room, though her parting glance at Snape showed him smirking off into the distance.

"Harry, you're hurting me!" she'd said, trotting to keep up with him in her ridiculous heels, but he paid her no mind.

When they were safely ensconced in the Gryffindor Common Room, he burst out, "Would you mind telling me why you were dancing with Snape?"

"Professor Snape," she corrected automatically. His color, which had already been alarming, seemed to rise to an even more livid shade of red.

"Professor Snape, then," he spat.

"He had a message for me from Dumbledore," she answered. "He said that Dumbledore wants me to stay here for the holidays."

"Dumbledore could have told you that himself."

"Dumbledore wasn't there tonight, in case you hadn't noticed," she said, her temper rising. "And the last day to sign up to stay over the holidays is tomorrow."

"He could have sent you an owl--he's been doing an awful lot of that this term!"

That was a bit close to home. "What, exactly, are you accusing me of, Harry Potter? Do you think *enjoyed* dancing with Professor Snape? Do you think I was just hanging about, *hoping* he would ask me to dance? You know as well as I do that he did it to humiliate me. Because he knew that no one would let me forget it--least of all, you!"

With that, she turned and ran up the steps to the girls' dormitory.

Parvati was sitting on her bed when Hermione entered their room. Lavender was, she presumed, off snogging with Ron in some abandoned corridor.

"Are you ok?" Parvati asked.

"Fine," Hermione snapped, tugging open the buttons of her dress with unnecessary force.

"And is McLaggen as 'fine' as you are?"

"Sod McLaggen."

"I'll take that as a yes."

"Look, if you must know, and I'm sure you will by tomorrow anyway, Professor Snape asked me to dance."

"Professor Snape!" Parvati squeaked. "What did you say?"

"What could I say?"

"So you danced with him?"

"I had to."

"Well, you *have* had quite a night, then."

"Quite."

"How did Harry take it?"

"About as well as you might expect."

"Sorry."

"Yes, well. I'd just as soon get this evening over with," Hermione said, drawing on her pajamas. "I have to write my parents, and then I'm going to bed."

Parvati returned to her studying as Hermione sat, parchment in hand, trying to figure a way to explain to her parents that she would not be coming home for the holidays after all.

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Snape strode through the hallways in a temper, and God help any students he found lurking where they ought not to be. He took twenty points from a cowering Hufflepuff, who was clearly on his way back to the dormitory from Slughorn's party, for being in the corridor after hours.

What could the Granger girl have meant by hiding out in his office? What had she thought she would find? He had known she was there instantly, though he had never seen her. But he'd *felt* her there and smelled the characteristic honey-and-fear scent that he had come to associate with her presence. Thank Merlin she'd had the sense to get out of sight.

He'd been attempting to get Draco to speak with him for so long that he'd had no choice but to proceed, even with the asinine girl tucked under his desk. As if he needed more on his plate than the simple fact of Draco Malfoy, running amok in the castle, enacting--no matter what he said--foolish and impossible schemes. He was lucky that the Bell chit hadn't died.

"Candy floss," he said angrily when he reached the gargoyle. He strode quickly up the steps and pounded on Dumbledore's door, flinging it open as soon as the Headmaster acknowledged him.

"Draco denies having anything to do with the necklace, though he is clearly lying," Snape said without preamble.

The old fool sat back in his chair, tenting his hands and waiting for him to go on.

"He still refuses to divulge his plan. He seems to think I'm trying to steal his glory."

"Keep trying, Severus," Dumbledore said mildly.

"As if I had any choice. But to complicate matters, the inimitable Miss Granger had somehow entered my office before I retired there with Draco and hid herself. She heard enough to cause her distress."

"And you smoothed things over with her, I trust?"

"Why should I? If she hadn't been snooping, she would never have heard a word. Let her worry."

"I will grant you that Miss Granger should not have been in your office. But, be that as it may, a worried student can be a dangerous one, as we are coming to know. And you must not let Harry interfere with Draco's duties. The risk that Voldemort will punish him is great enough already."

"But Albus--"

"No. If not for Miss Granger's peace of mind, then for Draco. It must be done."

Snape nodded, inwardly seething. Dumbledore could always twist a matter until he had him against the wall.

"Did you speak with her about the holidays?"

"It is arranged," he said.

"Excellent. You can speak with her then. But Severus, take care that you do not divulge anything about Draco's orders."

"Such easy assignments you give me, Albus. Calm her mind but tell her nothing."

"I feel certain that you are up to the task. And you'll be setting up a course of study for her?"

"In my spare time," Snape said acidly.

"Come now, you must admit it hasn't all been bad," Dumbledore said. "She took excellent care of you while I was away. You said yourself that you rarely recover so quickly. Though perhaps she would not have had to work so hard if you had not--"

As if the torture hadn't been enough, or the knowledge that he'd endangered her--endangered all of them.

"Miss Granger is nothing if not an *overachiever*," he said.

"Yes, she's quite a young woman," Dumbledore said, deliberately misunderstanding him.

"What did you have in mind for her studies?" There was no point in evading it. Once the old man got an idea into his head, he was nearly impossible to sway.

"Concealment Charms, Occlumency, Shield Charms, Extension Charms, a review of common poisons, some basic mediwizardry, perhaps some human transfiguration with a mind toward disguise--"

"Is there anything you would *not* like me to cover?"

"I see no need for you to address Divination, nor Muggle Studies, as Miss Granger detests the former and is quite well versed in the latter."

Snape snorted. "You realize that your little list of extra curricular studies might give me an idea of what she will be doing."

"I advise you not to think too much about it, Severus. Your job is to prepare her, nothing more."

"How can I prepare her if I don't know what I'm preparing her for?" he asked impatiently.

"The less you know, the better, my dear boy. I'm sure I've made that very clear. And now, I think I'm growing weary. You will contact Miss Granger after the students have departed?"

"I wasn't aware that I had a choice."

"Quite right, of course. You don't. Goodnight, Severus."

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The Great Hall was subdued during dinner on the night that the students departed for the holidays. Snape took his customary seat at the head table, between Minerva and Albus. As he served himself, he glanced down at the four house tables, so sparsely populated this year. Very few students had chosen to stay through the holidays; with the war brewing, families had presumably wanted to keep their children near.

The Gryffindor table was deserted but for the Granger girl. She sat and ate with quiet determination, not joining the students at the other tables, though surely no one would have thought it odd. House customs were much less stringent during the holidays. He felt almost sorry for the girl as he regarded the Gryffindor dishes. She'd taken but a serving of each, and the rest sat on the table as a palpable reminder of those that were absent.

He'd accompanied the students to the station that morning. Potter and Weasley had not acknowledged her, though she'd gone down to see them off. He felt the tiniest twinge of remorse that he had caused such a rift between the girl and Potter. He had thought only to embarrass her as she had embarrassed him and to punish her for breaking into his office; he should have realized that Potter's hatred of him would bleed into anything he touched. However, the spy in him recognized that, however unfortunate, the situation presented him with unique opportunities. How else could he have isolated her so completely? She would be vulnerable, malleable, alone. If he displayed the slightest kindness, she would leap at it, her silly Gryffindor heart unused to keeping its own company. These holiday lessons would allow him to shape her into something that would suit his needs.

Several times he thought he saw her steal a glance at him. The last time, he caught her eyes and glared so fiercely at her that she was forced to look back at her plate. He would need to break her of that habit. She would have to learn to simply be aware of his presence the way he had become aware of hers, he thought, remembering how his senses had tingled when he'd entered his office with Draco.

When he returned to his office, he touched the ring with his wand and summoned her there, Disillusioning himself and casting the Muffliato Charm on his person, so as to prevent her from hearing his footsteps.

He heard her knock but said nothing. After a moment, the door opened, as he knew it would. Miss Granger seemed to have great difficulty staying out of other people's rooms. Her face was tense as she entered, and her eyes scanned the room warily. He remembered the only other circumstances in which she had been summoned by the ring and was struck again with guilt. What was she expecting to find here? Then he chastised himself for his foolish sympathy. She didn't need sympathy--she needed to be hardened, trained.

He expected to see her prowling about--touching things, no doubt--or at the very least to be peering into the next room, so he was deeply surprised to see her take a seat in front of his desk and calmly cross her legs.

He moved to the fireplace, where he could keep watch on her face. She still looked frightened, which was gratifying, but she made no move to search for him. After a few moments she said, in a conversational tone, "Well, if you won't show yourself, I suppose I'll go back to my dormitory."

He whipped the charm off, feeling unsettled. He had intended to startle her, to teach her constant awareness. How had she known he was there?

"Ah, there you are," she said. "And with such a sensible look on your face."

He glowered at her. "Well done, Miss Granger. How did you know I was here?"

"I don't know. I felt you somehow or smelled you. I can't tell which. Why were you hiding?"

"To show you that you need not risk rumour nor discovery by staring at me like a senseless schoolgirl during meals. I intended to train you to simply be aware of my presence. But it seems you've already become attuned to my... nature. Describe to me what you felt when you entered the room."

"Er... at first I simply knew there was someone here. I wondered if Dumbledore was about somewhere, like the last time. But then I thought, no, he would have shown himself. Then I felt a kind of tingle... and I smelled spice and wool, and I knew it must be you."

"I see. Can you sense the presence of others?"

"I don't know. Most people don't hide when they've invited me to see them."

"Surprising," he said, and she bristled.

"Is there a purpose to this visit, or did you just intend to leap out and frighten me half to death, insult me, and send me on my way?"

"You will begin extra lessons with me in the morning," he said. "Dumbledore has suggested a course of study and assigned me the task of instructing you. Will nine o'clock suit you?"

"So, I'm to be given a choice about the time but not about the lessons themselves?"

"I could simply assign you a time to be here, if you are incapable of agreeing to one on your own."

"Nine would be fine."

"Marvelous," he sneered. "Good evening, Miss Granger."

She rose and headed for the door, but when she reached the jamb, she turned and said, "I trust my lessons will include an explanation of what in Merlin's name you were planning with Draco Malfoy?"

How badly he wished to laugh in her face and tell her to mind her own business. With barely concealed malice, he said, "I see no need to explain myself to you. However, we will discuss what you heard."

"Marvelous," she mimicked and swept through the door.

*Insufferable, self-important, gloating little nitwit.* And yet, there was a part of him that enjoyed their sparring. There had always been students--*Gryffindors*, his mind amended--who were willing to talk back to him, but never had anyone risen to the occasion with quite such high-minded aplomb. Miss Granger did not tremble when she struck, nor did she wince when he retorted. In fact, she seemed most at ease when they sniped at one another. Her color rose to a flattering pink, and she seemed... in her element. *What can you be thinking of?* He asked himself sharply as he gathered the equipment they would need for the next day's lesson. *The child is but one more burden you've been saddled with. Any pleasure you take in her company only puts you both at greater risk.*

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Hermione pounded on Snape's office door promptly at nine a.m., unsurprised to find him missing once again.

"Professor, this is becoming very tiresome," she began as she crossed into the room, but then a flash of red light bounced off the floor just before her feet. She stumbled backward, shouting, "*Protego!*"

"Not *Protego*, Miss Granger! The hex has already been thrown. Try again."

"*Impedimenta!*" she said, aiming her wand at his desk where his voice had seemed to originate.

"Look for the source of my spells, not the sound of my voice," he said. Another flash of red hit the wall next to her. She jumped to the side. "*Expelliarmus!*" She flicked her wand at the fireplace. She was certain she had caught a split-second glimpse of his wand.

"Not fast enough," he taunted, and a glowing hex struck a painting over her head, causing the inhabitants to run for cover.

"Your aim is remarkably poor," she said, throwing a Jelly-Legs Jinx at a spot next to the door.

"If I had wanted to hit you, I assure you, I would have."

"*Rictusempra!*"

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"*Stupefy!*"

"I thought we'd gotten past all this foolish yelling of spells."

*Ah, ha! I've got you now,* she thought, whirling just in time to see a tapestry move slightly in his wake. She summoned all her concentration and thought "*Incarcerous!*"

Snape gave a startled grunt, and she heard a muffled thud.

"Professor?"

"Kindly remove the ropes, Miss Granger," he snarled.

"Certainly, sir. *Relashio!*"

"I was beginning to despair of you ever catching me," he said, taking the thrill from her victory as he got to his feet. "Had I been your enemy, you would have been disarmed and bound at once."

"Shall we try it again?" she said archly.

"Not now. The element of surprise is key. And may I remind you of your recent lessons in Shield Charms?"

She blushed. *Protego Totalum*. How could she have forgotten? Well, she wouldn't be so foolish the next time.

"What is on the lesson plan today, sir?"

"Disguise," he said, taking his seat behind his desk and motioning her into a chair before it.

"Why does the Headmaster wish me to learn about disguise?" she asked, though she was delighted. *Disguising Charms!* They had only just begun to study human transfiguration last term--surely whatever Snape taught her would be much more advanced.

"I am not at liberty to say."

She gave him a long, measuring look and was about to open her mouth to protest, when he said, "The Headmaster does not wish me to know his plan for you. I believe the term is 'double blind.' The less I know about your plan, the less I could reveal, should the Dark Lord break me--the less he could draw from my mind."

"I see."

"It is the same reason that I cannot explain what you heard the other night, why I must ask you to put it from your mind. Double blind, Miss Granger. That is how we protect one another from discovery."

"But I don't understand. I already know part of your plan--"

"That is a risk we had to take for Potter. There will be times when you will need to be appraised of the secrets of the Death Eaters in order to protect him and times when I will need to know what I can do to best ensure the success of the Order. But we will keep our shared intelligence to a minimum."

"The less you know, the less can be tortured from you..." she whispered. What did he endure from that nightmare of a wizard? She thought of him, so nearly destroyed the other night. They risked his body again and again, yet they could not risk his mind.

"Precisely. And the longer our actions remain a mystery to the Dark Lord, the better our chances of success... and survival." He leaned forward with a look she'd never seen on his face before. It looked like sincerity. "Believe me, Miss Granger, the Headmaster is aware of all I shared with Malfoy. Do your job. Let me do mine."

"Yes, sir," she said, feeling ashamed of herself. He had been right. She should not have been in his office in the first place. And now she had information that could hurt him, information that he had tried to keep from her, not to betray them, but to keep them both safe.

"Can we move on to *Disguising Charms*?" he asked.

"Please do."

He took his wand and aimed it at his face, saying, "*Dissimulo Adversus!*" She stared, open mouthed, unable to conceal her astonishment. For Professor Snape was suddenly a blond-haired, pug-nosed wizard. His lips were full, his skin warm, and he was running toward portly.

"The quickest and most effective *Disguising Charm* is *Dissimulo Adversus*. It renders the charmed person as his or her exact opposite. Where I am dark, my charmed self is fair. Where I am thin, he is fat. It effects the four sites most used in recognition: nose, mouth, hair color, and body shape." He stood. "As you can see, the charm also makes me appear to be shorter."

It was amazing. And yet, she hated it. There was still something particularly Snape about him, something that should never be trapped inside such a body. It made her head hurt to look at him.

"Would you know me?"

"No," she said honestly, "but I would know that there was something... not right. There's still some you in you, somehow."

"Good," he said and waved his wand over his face again. *'Dissimulo Juvenis!'* Suddenly, Snape was her own age, gangly and skinnier than ever. His skin was slightly spotty, and his posture had changed. He peered at her from behind the curtain of his dark, lank hair.

"Gracious," was all she managed to squeak out. Snape... well, it was as if he weren't Snape yet. He was in there, but only in potential. "Is that what you really looked like?"

"It is," he said shortly. "Would you know me?"

"You would seem familiar to me," she said, trying to report her reactions as clearly as she could. "But there's something quite different about your energy."

"Can you name the thing that has not changed?"

She looked hard at his face. "Stand up," she requested. He stood.

"Can I see the other again?"

*"Dissimulo Adversus!"*

There was something... it was right on the tip of her tongue... something Snape that could not be changed. It was curious, if she hadn't seen his transformation, she'd have said that she'd always know him by his nose, but that was clearly not it. The depth of him, the *Snape*, of him was...

"Your eyes!" she exclaimed.

"Ten points to Gryffindor," he said. "No disguise charm can change the eyes. *Accio* hand mirror."

A gilded mirror flew in from the bathroom. The scrollwork around it was intricate, and Hermione found it hard to believe that Snape owned such a thing. He hardly seemed the type to appreciate looking at himself.

He handed her the mirror and instructed her to try the charms.

*"Dissimulo Adversus!"* she said and watched, in the mirror, as her nose lengthened, and her hair straightened and became darker. Her skin went deathly pale, and her lips thinned. Dear God, she looked like--but she cut that thought off. She tipped her head up to look at him, her still-brown eyes seeking his black ones.

He studied her, saying nothing, but she felt his eyes creeping over every inch of her face. Finally, she could bear it no more.

"Sir?"

"I'm committing this form to memory. If I see it, I'll need to know that it is you."

She nodded and glanced back at the mirror. She could be his sister. It was extremely disconcerting. She raised her wand again, eager to shed the strange visage.

*"Dissimulo Juvenis!"*

Before she even had time to look in the mirror, she saw Snape's face contort. *'Finite Incantatem!'* he said, flicking his wand at her. "You are young enough."

Ah, yes. Perhaps the man who had taken a child bride did not need to see his bride as a child.

"Cuticulus will change the color of your skin," he said quickly, turning away from her. "Pillarius adds hair. You will practice with these charms and return here tomorrow."

Hermione felt stung. She had rather looked forward to spending the day learning disguises, even if her lessons were from Snape.

"Yes, sir," she said, rising from her seat. "Nine o'clock?"

He nodded. His face was as closed as a slammed door.

## Chapter Nine

### Chapter 9 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: This world and these characters belong to JKR. I write for fun, not money. All my love to my beta, Shellsnapelover.

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Snape was sitting at his desk when she arrived the next morning. He noted with amusement that she had her wand drawn, ready to cast *Protego Totalum*.

"Do you often arrive in people's offices prepared to hex them?" he asked mildly.

She grinned, the cheeky little twit, and tucked her wand into the pocket of her robes before settling herself into the chair in front of his desk. Funny, he hadn't asked her to make herself at home.

"Let me see what you have practiced."

She rose and turned away from him, muttering something. When she faced him, he had to struggle not to reach for his wand and remove the glamour as he had done the day before. Her hair was thick and long, blond with only a hint of a wave. Her nose was somehow even more pert than ever, and her skin was tanned and freckled across the bridge over nose. She had seemed to shrink in stature, becoming diminutive, delicate--the ridiculous girl had made herself beautiful.

And yet, it was not beautiful. Oh, he could see how the disguise would be a distraction, and though he would never admit it to her, it was a brilliant move. For the girl before him bore no hint of bookishness or bossiness; she would inspire men to buy her pretty nothings and stumble in front of one another for the honor of protecting her. But those eyes, those eyes did not belong in such a face, and to place them there inside that false ideal was painful to behold. Where was Miss Granger, who smiled when she insulted him and quivered with anticipation in her lessons? Where was the terrified, impossibly lovely girl who had spread herself beneath him and allowed him to...

"Remove it," he snapped. She raised her wand and undid the charm, looking at him questioningly.

"Where did you learn such a charm?"

"I... I made it."

She *made* it?

"Explain."

"Well, sir, the base of the charms you showed me was *Dissimulo*, which is easy enough. The wand movement for both was the same upward jab. The difference lay in the descriptor. I used a basic beauty charm and modified it to match the *Dissimulo* base... See, it's this flick at the end... and there you have it."

"You did not use the library?"

"Madam Pince is rather angry with me at the moment, sir." At this he had to suppress a chuckle. Madam Pince had been complaining unceasingly of Hermione Granger for the last six years. Snape sometimes wondered if the old witch would prefer it if no one ever visited the library at all.

"So you tried an unknown spell--of your own creation--on yourself?" he asked incredulously.

She pursed her lips and set her jaw, staring back at him. "It worked, didn't it?"

"From now on, if you wish to experiment with new spells, you will do so under my supervision. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," he said and then added off-handedly, "Ten points to Gryffindor."

She had the good sense not to gloat. "Will we continue the Disguising Charms today?"

"I think not. You have two serviceable disguises at your behest. Though, Miss Granger, I should warn you that you cannot disguise Potter in such a manner. His scar and his eyes will not be changed. Anyone with half a brain will be looking for a boy with a scar and glasses. Disfiguring Potter would probably be your safest option," he said with a smirk. "But now, as our time is limited, I would like to move on to disguises of the mind."

"Occlumency," she breathed.

"Indeed."

He had been looking forward to this lesson. First and foremost, he told himself, it would protect him in the event that she were captured by the Dark Lord, and teaching her Occlumency himself would assure him that her mind was as well defended as it could be. But in addition, he craved to look into her memories, however briefly, and see what she still hid from him. Until he taught her to ward her thoughts, they would all be his.

"Has Potter described his lessons to you?"

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, but maintained his gaze, the foolish girl. Surely, she knew that the way in was through her eyes.

"He has."

"So you know what to do. Empty your mind, Miss Granger."

When she seemed suitably relaxed, he leaned forward sharply and hissed, "*Legilimens!*"

Images floating past... A frizzy-headed child sitting astride her father's shoulders; Diagon Alley--and the girl, older now, being fitted for school robes, flutter-hearted with nerves and excitement; her delight at being sorted into Gryffindor; anger at the Weasley boy, but anger mixed with... no--he rushed past. Where were the memories he was looking for? He seemed to pick them up by the fistful and, after glancing, tossed them aside, rushing on, deeper... deeper... to where she kept her heart...

The Time-Turner--he'd known it, though no one would admit it!--pure exhaustion, the strung-tight feeling that told him she was near tears; fear rolling off her in waves in the Shrieking Shack; the girl with Potter and Weasley, frantic in the Ministry, yet sure of her spell work, filled with a confidence he had not suspected and the firm, unflagging sense that she would keep fighting...

Was she Occluding him? Why could he not find what he sought? Ah, but here was a glimpse--his own face, terrible with rage at Albus, yet he did not feel revulsion from her, but an odd sort of sympathy. *Pity?* he asked fiercely of her thoughts, but no, it was not pity... and then terror and the same kind of blind resolution he'd felt from her in the Ministry as she wrapped her hand in his. Then a wall. He tried to delve deeper, pushing past the stone, pushing perhaps more than was prudent, and he caught a whiff of something like lust and the sight of his mouth pressed to hers. He reached into her mind with his, digging with everything he had... how many solitary nights had he played this memory over and over, and now he would have it from her... his blood was surging, quick and hot; he reached... and ran up against a closed door.

He withdrew in frustration. "What are you hiding, Miss Granger? What is there that you don't want me to see?"

"Forgive me, but I was under the impression that I was *supposed* to be blocking you. Is that not the very point of Occlumency?"

*Must she be so good at everything?* "You did not erect your walls until I was viewing... more recent memories."

She colored slightly. "I hadn't sorted out how to do it until then. I thought that was why you were looking for memories that would embarrass me, sir, that you were forcing me to figure out how to shield those thoughts from you. Isn't that how you did it with Harry?"

"Why would you find those memories embarrassing? Surely, you realize that I have them myself."

"Of course," she said brusquely. "But the term 'double blind' applies here too, doesn't it? As I hardly think you'll let me examine your impressions of that night."

He snorted. "Quite right."

"So, instruct me," she said.

"I beg your pardon?" What on earth was she talking about? Had he revealed something while he was in her mind, somehow given her the impression that he wanted to...?

"I let you in too far before I began to shield. Teach me how to do it better."

He gathered his wits about him once more. She suspected nothing. "Your methods were crude, but effective. It would serve you well to remember, however, that walls can be dismantled and doors broken down by those who have the time and care little for the destruction of your mind. You want your shield to be made of something both more permanent and more ephemeral. I, myself, tend to use the night sky. You might also try the surface of a lake--anything that cannot be chipped away or pounded through by force."

She nodded.

"Practice will help you to keep that shield close at hand. The Dark Lord will not warn you before he takes your mind."

"I know, sir. I'm ready to try again."

How different she was from Potter, who cared so little for anything he might have tried to teach him. He could see that she was deliberately slowing her breathing, tricking her body into relaxation. He gave her a moment to prepare--soon he would not be so kind--and plunged.

"*Legilimens!*"

Clouds drifting across the sky... good, but there was fear underneath, fear that he could seize... he followed the fear to where it led, beneath the sky, and found the night that Dumbledore had enspelled her and placed her beneath the Black Lake... the cold water, the reluctance to breath... then blackness... nothing.

Withdrawing, he said, "Better. I could see the memory you used to get there, but the image, once it rose, was impenetrable."

She smiled, but he thought she looked a trifle pale. Occlumency was an incredible drain on the body's resources. That was part of the reason he was so vulnerable to Voldemort's physical attacks; whenever he appeared before the Dark Lord, he was already compromised. He reached into his desk and pulled out a bar of chocolate, broke off a piece and pushed it toward her.

"Eat it. You will need to keep your strength up."

When she had finished it, he said, "I'm going to have to begin taking you by surprise."

"I assumed as much," she replied.

"In the meantime, I thought we'd do a quick lesson on Extension Charms."

"Increasing the internal dimensions of an object without altering the outer dimensions?"

He sighed. "A definition that was ripped from the pages of *The Standard Book of Spells Grade Six*, I assume?"

"Does that make it any less apt?"

"I do not wish you to *parrot*, Miss Granger; I wish you to understand."

"Then explain it to me."

"Extension Charms are some of the most useful of the Concealment Charms because they are condoned by the Ministry--mostly for their own convenience. Come here."

She rose and crossed behind his desk.

"What do you see?"

"Er... your desk, sir."

"Precisely," he said, pulling open a drawer, revealing a set of files. "A desk. Yet, in this drawer, I have the records of every student I have had the misfortune to teach. Every student for the last sixteen years." He pulled the drawer open further, then further still. The folders continued, one after the other without ceasing.

She reached out to touch them, as if to verify that they were not an illusion.

"Miss Granger," he snapped, and she withdrew her hand guiltily.

"Miss Granger," he said again, and as her eyes rose to meet his, "*Legilimens!*"

Now, he had her where he wanted her, surprised and in such proximity to his body that she couldn't help but think of him. Now... He tore into her mind and saw the flickering firelight, his hands stroking her legs and felt... yes... sweet desire, tentative but *present*. It had not been an act. Now, she had climbed into his lap, and he was ripping off her skirt... Suddenly, the image rippled and threatened to become the surface of the Black Lake, but he plunged beneath the water, seeing her fingers rummaging under his shirt, feeling the heat and confusion swirling around in her thoughts and hearing himself say, "Bedroom." He saw the two of them entwined, his face buried in her quim. He felt her need; he felt her come; he felt...

She collapsed, striking the side of his desk with her hip as she fell.

*Goddamn it. What have I done?*

He realized immediately that he could not take her to the hospital wing. Poppy would be sure to ask all sorts of questions about her lessons, questions that he would be unable to answer; so, he gathered her limp and pliant body and carried her through the Floo to his chambers, where he lay her on the couch in front of the fireplace. He summoned a blanket and checked the time. Three o'clock. She'd probably been out for about four minutes at that point, so...

*Three o'clock?*

How long had they been warring for control of her mind? Past lunch, that much was certain, and he realized that he had no idea if she'd eaten breakfast. He had not appeared in the Great Hall that morning.

"Dobby!" he called.

Dobby appeared beside him immediately, and seeing Miss Granger upon the couch, the house-elf rushed to her side, quaking foolishly.

"But what is wrong with miss?"

"She's exhausted herself," Snape said, refusing to acknowledge that he might have had a significant role in exhausting her. "She needs food. And bring plenty of tea and pumpkin juice."

"Certainly, sir." The elf *cracked* out again.

He hurried into his laboratory, scanning the shelves. Pepperup, yes, between that and the caffeine... and some Memory Potion might not be totally amiss, though God help

him if he'd damaged her mind...

He returned to her side and smoothed her hair back with his hand. She was sweating slightly, but he felt no real sign of fever. What in Merlin's name was wrong with him? What had he been so desperate to find that he should have fought the girl so hard? He had, as he'd pointed out to her earlier, his own set of those memories, and if he could not trust his recollections--her breathing, the thick, rich scent of her arousal--what could he trust? It had been ridiculous and destructive to push her new skills so far. Surely, when she woke she would be livid--

Dobby returned, startling him from his reverie. "I is bringing food for miss," he said. "Should I fetch Madam Pomfrey?"

"That will not be necessary," Snape said, accepting the tray of food that the house-elf offered. "She simply needs some food and some rest. There is no need to speak to anyone," he said, knowing that would be enough to bind the elf to silence. "That will be all."

When they were alone again, he took his wand and aimed it at the unconscious girl, saying, *Rennervate!*

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She opened her eyes warily, taking in his presence, the room, and the food and weighing their meaning before she spoke. He had cared for her. He had attacked her mind and tried to take what she had specifically warded against him, but he had cared for her. "What happened?"

"I--I tested your abilities too rigorously. You fainted."

She sat quietly for a moment, sifting through the memories he had seen before the world went dark. "You could have asked. I would have told you anything you wanted to know."

"Asked what? Here, drink this pumpkin juice. It will help get your blood sugar up. You're delirious."

"I'm not," she said, though she took an enormous swig of the juice. "I could see what you were looking for."

"You've missed lunch, and I daresay, from your reactions, you missed breakfast as well. Eat, Miss Granger. This will all make more sense in a few moments."

She glared at him, but reached out and gingerly took a sandwich.

"You will be a fine Occlumens," he began. "I apologize for pushing you so hard. Your determination proved much more than I anticipated."

"You've been underestimating me for years, Professor Snape. I'm used to it. I just hope I'm able to perform under more... malevolent scrutiny."

He nodded and poured more pumpkin juice into her glass. She drank it greedily.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better," she said. "Thank you."

He huffed. "You should hardly be thanking me."

"No, I suppose not. Why on earth were you so determined to get to those memories?" She would have the answer; he could not evade her forever. There was a strange flicker of hope in her chest that she could not explain.

"Because the Dark Lord already suspects our relationship. It is what he will look for if he is able to lay his hands on you."

She felt the world beginning to spin again, and he thrust a phial of potion into her hand. "Pepperup," he said shortly. She drank.

When she was able to speak without fear of losing the sandwich and juice, she asked, "How do you know?"

"Because my own shields failed when I was last before him. He saw very little--but he saw you."

*No, God. No. The night that he had returned to Hogwarts...*

"Was that the reason for--?"

"In short."

"Professor Snape, I--Oh, God, I think I'm going to be sick." She stood, looking frantically around her and remembered that the loo was through the bedroom. She stumbled as she took off through the door but managed to get there in time.

As she heaved up her meager lunch, she prayed, *Please God, how can I undo it? He bears enough already. He must not be tortured because of me. His secrets..She collapsed against the wall. The cool of the tiles slowly seeped into her skin and began to clear her head. It cannot be undone, now or ever. All we have is Occlumency. Let our shields be thick and unyielding. Let me cause him no more harm.* She thought of that senseless flame that had sprung up in her chest when it had become clear that he wanted her memories of that night. *Don't you ever hope that, Hermione Granger. Not even for a second. If he were to care for you... it would mean death.*

When she could stand, she made her way back to the sitting room, where Snape was pacing before the fire.

"I shouldn't have given you the Pepperup," he was saying. "Surely, a reaction to--"

"I'm fine," she said curtly.

"Sit, Miss Granger. You've had a shock, and you need--"

"I said, I'm fine," she snapped. "I'm going to return to my chambers to lie down." She strode across the room to the fireplace as steadily as she could.

He looked surprised at first and a bit stung; then his face settled into its usual indifference. "I'll expect you in the morning," he said. "Do have the good sense to eat something first."

"Yes," she said, "Clearly, I'll have to fortify myself." And with that, she stepped into the flames.

# Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: This world and these characters belong to JKR. I write for fun, not money. Thanks, as always, to my awesome beta, Shellsnapelover.

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She knocked. When there was no answer, she wordlessly cast *Protego Totalum* on herself and entered, wand aloft.

"*Stupefy!*" he said. The hex bounced off the air in front of her and dissipated. She grinned.

"*Expelliarmus!*" she retorted, but he, too, had cast the Shield Charm, and her spell was rendered useless.

"Now we talk about circumventing a Shield Charm," Snape's voice said from somewhere off to the left.

"Show yourself," she said. "It's disconcerting to take orders from an empty space."

"Ah, but you are supposed to sense me, Miss Granger."

She rolled her eyes and turned to face the door where she assumed he was.

"Over here," he said, and the smirk was evident in his voice.

She whirled. Then suddenly she *could* sense him, right behind her. *Spice and Wool*. She put out her hand and felt the heavy fabric of his robes, though she could not see them.

"But how--?"

"Because I cast *Protego Horribilis*."

"So I can touch you because I mean you no harm?"

"Apparently."

"But the *Expelliarmus*--"

"Any spell meant to harm--or in the case of *Expelliarmus*--to disadvantage me, will be repelled, regardless of the caster. *Protego Horribilis* would be a wise choice, should you find yourself among the Death Eaters."

"So if I were to cast something innocuous or something that would aid you, it would get through?"

"Such as?"

"The Disillusionment Charm. Remove it. I want to see if I can replace it."

Snape trickled into being before her. She waved her wand, and he melted from sight again. It was an extremely odd sight. Hermione had only ever Disillusioned herself; she hadn't realized that the uncomfortable sensation of being slowly engulfed had a visual counterpart.

She smiled to herself. If she were captured, Snape would be able to cast spells to assist her. He could also hex her without effect, preserving his role as a spy. This was valuable information. She thought of the lessons he had given her. *You now have two serviceable disguises at your behest... If I see it, I'll need to know that it is you... I, myself, tend to use the night sky... Protego Horribilis would be a wise choice, should you find yourself among the Death Eaters.* Whatever Dumbledore had intended her to learn, Snape was teaching her to survive.

Suddenly, Hermione felt much lighter than she had in weeks. It would be all right. She had done the right thing. Snape was... well, he was Snape, and not a thing could be done about it. But he would help her, and she would help him. And they got on as well as could be expected, didn't they? She had to admit that she enjoyed their verbal duels. It wasn't a marriage, not by a long shot, but it was a plan.

"Remove the charm, Miss Granger," he said, and she did, revealing him.

"I meant the *Protego Totalum*," he sneered.

Just as she raised her wand, he hissed in pain, his eyes squeezing to slits.

"Professor! I swear I didn't--"

"Use your brains," he managed to growl. "I'm still wearing the Shield."

"Then what--?"

"I'm being summoned."

Her heart seemed to drop into the pit of her stomach. Summoned.

Snape quickly removed the Shield Charm and said, "*Accio* robes and mask!"

She watched in silent horror as the trappings of the Death Eaters soared across the room and into his grasp.

"You'll need to inform the Headmaster," he said as he brushed past her, preparing to leave.

"Wait," she said, grabbing his arm. He turned toward her, and there was nothing of the man she had known over the last several days in his eyes. She quickly released him.

"Yes?"

"If he knows... then won't you need to take him something?" She could not let him walk out of here without a story. He had spent these holiday lessons preparing her; now,

she must prepare him.

"What are you blathering about, Miss Granger? The longer I delay, the worse--"

"I assume you've told him that you are using me to gain information about Harry--that you've... seduced me?"

He said nothing, but continued to stare menacingly into her eyes.

"Take this," she said and opened the clasp of her robes.

"Miss Granger!"

"Trust me," she said firmly and ripped her tie free. She undid the top few buttons of her shirt and took hold of his arm once more, gazing adoringly into his eyes.

"Professor Snape, Harry suspects that Draco Malfoy is up to something! He's been following him around the castle--he thinks that Draco might have had something to do with the necklace that cursed Katie Bell! I'm frightened, Professor. Will you look into it?"

Snape's eyes were completely unreadable, but he smoothed a hand over her hair and said, "Never fear, Miss Granger. Of course I will look into it. But do tell Mr Potter not to do anything rash. Draco Malfoy is a powerfully connected wizard. It would not do to tangle with him."

"Thank you, sir," she simpered.

"Thank *you*, Miss Granger," he replied, and she could not tell whether it was a part of the scene she had so hastily set up or something else.

Snape said nothing else, but fled the room in haste, leaving her alone in his office. She stood there for a few minutes, overcome by what had just happened. Pacing did nothing to ease the crawling panic that had infected her bloodstream. *Please, God*, she thought. *Please, God. Please, God.* Seemingly capable of no more coherent thought, and unwilling to stand there uselessly any longer, she buttoned up her shirt, replaced her tie, straightened her robes and set out for Professor Dumbledore's office.

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Snape's thoughts were tinged with pain and confusion as he strode down the corridor. Only a few more minutes to the Apparition point, if the staircases cooperated, and the end of the burning in his left forearm. He had stayed too long; the pain was already reaching a fever pitch. He remembered the Dark Lord's first summons upon his return to power. That night, Snape had needed to wait an hour before joining him. It was not a pain he ever wished to revisit, and every twinge and burn now brought its memory. What in bloody hell could Voldemort want? He was not supposed to be summoned during the holidays; the Dark Lord had agreed, with so few around the castle, his absence would be noted, far more so than when the halls teemed with students. His skin prickled with apprehension.

Compounding it all, his arm still seemed to tingle where Miss Granger had grabbed him. The girl had flummoxed him. Not because she had so quickly grasped what would be necessary--for all he hounded her about original thought, she'd never had a dearth of it--but that she would be willing to debase herself so fully. It boggled his mind. He was only a half-blood and because of it, he had taken great pains all his life to never appear at a disadvantage. That she, a Muggle-born, whose worth would always be questioned, would be willing to appear foolish and naïve in front of so powerful a wizard as the Dark Lord... well, he didn't know whether to admire or berate her. Perhaps it was genius; perhaps they would lull the evil bastard into a sense of complacency, but he still felt it was a terrible risk. He would not have asked it of her; he'd have found some other way, something he could twist...

He thought again of her words, *Harry suspects that Draco Malfoy is up to something*. Clever thing. It seemed she'd learned the most important lesson of all without his ever having to instruct her: you always lie with the truth.

By the time he'd left the castle, he was nearly running for the Forbidden Forest. He shrugged on his robes as soon as he'd reached the cover of the trees, thrust the mask to his face and touched the Dark Mark with his wand. The end of the pain coincided with the pressure of Apparition, leaving him feeling empty and nauseated. When he reappeared, he was unsure to where he had arrived. The room was large, and the walls were stone. Other Death Eaters were present, and he slipped soundlessly into their ranks, but not before he was noticed.

"Severus!"

He stepped forward, fell to his knees, and took the hem of the Dark Lord's robes between his fingers, lowering his face to kiss it.

"You're late."

"Forgive me, my Lord. It took me a few moments to break away unnoticed."

"I do hope you've brought enough intelligence to justify your continued presence at Hogwarts."

Snape raised his face to the serpentine wizard's eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

"Not yet, Severus," Voldemort chuckled coldly. "So many of my loyal servants risk so much, while you dwell under the school's protection. Tonight, I wish them to hear what you bring me, to know what is gained behind those walls."

"Very well, my Lord," he said, thinking, *Lucius*. Lucius had been whispering in the Dark Lord's ear. Tales of his interference in Draco's plan, perhaps, or even less. His jealousy was hardly misplaced; he sat in Azkaban while Snape lived in relative comfort--not that Azkaban was the horror it had once been with the Dementors on the side of the Dark Lord and the Ministry slowly being infiltrated. Messages were passed in and out with ease, and Snape thought bitterly that Lucius should consider it a holiday of sorts. He lived within confines that kept him relatively safe and was required to do little more than languish to be considered loyal.

"Potter was shipped to the Burrow for the holidays, along with Weasley. There is heavy Order presence in the house."

"Not kept at Hogwarts, then?"

"No, my Lord. Dumbledore is often absent. I don't think he wishes Potter to remain there without his presence."

"Where is Dumbledore? I would think he would be reluctant to leave his precious school unattended?"

"He leaves it in the care of the werewolf and the Metamorphmagus. He feels that is protection enough."

"Foolish, foolish."

"Indeed, my Lord. The Order is not gaining numbers as quickly as they might have hoped. Their presence in the Ministry remains static. They have not inducted Potter, nor any student sympathizers."

"Interesting."

"However, their main focus remains on Potter. They set much store by the prophecy, though they pretend to disdain it. I am certain that Dumbledore is giving the boy private instruction that even the Order is not privy to. I suspect it has something to do with his prolonged absences."

"You must make yourself privy to it, Severus. I will not tolerate--"

"Yes, my Lord. I am developing a source."

"Potter's friend?"

There were a few hushed murmurs among the Death Eaters. "Yes, my Lord."

"Is she proving a valuable contact?"

Snape smirked. "She is. Just this morning she told me that Potter suspects Draco Malfoy of some kind of treachery and says Potter's been following him. I told her to leave it to me, that I would sort it out, and to warn him off going to Dumbledore with it."

The Dark Lord nodded and looked at him thoughtfully with his glowing red eyes. "Have you bedded her?"

Snape leered in response, turning up the corners of his mouth. "As disgusting as it is to rut with a Mudblood, there is no faster way into a foolish, young girl's heart. They equate pleasure with love."

At this, he heard some appreciative laughter.

Voldemort could apparently wait no longer. He seized Snape's face in his hands and hissed, *Legilimens!*

Snape had been ready. He'd suspected that no matter what the Dark Lord said, he would want some tangible evidence of his time with Miss Granger.

As the wizard penetrated his mind, he allowed the girl's image to float to the surface, remembering her as she had been, lying on his couch after their vigorous attempt at Occlumency, frightened but still trusting. Slowly, he substituted flashes from their wedding night: a bared leg, a gasping mouth, a smooth expanse of skin. He gave him her face, open and questioning, then relaxed and sated, and finally, he played her gift to him, her words. *I'm frightened, Professor. Will you look into it?*

Suddenly, Voldemort's attention turned. Snape could feel him ruffling through his memories, searching for something. He offered Dumbledore, ordering him to train Miss Granger; Draco, insisting that he needed no help; hexing Potter during class. The Dark Lord moved faster and faster through his thoughts, seeming to be unsatisfied by what he found there. Finally, Snape reluctantly gave up a memory he had hoped to keep: Miss Granger, sleeping, tucked into the crook of his arm. Then, *He thinks that Draco might have had something to do with the necklace that cursed Katie Bell!* Voldemort quickly withdrew.

"I had heard of a cursed student at Hogwarts," Voldemort purred, "though Dumbledore did his best to hush it up. Tell me, Severus, did Draco participate?"

"He says he did not, my Lord."

"But you think otherwise."

"It is not my place to speculate. Draco's actions are between the two of you."

"Yet, you press him for details of his plan."

"I seek only to aid him, my Lord."

"Narcissa has told me of your vow."

"If I had not been certain that she would, I would have brought it to your attention immediately."

"Would you? Lately, I have found you... secretive."

"My Lord, I offer you my mind. What secrets could I be hiding?"

"Why could I find no evidence of the vow in your memories?"

"But doesn't its very absence assure you?" Snape asked silkily. "If I felt I had done something to displease you, if I had tried to hide it, a Legilimens of your skill would have found it immediately."

Voldemort gave him a measuring look, but nodded.

"Very well. I find your news acceptable. But I warn you, Severus. Do not interfere with Draco Malfoy. As you said yourself, he is mine to control."

At this, Snape knew that he had won, though at what cost he dared not consider. The Dark Lord had dismissed Lucius's comments as unfounded, and the others--he thought he recognized Yaxley, Macnair, and Bellatrix Lestrange's forms among them--would be satisfied that he continued to serve them. However, he feared for Draco. His mishap with the Bell girl had been revealed, and now Lucius with his sneaky tongue would be, once more, the subject of the Dark Lord's ire.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Bellatrix! Approach me."

Snape watched as various Death Eaters were brought from the ranks to account for their whereabouts and actions, much as he himself had done. He resisted the urge to shift from foot to foot. It would not do to incur the Dark Lord's wrath, having just taken such measures to avoid it--not that the doings of Walden Macnair were particularly scintillating. However, he knew he must remember every word. He would have to bring this to his other master upon his return.

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He climbed the spiral steps wearily and tried to be grateful that he could climb them at all. It was harder and harder to believe that he was doing anyone any good. All the secrets passed back and forth, all the reporting. He found it easy to lose track of whom he was spying for. Dumbledore had best make this quick. He craved the silence of his own chambers, some tea, perhaps something stronger, and rest.

He knocked and entered, finding Dumbledore at his regular perch behind his desk.

"Are you well?" the old man asked.

"As can be expected."

"Hermione came by hours ago. I admit I had begun to worry."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Don't trouble yourself."

"I assume he asked after her?"

"He did."

"And?"

"I gave him what he wanted--news that only she could give me."

"Which was?"

"That Potter suspects Malfoy."

"Severus!"

"Don't start. It was your precious Miss Granger's idea. She planted the memory on me just before I left."

"Did we not agree that you were to keep Draco's plan from Hermione?" Dumbledore was quiet with rage.

"I've kept your secrets, old man. She knows nothing of Draco's plan."

"Then why would she suggest such a thing?"

"Perhaps because it is true? Potter has never had an ounce of anything but suspicion for Draco, for any Slytherin! She says he's been following Draco about the castle, watching him. She seemed to feel, and I agreed, that this is what the Dark Lord would be expecting to hear from her lips. Not plans, not strategy! Just simple, teenaged rumours and grudges."

"I see."

Snape sat and fumed. How dare he question their methods? It was on Dumbledore's orders that he became a spy, joined the Order, married the girl. It was on Dumbledore's own orders that he would kill the venerated old wizard and become an outlaw. Protect Malfoy. Protect Granger. Protect *Potter*. "*You take a great deal for granted, Dumbledore! Perhaps I have changed my mind!*"

"*You gave me your word, Severus.*"

"And I've kept it! Through it all I've kept it."

And because he was too tired to fight anymore, and because it wouldn't matter even if he weren't, he said, "Bellatrix Lestrange has moved something of the Dark Lord's into her vault at Gringotts." Then he stood and swept into the Floo.

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She was somewhere in his chambers. He could tell it instantly as he stepped from the fireplace. Was there no end to the snooping, the spying? What was it she had said the day before? *You could have asked. I would have told you anything you wanted to know* She pretended at trust and honesty, but she snuck around his home while he risked his life to protect hers. Well, he would find her. And when he did, he would scare the life out of her and remind her on whose turf she treaded.

As he had done so often over this holiday break, Snape Disillusioned himself and cast the Muffliato charm over his body. He crept from his study into the sitting room, glancing at the bookshelves where he had expected to find her. *His bedroom?* He proceeded through the sitting room to the bedroom, wondering idly what he would do if he found her in his bed. But she was not there, either. Could he be mistaken? Had he simply hoped that she would be there?

He returned to the sitting room and was considering checking the bathroom when he saw her. She was curled, asleep, wrapped in the blanket he'd summoned for her the day before. Her mouth was slack, and her hair spread wildly over the arm of the couch. She looked, to him, simultaneously like an exhausted child and an exhausted angel. He sat in an armchair across from her and watched her sleep for a time, thankful for the charms that kept him silent and invisible. What was she doing here? He told himself that she had simply wanted to make sure he had not revealed anything further about their relationship to Voldemort. She had been violently ill when she'd learned that the Dark wizard knew of her; surely, she wanted assurance that she was not in any more peril than before. It was surprising that Dumbledore had not offered to reassure her after debriefing him, but... here she was. He was grateful that she was asleep, that there would be no more harsh words today, that he could pretend that someone had waited so many hours to make sure he was all right.

She stirred a bit in her sleep then and gathered her hair to one side. He thought it best not to examine the pang of loss that he felt when so much of that snarled bramble patch disappeared from view. "You're back," she murmured.

He smiled ruefully, though she could not see him.

"Are you all right? Did he hurt you?" She was starting to rise now, and the pitch of her voice rose simultaneously. "Professor? Where are you?"

He removed the charms and stood before her. Her eyes drank him in, searching over his skin inch by inch. When she had seemed to satisfy herself that he was unblemished, she sighed and said, "Thank God," sinking back down to the couch.

He sat beside her. "Your plan worked," he told her quietly.

She nodded. "Good."

He leaned back against the firm padding of the couch and flicked a fire into the grate with his wand. She gazed into it, and it seemed that the flames lulled her back into sleep. He stared into them himself for an indeterminable amount of time before he followed her.

## Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. I am, as always, filled with gratitude for my beta, Shellsnapelover. Please do not eat any mushrooms based on my descriptions. :)

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She sat up with a start at the sound of Dumbledore's voice and the sight of his green face peering out from the guttering flames. Where was she? And how long had she been drooling on Snape's shoulder?

"Good morning, Severus, Hermione," he said sternly. "Severus, I suggest you send Hermione back to her room at once. The house-elves are in a dither about where to deliver her Christmas presents."

*Christmas?* Oh, dear God. Had she slept here all night?

Snape blinked and said calmly, "Certainly, Albus. Is that all?"

"Yes," the Headmaster said. "That is all. And Happy Christmas." Then he was gone.

"I'm so sorry, Professor Snape. I didn't mean to--"

He waved his hand dismissively. "To what? To be the only person in this castle who showed a modicum of concern for my well being? Think nothing of it. You're forgiven."

She stood and stretched silently, having no idea how to reply. This was Snape as she had never seen him, and she had the urge to flee before he suddenly began firing curses at her.

She folded the blanket, laid it on the couch and gathered her school bag. "What time should I return?" she asked.

"Return?"

"For my lesson?"

Snape shook his head. "It's Christmas, Miss Granger."

She nodded, feeling oddly dismissed.

Heading for the fireplace, she paused and looked back. "Happy Christmas, Professor Snape."

"And to you." His face remained blank, but there was no venom in his voice.

She stepped through the flames.

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She appeared in the Great Hall for breakfast but did not look at him, instead nodding curtly to the Headmaster as she took her seat at the Gryffindor table. She ate alone, as had been her custom throughout the holidays, though he took no pleasure in it as he had before. Despite the fact that the table had been greatly reduced in size, she looked very small sitting there.

Beyond a cursory, 'Good morning,' Dumbledore did not speak to him at breakfast. Snape exchanged pleasantries with the rest of the faculty and ate his meal quietly. He was not fond of these holiday meals and their forced conviviality. He would have preferred to eat in his chambers, but had thought it best not to anger the Headmaster any further today.

When he had finished eating, he wished his colleagues a Happy Christmas and quickly left the room, climbing the many staircases to the Astronomy Tower. A thick blanket of snow had fallen overnight, and he wished to look over the grounds, wiped clean of students and their debris. He enjoyed the thick, silent feel of the school covered in snow. It made him feel safe, as so few things did.

Wrapping his cloak about him tightly, he stepped out onto the Tower. The air was bitter with cold, but it felt cleansing. Whatever he had endured, he always felt scoured and renewed by the harsh winter winds. The Forbidden Forest looked glassy with ice, and he was struck by the idea that a very different type of Transfiguration had occurred in the night. Everything appeared changed. What was usually Hagrid's dilapidated hut was naught but a hill, and the Black Lake had been charmed white with ice and snow. He leaned against the battlements and breathed deeply, feeling the wind slice his throat and bite his lungs. Though part of what he loved in seeing the world made fresh was the sense that he was the only solitary soul to witness it, he wished vaguely for Miss Granger and her insufferable chatter to make the day feel truly like a holiday.

As if he had conjured her with his thoughts, he saw her crossing the grounds, a bright speck against the endless expanse of white. She wore her heavy cloak over her robes and a scarf in her house's colors, and her hair was whipped by the wind into a moving chestnut cloud. He smirked slightly. It reminded him a bit of the Whomping Willow. He was sorry that he had not accepted her suggestion of a lesson. He had no wish to mark essays today or to brew tedious potions for the hospital wing. He'd had no family with whom to celebrate the holiday in years, no gifts to exchange, no holiday meal outside the Hogwarts feast, and yet he often felt some strange wish to set this day apart from all the others. To teach her today might have been almost festive.

She turned toward the lake and charmed a hole into the snow. Slowly, a bench appeared where moments ago there had been only a slight rise in the smooth expanse of white. He watched as she settled herself, apparently content to sit and watch the snow blowing across the iced surface of the lake. Refusing to give any more thought to the idea than to decide firmly upon it, he turned from the battlements and made his way back to his chambers.

Once inside, he strode to his sitting room and quickly scanned the shelves for the book he wanted. He felt an uncommon desire to hurry, in case he should miss her, for this would be an excellent opportunity to instruct her on edible plants and fungi. No one else would be out on the grounds in this weather, and he could give her a practical lesson without risking anyone's curiosity. He seized the book he sought and hastened out onto the grounds.

The light was nearly blinding, reflecting as it was off the acres of snow. He stopped and squinted, his eyes searching for a familiar burst of color *There*. She had remained on the bench, heedless of the wind and cold. Once again, he was stuck by how small she looked, a bright, tiny speck against a large and rather unforgiving tableau. He trudged through the snow toward her.

"Miss Granger," he said, startling her from her thoughts.

Her head jerked up, and she smiled at him. "Professor Snape. I was just out enjoying the weather."

He snorted. "You'll be lucky if you aren't frozen to that bench. Are you dressed appropriately?"

"Pardon?"

"Are you cold?"

"No, sir. I cast a Warming Charm. I... I like to look at the snow. The world seems clean again. New."

He nodded curtly.

"I wondered if you might like a lesson on edible wildlife. When you have finished admiring frozen droplets of water, of course."

She gave him a long and somewhat amused stare. Finally, she rose from the bench. "Certainly, sir."

"Good. Come." He slogged through the snow toward the Forbidden Forest with Miss Granger in his wake.

Once they had reached the cover of the trees, where the snow lay thinner upon the ground, he used his wand to clear a patch of undergrowth.

"What do you see?"

"Beech trees. Leaf debris. Slush. Mushrooms."

He looked at her disdainfully. "And what, pray tell, of all of this is useful?"

"Well, beech wood is sometimes used for wands, though not very often. And the mushrooms, I guess? Though I wouldn't know what would be safe to eat."

"At the base of the beech tree, it is common to find a plethora of mushrooms that are edible, should one find oneself in need of food. Here," he said, pointing to an orange, thin headed mushroom with blunt blue veins, "is a Chanterelle. It is edible and fairly palatable. Do you see others?"

"This," she said, indicating another of the mushroom he had pointed out.

"If you ate that, Miss Granger, you would be violently ill within the hour." He nudged the mushroom over with his foot. This is a Jack o' Lantern mushroom. Notice that it has very fine gills instead of veins."

She bent and peered at the mushroom. "I see."

"Remember it," he said. She nodded and looked as if she wished she had some parchment.

"If you are relying on mushrooms for food, Miss Granger, you very likely will not have your notes available. You must commit these things to memory." He cleared away a bit more snow.

"This," he said, pointing at a ridged and pitted mushroom, "is a Morel mushroom, also found in beech woods. It is safe to eat, but again, take care not to confuse it with the False Morel." He sliced the mushroom lengthwise with his wand, showing her the hollow stem of the Morel. "A False Morel will be filled with a cottony substance. To consume it would be fatal."

"Professor Snape?" she asked, and her face was as serious and focused as it would have been if he had been explaining the steps involved in brewing the Draught of Living Death.

"Yes?"

"Is this--I mean to say, did Dumbledore put this on my course of study?"

"Are you asking me if I would have chosen to spend my Christmas holiday looking at mushrooms in the snow?"

She glared at him, but her voice was calm and serious. "I'm asking you if you think I'm going to be scrounging in the underbrush for food in near future."

"You know very well that I have no idea what the Headmaster's plans are for you."

"I'm not asking what you know. I'm asking what you think."

"He asks me not to think. Double blind, Miss Granger."

She looked at him for a long time, so long he wished to look away but did not.

"I don't wish to endanger you or myself. But it seems an insult to both of us to imagine that we cannot see what this must mean," she said.

"Which only serves to highlight the importance of this lesson," he replied shortly. He hated himself slightly in that moment. It was clear what all this meant: the disguises, the Occlumency, the Shield Charms, the lessons in food and mediwizardry. She would be going on the run. And yet, he would not--could not--speak to her about it, could not reassure her. He could only teach her.

She nodded and cleared a larger space in the snow for them to sit. He lowered himself slowly, dreading the way that the cold would seep into his joints, but found, to his relief, that she had cast Cushioning and Warming Charms on the frozen ground so that they could work comfortably. He crossed his legs and opened the book.

"Here is a list of mushrooms common to Great Britain," he said. "I chose beech woods, not only because they are readily available for study, but because they are common, and because I have no expectation that you will be able to commit the entire text to memory. It seems best to me that you focus on a single habitat."

Miss Granger took the book into her lap and hunched over it. Her eyes darted quickly over the text, back and forth.

"*Accio* Mushrooms!" he said and nearly laughed when the two of them were pelted with flying fungi. She did laugh, and the sound pealed like bells through the winter wind.

He watched as she picked up one of the bright orange caps and inspected it. "Jack O' Lantern," she said, laying it aside.

"Mark it, Miss Granger. You wouldn't want any dunderheaded companions you might have eating it by mistake."

She looked at him sharply, then smirked and vanished it with her wand. He nodded, and she chose a purplish mushroom with a convex cap, turning the pages of the book as she scanned for a match.

"Wood Blewit?" she asked him.

"Indeed. You'll want to cook it, but it's edible. Some people quite enjoy them."

She set it in the folds of her robes where they had pooled in her lap. She took up all those that resembled it, and after inspecting them carefully, added them to the pile.

She worked tirelessly, taking up mushroom after mushroom, comparing them to the book and then vanishing them or adding them to the growing mound in her lap. He watched her as she worked, occasionally confirming her identification or adding a comment about preparation or flavor. Her brow was furrowed, and her hair whipped madly into her face. Several times she stopped and wound it into a knot at the base of her neck, but strands and finally whole chunks would be torn free by the wind, and they danced merrily about her head. She batted at them distractedly. Her cheeks and nose were flaming pink, chafed raw by flying snowflakes. This is what he liked most about her, he decided. Never once did she complain of the elements or ask how long they would have to do this. She simply set about the task with competent interest, determined to complete the lesson before her.

When the pile of mushrooms around her had been reduced nearly to nothingness, and the pile in her lap had grown to what might be considered enough to feed three desperate teenagers, he stopped her.

"Well done," he said, blocking the hand that had reached out for one of the few remaining mushrooms. "That one, of course, is Fly Agaric, the storybook mushroom. Quite easy to recognize and quite poisonous. Vanish it." She complied and turned toward him. A lock of her hair brushed across his mouth.

"The next step in the lesson, of course, after positive identification, is--"

"To eat one," she said.

"Quite."

She poked around in the pile, choosing a Morel. She sliced it tip to end with her wand and inspected the hollow stem.

"No cotton," she said. "And the gills are disambiguated. It should be fine."

She cut a section of the mushroom and raised it to her lips. Suddenly, he was seized with panic.

"No!" Snape said, and she nearly dropped it.

"What? You agreed with me! It's a Morel."

"Let me." He reached for the mushroom, but she shook her head vigorously.

"No. Your life is far more valuable than mine, Professor. I'll eat it."

"No one eats it," he said firmly.

"Are you mad? You said yourself, it's part of the lesson! What is the point of teaching me to find the food if I can't then consume it? I trust my work, Professor. I'll eat it."

"If you trust in your work, then you should have no concerns about my--"

"No--Look. You..." She looked at him carefully, as if to decide how he might interpret her words. "You take enough risks on my behalf."

It stopped him cold. He remembered the way she had looked at him the night before. Her eyes had scanned him so thoroughly and systematically. She'd searched him, not just for blood, but for pain, he felt certain, remembering how her gaze had lingered on his face, weighing the expression there. And then, how limply she had fallen back on the cushions, relief so evident in her posture.

"We'll both eat it," he said. Strange notions danced through his mind--of the Muggle Shakespeare, and the two of them ending up dead in the snow like some perverse Romeo and Juliet. He found the image oddly comforting.

She nodded and sliced the mushroom again, handing him a sliver that matched her own. He chewed and swallowed, his eyes never leaving her face as she did the same.

"Now, what?" she asked.

"Now, we wait."

They sat in silence, watching the snow falling from the tree cover. A few winter starlings darted between the branches. She leaned back, propping herself on the heels of her hands. "How do you usually spend the holidays?" she asked.

"Pardon?"

"How do you spend the holidays--when you aren't teaching insufferable Gryffindors how to survive in the woods?"

His eyes darted to her face, and he saw that she was teasing him. Impertinent little chit. He smirked and shook his head at her. "I usually complete the far more enjoyable task of marking student essays," he said, and she grinned.

"You always stay here?"

"I dislike cooking for myself," he said simply.

Their silence resumed, punctuated occasionally by the creak of the icy branches and the shuffling of animals deeper in the woods. The sun was high overhead, but it was shady on the forest floor where they sat.

"And you?" he asked finally.

"I grew up outside London," she said. "My parents are dentists. That's a kind of Muggle tooth doctor."

"My father was a Muggle," Snape said quietly. "I know what a dentist is."

"Oh!" she replied. "I didn't know that. Well, my parents close their practice for a few days at the holidays. We do the traditional things. Lots of food, presents, and the like."

For a moment he pitied her, far from her family on Christmas day, eating mushrooms in the snow instead of warm holiday meals prepared by her mother.

"I thought I would be quite homesick," she said suddenly. "But I've enjoyed the respite. It's very odd to go back to a world without magic."

"Indeed," he said. "Many Muggle-borns have difficulty with that."

"Do they? I find I have very little idea what to expect once I leave Hogwarts."

"Most find that they have a preference for one world or the other and choose accordingly. As you said, it is difficult to live in between."

He did not point out to her that it was wartime, and that she would likely have very few choices once the Death Eaters rose to power: give up magic and live in hiding, or fight and live in hiding. He also failed to point out that her choice had been effectively made the night she married him.

"Yet, you grew up in between," she said, oblivious to his thoughts.

"I did," he said shortly. "I prefer magic."

"As do I, I think."

He was not surprised by her statement. Rarely had he seen a Muggle-born take to magic as she had. It was not just her talent for it, but the way she had steadfastly remained friends with Potter, taking up a prominent place in a magical war that had existed long before she knew of magic, long even before she was born.

"I think we can now safely assume that we are not going to die painful deaths by mushroom poisoning," he said, pushing himself up off the ground, as he had no wish to discuss his rearing any further.

He offered her his hand to help her up, and she took it. As she stood, the heap of mushrooms fell from her lap. Just as she bent to brush them from her cloak, a huge gust of wind tore through the trees and ripped her hair free from its knot. She squinted as it flew before her, effectively blinding her. She released his hand, raising both of hers to her face to control her flying mane, and he gazed at her in amusement as she battled her hair. He felt such a rush of affection for this silly, impossible girl; this lovely, insufferable girl; his brave, Gryffindor girl, that he reached out and used both hands to tuck her hair behind her ears. And then, cupping her jaw in both palms, he bent and kissed her.

Her lips were icy cold, and he sought the warmer depths of her mouth with his tongue. Her hands parted his cloak, and she stepped toward him, threading her arms around him, tucking herself more firmly into his grasp as their kiss deepened. He heard the rushing, inexorable sound of the wind, or perhaps it was the rush of his pulse in his ears, as every part of him seemed suddenly to have awakened.

*What in bloody hell was he doing?*

He released her sharply and took a step back.

"I apologize, Miss Granger. That was most inappropriate."

"Inappropriate?" she stammered.

"I--forgive me." He thrust the book into her hands. "Keep it."

She took it, still looking at him with naked confusion. He brushed past her and strode from the woods toward the castle.

"Professor Snape!"

He heard her calling over the wind but continued without looking back. What could he have been thinking of? *Kissing a student? Not a student-- your wife!* His mind gibbered and justified. *Your wife.* He thought again of how tiny she had looked alone in the snowy expanse of the grounds.

That girl would be his undoing.

## Chapter Twelve

*Chapter 12 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All fully italicized text is from HBP. Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. All else is mine. Thank you, Shellsnapelover, for your faithful work on this story.

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For the next several days, she knocked at his door promptly at nine. She knew he was inside; she could *feel* him there, but he never invited her in. She knew that she could simply barge in. The wards would admit her. Or she could go to Dumbledore, and he would be forced to continue their lessons. But just as she had no wish to explain to Dumbledore what had prompted this behavior, she had no desire to force herself upon him. When he was ready, she told herself, he would answer, and they would go on as they had before that afternoon in the Forbidden Forest. She would keep knocking until then.

Hermione was in the grip of a kind of loneliness she had never known before. She had known what it was to be friendless, to be thought an irritating, arrogant swot. She had known what it was to have friends and to be without them; every moment spent back in the Muggle world was punctuated by the thrumming loneliness of missing Harry and Ron. She had known homesickness, a loneliness for her family when she was at school, and a loneliness for the world of magic when she was at home. But she had never known the feeling that now seized and bound her heart. It felt as if a piece of her had been carved away, almost as if she were lonely for herself. Whether Snape *had* the missing piece or whether he *was* the missing piece, she did not know, but it seemed clear that nothing had been right since he had left her standing in the woods, and whatever it was drove her into the dungeons each morning.

Studying did not help, nor reading, and she felt abandoned by the skills she had learned over the years to keep herself calm and whole. She felt, always, as if she were in a low grade panic. She wanted to beat on the door and demand that he see her. She wanted to beg him, to promise that it had meant nothing, that she would do anything if only he would teach her a bit more. But, of course, it was Snape, and she could do no such thing. She could imagine the look in his eyes, the cold disdain there, if she dared to reveal emotion of any kind. He would crush her.

On the fourth day, he answered her knock.

"Enter."

She crept into his office, shaking slightly and clutching a leather drawstring bag. As she approached his desk, she realized what he had done in refusing to see her. He'd made himself back into her professor. With a single word, *Enter*, he'd told her that there would be no friendly dueling of words or spells, no special lessons, no conversation. She was simply another of his terrified students, bringing him her work for inspection.

"Miss Granger. To what do I owe the... pleasure?" He said the word *pleasure* so dubiously that she wished she could retort, but she knew she must not.

"I finished my project on Extention Charms," she said quietly, handing over the scrap of leather.

Snape opened the pouch and withdrew her schoolbooks, one at a time. He set them on his desk.

"Adequate," he said, sounding bored. "Of course, a pouch of this nature begs curiosity. Why do you have it? What is inside? Far more inconspicuous would be some sort of handbag... something the eye would just drift over, register but ignore..."

"Yes, sir," she said. She felt oddly exposed standing in front of his desk, though he had not invited her to sit.

He dropped the pouch onto his desk dismissively, and she wondered whether she should pick it up and begin loading her books back into it. His head had dropped back down to the parchment he'd been working on, his hair curtaining his face so that she had no hint of the expression there. Was he enjoying her discomfort, or bound by discomfort of his own?

"Was there something else?" he asked without looking up.

"No, sir," she said, and now she did collect her books, awkward as it was to reach around him to get them. She packed each one back into the pouch, looking at it a bit sadly. She'd worked very hard on it; it had been the only thing she had managed to concentrate on in the last few days. She'd thought the idea of a drawstring bag was inspired, as she could widen the mouth of the bag to accommodate items of so many shapes. She had, though she would not have admitted it to herself, brought it to him like a gift, a gift of her mind or her talent. That he considered it unworthy made her hate it.

"Then I will expect to see you in Defense Against the Dark Arts next term," he said.

So, there would be no more lessons. He'd admitted her into the office to dismiss her for the rest of the holiday. When she had refilled the bag, she turned to leave.

"Miss Granger."

She spun.

"After careful consideration of the events of the other day, I rescind my apology."

Her heart leaped. Was he saying--?

"I was clearly under the effects of mild mushroom poisoning. Therefore, I see no need to apologize for my actions, as I was not in control of my faculties."

Somehow, in a single statement, he had managed to imply that she had misidentified a mushroom and poisoned him and that he found her so repulsive that only neurotoxicity could have brought him to kiss her.

Hermione looked at him steadily, weighing her options. Pointing out that she had eaten the same mushroom with no ill effects did not seem quite the right thing, nor did crying and running from his office. She locked her gaze on his as she reached down into herself and pulled forth a cool grace that she had hardly known she possessed.

"I'm sure you're right," she said mildly. Then she paused and added, "Imagine what might have happened if we'd eaten the whole thing."

She had only the brief impression of the color that rose to his cheeks as she turned and walked calmly from the room.

It was only after she had climbed two sets of stairs and crossed the castle to the opposite wing that she decided she was far enough away and burst into tears.

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Hermione was sitting in the Common Room when Harry returned, bursting through the portrait hole and heading straight for her. She was so pleased to see that he was no longer ignoring her--the last few days had been so torturously long and lonely--that she didn't even think to ask for an apology.

"Harry! Did you have a good holiday?"

He flung himself onto the couch beside her. "Yes, it was nice... I've got so much to tell you. And I'm... erm... I'm sorry about the way I treated you before I left. I wasn't in my right mind, you see--I heard--"

She waived her hand dismissively. "What did you hear?"

"The night of Slughorn's party--I followed Snape and Malfoy! They went into Snape's office and--"

Hermione's heart seemed to flutter and stop in her chest. He heard what?

"Malfoy's planning something! Something for Voldemort... and Snape was offering to help him!"

Hermione listened in stunned silence as Harry told her all that he had overheard outside Snape's office. She tried to think calmly. She must throw Harry off this trail, but how?

"*Don't you think--*" she began.

*--that he was pretending to offer help so that he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he's doing?"*

"*Well, yes,*" said Hermione.

"That's what everyone says," Harry said impatiently. "But it proves that I was right--Malfoy's up to something! I've been telling you that for ages!"

"You certainly have," Hermione said, but Harry took no notice of her tone.

"And it proves he's a Death Eater."

"Did he actually say that he was working for Voldemort?"

*Harry frowned, trying to remember. "I'm not sure... Snape definitely said 'your master,' and who else would that be?"*

*"I don't know," said Hermione, biting her lip. "Maybe his father?"*

"Why are you so determined to believe that Malfoy is innocent?"

"I'm not saying that I believe that Malfoy is innocent--I'm just saying that if Professor Snape is aware of the situation, then we have to believe that--"

"Oh, please," Harry began angrily. "Snape's hardly proven himself to be trustworthy. The man is a Death Eater, Hermione. I don't know why you always defend him."

Hermione thought of all she'd heard in Snape's office the night of the Christmas party. She couldn't really blame Harry for his distress; she'd been frightened and angry at what she'd heard as well. But the fact was, she did and had always trusted Snape. For years, Harry had been maligning him, but didn't he always turn up when they needed him? Even in the Shrieking Shack, he'd thought he was protecting them--protecting Harry from the man who'd sold out his family. The horrible night that they'd gone to the Ministry, the night they'd lost Sirius, it was Snape who had sent them help. She thought again of what he'd told her when she questioned him about Draco's plan: *Believe me, Miss Granger, the Headmaster is aware of all I shared with Malfoy. Do your job. Let me do mine.*

Whatever had gone on in that office, she had to trust that it was part of the plan. Weren't there many parts of the plan that she didn't understand? Why was she bound to Snape? Why was Dumbledore preparing her--and from what Snape had insinuated in the woods, Harry and Ron--to live in hiding? She had to have faith, to believe that somehow the plan would save them. Harry could not be allowed to interfere in whatever Snape was doing.

"Look--if you don't trust Professor Snape, then go to Dumbledore. I'm sure that he's already heard all of this, so he'll be able to ease your mind."

*"You're unbelievable, you are," said Harry, shaking his head. "We'll see who's right. You'll be eating your words, Hermione."*

"Maybe so," she said, "but I'd have thought you'd have more faith in Dumbledore's opinion."

Just then, Ron and Lavender entered the common room.

"I missed you so much Won-Won." Lavender was hanging from Ron like a pretty, blond limpet.

Harry looked at Hermione apologetically, but she shrugged. "If that's what makes him happy," she said.

He looked relieved. "Do you think that maybe you two will patch things up?"

"I suppose."

"Brilliant!" Harry said, apparently forgiving her for her earlier unwillingness to vilify Snape and Malfoy. "Speaking of arguments, *had a row with Rufus Scrimgeour as well...*"

As Harry launched into the tale of his run in with the Minister of Magic, Hermione fidgeted. She had to warn Snape that Harry had been listening. She knew she hadn't succeeded in putting him off trailing Malfoy, and she didn't want Snape to think that she'd told Harry what she'd heard. And she wanted him prepared for Harry's possible interference...

As soon as she'd felt she could leave politely, she excused herself to use the loo. It struck her that she'd spent the last few days longing for company, yet as soon as she had it, she was struggling to get away again. She hurried up the steps to her room. Parvati had not yet returned, and Lavender was still in the common room with Ron. She aimed her wand at her ring and thought, *Harry's heard something. I need to see you.*

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Snape had been unsuccessfully trying to mark papers all day. Ever since Miss Granger had made her brief appearance in his office, he had been unable to think of anything except the subtle lift of her eyebrows and the cool, even tone of her voice as she'd said, *Imagine what might have happened if we'd eaten the whole thing.* Minx! Was she put on the earth to torment him? What could she possibly have meant by such a thing?

He had finally put away the marking as it was clear that he would accomplish nothing else today. He was preparing to visit the Slytherin common room to greet his returning students when his ring began to warm. *What now?* he thought, removing it.

*Harry's heard something. I need to see you.* The words were tiny, and he had to twist the ring several times in order to read them. He made a mental note to teach her some kind of shorthand before he sent his reply.

*Eight. My chambers.*

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Dinner was a torturous affair. Snape had taken out some of his frustration and anxiety on the Slytherins, but as soon as he entered the Great Hall, it had all returned, compounded by the sight of her squashed between Potter and Weasley at the Gryffindor table. So the golden trio had kissed and made up. And now they would have her ears again, bending them with all manner of lies and insinuations about him. What could Potter have told her that she would ask to see him?

He choked down what he could as Dumbledore gave a welcoming speech. Despite his warnings, the girl had glanced at him several times, though he could hardly chastise her, as all eyes were on the Head Table. Once, their eyes had locked, and he had looked away. What in Merlin's name was she doing to him?

Unsettled, which was to say, in a murderous temper, he left the Great Hall for his chambers. He paced for a time and then decided it would be best to settle at his desk so as to appear busy when she arrived. He opened a book and shut it again. He ordered tea from a house-elf, castigating it when the tea arrived hot enough to scald, the way he liked it.

When she arrived through the Floo, promptly at eight, he was prepared to snarl at her until she cried.

"Professor Snape," she said. "Thank you for seeing me."

He said nothing but glared unrelentingly at her, feeling a thrill of triumph when she began to quail.

"I--I wouldn't have troubled you, but Harry's come back from the Weasleys' and it seems..." She twisted her hands before her, rocking slightly from foot to foot.

"Spit it out, Miss Granger. I don't have all evening."

"It seems he was eavesdropping the night of Slughorn's party."

For a moment he thought she was referring to something between the two of them. Then it dawned on him that she meant his conversation with Malfoy. How many Gryffindors had been lurking round his office that night?

"I see."

"I just thought... well, I just thought you should know that he considers it proof that Malfoy has joined the Death Eaters, and--"

"--and as usual, he believes me to be aiding him in some nefarious plan."

"Quite," she said, looking slightly relieved.

"What have you told him?" he asked her fiercely.

"Nothing, sir. I asked him if Malfoy had ever actually said that he was working for Voldemort--which he never did, sir. And I told him that you were surely pretending to go along with Malfoy to find out what he was planning. I suggested he see Dumbledore if he couldn't bring himself to trust you."

"And what did you hope to gain by telling me all this?"

"Nothing, sir. I just thought that you should know in case Harry should try to hinder your plan--"

"People assume that Gryffindors and Slytherins are opposites, but I think they are more alike that you would care to admit: conniving, self-serving, always ready to cheat and lie, break rules and tell tales to get what they want. I prefer Slytherins because they are *brave* enough to own up to it. Gryffindors always pretend to be doing it for someone else. What is it that you *want*, Miss Granger?"

She looked both hurt and affronted. "I assure you, I was thinking of nothing but your safety. What if Harry should do something in obvious response to what he heard? What if he were to stop Malfoy, and Voldemort thought that you--" Her voice broke a little. "What if he thought that you had told me something you shouldn't have and that I--" She clenched her jaw and blinked rapidly.

So, he'd succeeded in making her cry. A wave of self loathing crashed over him, but he refused to back down in the face of her tears.

"So, you've come to ensure that I'll protect you from the Dark Lord?"

"No!" She let out an anguished sound of frustration. "I came to tell you to watch Harry. Keep him away from Malfoy. Keep yourself safe."

Then she did cry in earnest, perhaps in her own fit of self loathing, for she had done what no one else had ever done. She had betrayed Potter for him.

He rose from his desk like a man underwater. The air seemed too thick to breathe. He stepped toward her, and she flinched away. He would have cursed himself if he could have found the presence of mind.

"Miss Granger."

She shook her head and swiped at her eyes. "I'm sorry, sir. I'll go now."

"Miss Granger." He lay a hand on her arm. She looked up at him, and he was mesmerized by the way her tears had formed her eyelashes into heavy, dark spikes.

"Hermione," he said, and somehow she was in his arms, her sobs wracking her tiny frame. He stroked her abominable hair--Merlin, how could he have forgotten already how soft it was?--and felt her hot tears through the fabric of his shirt. He should have been repulsed; he even tried to feel repulsed, but all he could muster was a kind of deep ache, and so he clutched her tighter.

"Hermione."

"You can't," she gasped, trying to wrench free of his grasp. "I want you to so badly, but you can't. It's too dangerous."

"Do you really think I would let him hurt you now?"

"Not me, you sodding imbecile! He'll kill you. He'll find out, and he'll kill you."

Something inside of him shattered as she threw him off and ran for the Floo. He watched her robes swirl as she disappeared into the flames. Staggering to a chair, he sank into it. He'd looked into her eyes and hadn't needed Legilimency to read the truth there. She cared for him.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Chapter 13 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All fully italicized text, and anything else you might recognize, belongs to JKR. I write for fun, not money. Many thanks are owed for this chapter. I was lucky enough to get input from KingPig, Irishredlass, OpalJade and my tireless, wonderful beta, Shellsnapelover. Thanks to all these brilliant ladies.

The weeks passed in a kind of fog through which a bright light seemed occasionally to shine. Hermione was as exhausted as she had been during her third year when she'd been using the Time-Turner, perhaps more so. When she was not in class, she was with Harry, trying to prevent him from tailing Malfoy; and when she was not with Harry, she was in the library, searching for information about Horcruxes.

Harry had set her to the task after one of his lessons with Dumbledore. It seemed the old wizard wanted Harry to get a memory from Professor Slughorn... a memory concerning Horcruxes. Whatever they were, Professor Slughorn hadn't wanted to admit that he knew anything about them, leading Hermione to believe that they were a bit of very Dark magic indeed. Hence, she sat in the Restricted Section, hour after hour, poring through *Magick Moste Evile*, which was singularly unhelpful. All she'd found so far was the assurance that the Horcrux was "*the wickedest of magical inventions*," which did not ease her mind. It seemed to her that Dumbledore, like some perverse Pied Piper, had been leading Harry down the same sort of path he had taken her down in September, a path filled with dark portents and cairns along the road that he would not stop to let them see, instead filling their heads with lofty ideals and bracing words. He was infusing Harry with purpose and strength, but for what? He hadn't even told her what they would be up against. And so, she searched.

Harry, for his own part, was far more interested in Snape and Malfoy and had bent Ron's mind to his way of thinking. The two of them were forever poring over the Marauder's Map, searching for Malfoy's little black dot. It was often missing. Hermione fretted silently over its absence, but she refused to track his movements with the same obsession that Harry and Ron did, resolving firmly in her mind to leave it to Snape.

The bright spots in her life, the ones in which she felt the most awake, were those she spent with Snape, though she saw him infrequently and almost never alone. Something had changed between them the night that she'd gone to warn him of Harry's determination to stop Malfoy's plan, and though she'd forbidden him to care for her, she knew that she could no more dictate his feelings than she could her own. When she passed him in the corridors, her heart would leap painfully in her chest, and she would duck her head to avoid his eyes. He attacked her viciously in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and yet, it seemed to her that his very vitriol was evidence of the change in his feelings.

Hermione had been terrified to attend the first Defense class of the new term. Snape had so unbalanced her in his office, first with his angry questioning and then with the look that he had given her, that naked vulnerability, and the way that he had said her name, that she had no idea what to expect from him. She feigned bravery, entering the classroom before the others and taking her usual seat. She did not fidget, nor pretend interest in her textbook, but sat calmly and quietly in her seat, waiting for class to begin.

The topic of the day's class had been Concealment Charms, at which, of course, she excelled. As the other students struggled to Disillusion themselves, she rendered herself invisible and crept quietly around the Gryffindors, whispering advice.

She had just sidled up behind Neville when Snape's voice rang out clearly across the classroom. "Miss Granger!"

Her head snapped up, though no one in the class could see it. She took a guilty step away from Neville.

Snape crossed the room in a predatory stance, and Neville cowed and began to back away. "Who were you speaking with, just now?"

Neville stammered that he hadn't been speaking with anyone, but Snape had already brushed past him, striding toward the place where Hermione was now standing. She began to move, ducking quickly down an aisle, heading toward the Slytherin tables, but he turned as she did, seeming to follow her every move.

"What good is invisibility, Miss Granger, if you make it obvious where you are?"

Hermione smiled to herself. He was using his sense of her to track her movements, making an example of her by using something of which only the two of them could possibly be aware. He would humiliate her, yes, just as he had to do. But he would do it by acknowledging this thing between them.

"*Finite Incantatem!*" he said, pointing his wand at what must have looked like empty space. When she suddenly appeared before them, the Slytherins chuckled nastily.

"Disillusionment Charms are useless if you carelessly forecast your position," he drawled. "You must be silent; you must be stealthy. Above all, you must be subtle. Which makes it a rather poor choice for Gryffindors, no matter how hard they have *studied* the spell."

Hermione knew he was goading her, perhaps hoping that she would take the bait and earn herself detention. He Disillusioned several students--herself, Malfoy, and Neville among them--and set them to the task of finding one another. No one exhibited the least aptitude for tracking, Hermione included. Instead there was a great deal of knocking about, tripping over things and suddenly slamming into invisible people, and Hermione recalled something that Dumbledore had once said to Harry, back in their first year: *Strange how nearsighted being invisible can make you.* Still, the Disillusioned Defense professor had no trouble finding her, and she him, again and again. Sometimes he simply brushed her sleeve with his hand as he passed her. Several times he jabbed her with his wand, and once, one heart-stopping time, he seized a fistful of her hair. Her blood had pounded in her ears then, and she'd had to fight the urge grasp his arm and pull him toward her. But then he released her with a tiny shove, and she'd returned to searching for tell-tale signs of a Disillusioned person: a parchment rolling in a breeze seemingly caused by nothing, the scrape of a chair where there should have been none.

Snape swept the room with a finale *Finite Incantatem*, which revealed a number of sheepish students in various perches throughout the room. Neville was standing atop the Gryffindor table, looking both mortified and fearful, and Hermione, who had been lurking in a corner, crossed quickly to Ron and Harry.

"I suppose it's difficult to cheat, Miss Granger, when you cannot see your companions," Snape drawled. "Longbottom, do come down from that table. I shudder to think what will become of you outside these walls."

Hermione held her hand out to Neville, who clambered down from the table gracelessly, to the further amusement of the Slytherins.

"Contain yourself, Draco," Snape said rather unexpectedly. "Wasn't that you who fell over a chair? Funny, I hadn't noticed the furniture becoming invisible as well."

Hermione suppressed her smile, but the rest of the Gryffindors did not. Harry looked positively elated.

"Troubling," Snape said. "Troubling, indeed. Your NEWTs approach, and more important still, there is a war on. Yet the lot of you treat your own survival so carelessly." He swept across the room, robes billowing self-importantly, and Hermione did struggle not to smile then. The things which had most frightened her about him now seemed obvious and easy. He took a sharp turn, and she lost sight of him for a moment, imagining him practicing that intimidating swish of fabric. Suddenly, she was aware that he was near her, far too near her to be in public, and she snapped to attention just as he seized her from behind and drew his wand to her throat.

"What will you do now, Miss Granger?"

His left arm held her firmly, pinning hers to her side. She still had some range of motion with her wand arm, however *Careless*, she thought, though he must have planned it that way.

"Let her go," Harry said, all amusement having vanished from his face. He took a step toward Snape.

"Temper, Potter."

Hermione looked at the determination she saw in Harry's face. No matter what Snape had insinuated, Harry took this seriously. He looked as she imagined he would if she were really held by a Death Eater before him. She felt two things in almost equal measure. First was a surge of love for Harry. He would fight, would stand up to anything, before he would see her harmed. Whatever they were about to embark upon, she would be safe with him. The second was fury that he could not see what Snape was providing him. Here, in total safety, he had the opportunity to think about how to respond should one of them be captured. Snape was training him as surely as he had trained her through the winter. Why was he so blinded by a carefully tailored robe and a sneer?

Hermione turned her right arm slightly, adjusting her wand minutely in her grasp as Harry raised his.

"Let her go," he repeated.

"Take another step, and I'll hex her."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?" Snape dug his wand rather painfully into her neck.

"*Expe--*"

"Harry, no! Expelliarmus would disarm me, too."

"*Accio Sn--*"

"Wordless, Harry, or not at all! He will kill me before you get the spell out!"

"Silence, Miss Granger."

She twitched her wand upward, thinking, *Stupefy!* and knew she'd hit her target when Snape froze around her. She eased herself out of his grasp and considered whether or not she should take his wand. This was only an exercise, of course, and he'd be furious if she disarmed him in front of his class... but hadn't the point been to treat this as if it were real? She slipped his wand from his fist before releasing him from the spell.

Snape blinked twice as he seemed to take stock of the situation. Quietly, so terribly quietly, he said, "My wand, if you *please*," holding out his palm implacably. She placed his wand in his hand, feeling suddenly short of breath. She waited for the deduction of house points and the detention that were sure to follow.

"I could have killed you three times over in the time it took you to shout instructions to your... friend."

She swallowed. He was right, of course, but it had been good practice. She only hoped Harry had learned something. She glanced over at him; he was all but quaking with rage.

"Harry," she began, but he was already advancing on Snape, wand raised. "Harry, stop!"

"How dare you?" he thundered. "This is Defense *Against* the Dark Arts, if you hadn't noticed! You have no right--"

"Harry!"

"No, by all means, continue, Potter. I have no right... to what?"

"To touch her!" Harry screamed, and Hermione flinched from his words, imagining how they must have sounded to Snape.

Snape, however, seemed unfazed. "Oh, I assure you, I have every right," he purred. "Fifty points from Gryffindor for your outburst, Potter. And I hope you can think of a better *defense* when it's your true enemies you are up against."

Fortunately, class ended, and Hermione managed to drag Harry from the dungeons.

"Digusting, greasy *bastard!*" Harry fumed as they climbed the huge marble staircase.

"Are you all right, Hermione?" Ron asked.

"I'm fine," she snapped. "He didn't hurt me. He was teaching."

"You call that teaching? He was terrorizing you! I'm going to Dumbledore. He can't get away with--"

"So, it doesn't matter how I felt about it? You get to tell me that I was terrorized? I'm grateful for what he did today, and you should be, too."

"Grateful?" Ron said. "Are you mental? Why should we be grateful?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps because he gave us the opportunity to imagine what we might actually *do* if one of us were captured? Because he showed me how to think clearly and use distraction to my benefit, even when I was afraid? What on earth should I feel grateful for?" She shot forward several steps, and the boys had to hurry to keep up with her.

"Yes, but if he'd *said* that then we might have--" Ron began.

"Do you imagine that Lucius Malfoy or Bellatrix Lestrange will take the time to warn you first? Mr Weasley, do pay attention, for I'm about to take your little friend prisoner. Whatever will you do?"

"You sound like him," Harry said with disgust.

The two of them could just bugger off. She was long past the point where she would take being compared to Snape as an insult.

"Good! I'm glad you think so, since he's the only person around here who is actually concerned about survival. Abstinence!" she yelled at the Fat Lady, who winced at her tone.

"Look, Hermione," Harry began.

"No, you look. You can hate him all you want to, Harry. You can call him names, and you can believe he's a traitor, and whatever else it is you need to do to keep from thinking about your real enemy. But I'm going to listen to him, and I'm going to learn from him. And we'll see who eats their words."

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Things were chilly between her and Harry and Ron for several weeks. They still took their meals together, still sat together in their classes, and Hermione continued her round-the-clock search for information about Horcruxes, but a line had been drawn, and though none of them mentioned it again, they all knew that she stood on the opposite side of it.

The morning of Ron's birthday dawned dark and chilly, and Hermione rolled over in bed and made the barely conscious decision to sleep in. It was Saturday, and she'd been up until three a.m. searching the Restricted Section for mention of Horcruxes. Harry'd had no luck tricking Professor Slughorn in giving him the memory, mostly, Hermione thought, because he had been idiot enough to follow Ron's advice on the subject, and she was more than a little annoyed, as his inability to get the memory simply meant more late nights for her. Surely, they could survive breakfast without her. She'd just give Ron his present at lunch.

She snuggled deeper into her bedding and reached out with her mind for the lovely dream she'd been having. In it, she'd been dueling with Snape, and just as she'd raised her wand to hex him, he'd swept her into his arms and....

Her ring began to burn. *Fuck.* She wrenched the cirlet from her finger and peered blearily into it.

*Hospital Wing.*

Hermione was out of bed in an instant, snatching up yesterday's jeans and stepping into them, jamming her shoes onto her feet. *Oh, no. Oh, please, God, no.* She threw on her robes as she raced down the stairs, tearing through the common room and diving through the portrait hole, only to find herself slamming smack into a familiar black waistcoat.

Snape took her firmly in both hands and set her on her feet. "Miss Granger," he said. "You look a fright."

"What? I thought--" She stopped herself. "What do you mean, *Hospital Wing?*?" she hissed furiously.

"Weasley," he said shortly. "Poison. I realized I might have given you the wrong idea, so I came--"

"What happened? Is he all right?"

"I don't know the details, but he is stable at this time. Potter apparently learned *something* I tried to teach him and forced a bezoar down his throat. Madam Pomfrey is attending to him. I thought you would want to know."

"Yes, of course. Thank you."

She hurried toward the Hospital Wing, and Snape walked alongside her. "Sir, do you think that you had better--"

He looked at her oddly. "Indeed. I apologize for frightening you."

"No, don't apologize. I'm very grateful."

He said nothing but turned sharply down the next corridor. Well, that had been unfortunate. She hadn't meant... But it couldn't be helped. She could not waste time running after Snape with Ron poisoned. Her mind raced. Where could he have encountered poison? Her mind strayed involuntarily to Draco... if Snape was right, and Draco had been involved in the Katie Bell incident... She shoved the thought from her mind. Double blind. But if Ron were in danger, surely he wouldn't expect her not to--

Hermione burst into the Hospital Wing, where she found the Weasleys and Harry clustered around Ron's bedside.

"What's happened? I came as soon as I heard!" Belatedly, she realized that she could not tell anyone where she'd heard the news, but fortunately, no one questioned her.

She took a seat beside Harry and listened intently as he recited, for surely the hundredth time, his story, beginning with the Chocolate Cauldrons (*warned you!* she couldn't help interjecting) and taking Ron to Slughorn's office. She had been about to make a snide comment about the inability of the Half-Blood Prince to help in brewing antidotes, but she caught herself when she realized that without that blasted Potions book, Harry would have never known how to save Ron's life. She settled on an ambivalent prayer of thanks to the Prince, whoever he was.

"But he'll be all right?" Hermione asked as Harry finished the story.

"Professor Slughorn and Madam Pomfrey think so," Harry said. *'He'll have to stay a week or so... keep taking essence of rue...'*

Hermione burst into tears. Her heart was still racing, and this was all simply too much. How had she become so distant from her friends? Looking back, she could see how these events had piled on one another--Romilda and those spiked chocolates, the cursed necklace, Ron's birthday, the Half-Blood Prince's book--everything made a horrible kind of sense to her still sleep-addled and guilty mind. How could she have not seen this coming? Would it have happened if she'd woken on time and gone to breakfast? Why hadn't she been looking out for them lately? She'd just abandoned them to their foolish tracking of Malfoy! And the worst thing, the thing she could barely admit to herself, was how much more frightened she had been when she'd thought it was Snape in the Hospital Wing. Was she heartless? Her own best friend was lying here unconscious, and still she felt fretful over her accidental slight of Snape in the hallway. What was wrong with her?

Harry awkwardly put an arm around her, clearly believing that she was overcome with worry for Ron. She sobbed harder, hating her traitorous mind and her foolish heart. She had always been the sensible one. She didn't suffer flights of fancy; she didn't run off half cocked like Ron and Harry did; she believed in logic and reason and study. She *prioritized*. And yet, suddenly, it seemed that her priorities had become tangled and confused by a sneering, cynical man twice her age, who half the time infuriated her and spent the other half proving to her, over and over again, in such myriad ways, that despite her youth, her house, her disposition--despite everything, he cared for her.

Ginny came round the bed and wrapped her arms around Hermione from the other side. How was it possible to hate herself so fiercely and to feel so perversely elated at the same time? She allowed herself to sink into her friends' arms and to cry for everything that was building inside her. Everyone here, everyone she loved, was in, to quote Mrs Weasley's clock, mortal peril. Ron's poisoning was surely only the beginning of the horrors they would face. Before long, she knew, she, Ron and Harry would leave Hogwarts and the comforts even of the Hospital Wing. Perhaps the next time one of them was injured, it would be she tending their wounds. It was enough to drive anyone crazy with terror and self-doubt. And yet, she drew comfort from Harry's and Ginny's embrace and more comfort still in the thought of the man who was teaching her to survive. If they made it, they would have Snape to thank. But what of his survival? Who would tend his wounds, worry at his bedside? When he returned to the Death Eaters, who would even know or care if he was in trouble?

"He'll be all right, Hermione," Harry whispered.

She snuffled a final time and raised herself upright once more. "I hope so," she said, though it was not Ron she was thinking of.

## Chapter Fourteen

*Chapter 14 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Thank you to JKR for letting me play in the Potterverse, and thank you to Shellsnapelover for her faithful betaing of this story. This chapter owes a great deal to Sampdoria, whose comment on an earlier chapter inspired it, and to my husband, who listened patiently as I coaxed it into being.

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When the mark burned, Snape had known that it was not an interrogation he was being summoned for. There had been pain, yes, the flash of something foreign and evil in his skin, but it had been undercut by a tingle--a tingle of pleasure that promised something very different. He disliked answering this particular type of summons, but he felt that, having displeased the Dark Lord so recently, it would be wise to capitulate. Therefore, he hastened to his chambers and chose his attire carefully: his best dress robes, in a rich forest green, hidden by his Death Eater cloak, and, of course, the mask, which he transfigured and stored in the pocket of his cloak. He quickly penned a note to Dumbledore explaining his whereabouts and froze, considering whether or not he should contact Miss Granger.

There was a part of him that wished to test their newfound bond. If he told her where he was going, would he find her waiting in his chambers when he returned? Would he be able to take the comfort and strength she offered if he could force her to prove, once again, that she cared? He hesitated with his wand raised. He knew he would not be tortured, at least not in the manner to which he was accustomed. It would be wrong to worry her, particularly when he had no idea when he might return. These sorts of gatherings often lasted all night. Yet, he seemed to be unable to help himself.

*Summoned*, he sent and set out for the Apparition point.

He was vaguely disappointed when there was no reply, though he knew that she was likely in the same room full of people where he'd left her hours before. He checked the ring once more before leaving, though there had been no telling burn, donned the mask, and Apparated.

He arrived in a room of startling scale. The ceilings seemed inches from the heavens, and the heavy stone walls were cloaked in massive, intricately embroidered tapestries. Soft scone light flickered from every wall, and the room was saturated with noise and scent. He could smell roasted fowl, cinnamon, simmering vegetables, and the heady scent of rich, red wine. Strains of music permeated the air, though he could not see the band through the throng of witches and wizards that filled the room.

Narcissa Malfoy, resplendent in a deep sapphire gown, approached him instantly. She looked better than he had seen her in some time, certainly much better than she had appeared during their meeting at Spinner's End. Her hair was bright and shining, and her skin luminous. However, there was something in her face that made him suspect that serious charm work had gone in to her appearance that day. Her eyes looked heavy and shuttered, as if she'd recently had troubling news.

"Severus, darling. So glad you could make it. Please, let me take your cloak."

So, he was in Malfoy Manor, as he had suspected. "Narcissa," he said as he handed her the garment. "You look splendid, as usual. Tell me, to what do we owe your gracious hospitality?"

She blushed prettily. It never ceased to amaze him the way that the purebloods clung to the old ways, the old manners, in the face of everything. Her husband sat

imprisoned in Azkaban, her teenaged son shackled with a duty much too large even for a full grown wizard, and yet Narcissa Malfoy flirted with him in her ballroom. He had grudging respect for her courage.

"It seems Draco has had a breakthrough," she said. "I'm sure you've had a hand in it, Severus. I'll always be in your debt."

"Nonsense," he replied. "Draco has been a credit to his family. Self-sufficient, resourceful... I'm pleased to hear that the plan is drawing to completion."

"I'm sure. Your teaching days are numbered, are they not? Will you take up the Headmaster's position?"

"I will do as the Dark Lord requests."

"Of course, my dear. Do have something to eat," she said as a house-elf passed, bearing hors d'oeuvres.

He took a glazed fig topped with mascarpone and wrapped in prosciutto. "Fascinating," he said, inspecting the item dubiously before he ate it. "And delicious. Though I'd expect nothing less."

She gave him a modest smile before slipping her arm through his. "You'll want to pay your respects, of course," she said and led him through the crowd.

The Dark Lord sat in an oversized chair, perhaps more properly termed a throne, at the far end of the ballroom. Inwardly, Snape smirked at the wizard's pomp and pageantry, but he had to admit that there was something regal in the atmosphere of the room. As he and Narcissa passed, the other Death Eaters respectfully stepped aside to make room for them. He felt the heavy brocaded silk of his robes sweeping the stone floor as he walked, and Narcissa's gown fluttered gently with her movements. He knew they must look striking, for he saw jealousy in the faces of some of the guests, both male and female. There was something gratifying in the reverence in which the other Death Eaters held him. Oh, he knew there were some, like Bellatrix, who still suspected him, but they were allowed to make no show of it here. Here, he was Severus Snape, trusted spy of the Dark Lord. Here, he had surpassed the respect that money could buy, ascending above Lucius Malfoy—even in his own home, with the man's wife on his arm—to the right hand of Lord Voldemort himself. It was so different from the gatherings of the Light, in which, he was relegated to the back of the room, ignored. When dinners were served, he was always the last to be invited to eat. No one greeted him, nor stepped aside to let him pass. He slunk when he attended Order meetings. There was no other word for it. But here—here, he strode.

Snape fell to his knees before the Dark Lord.

"Severus. I'm so pleased you could attend."

"As am I, my Lord. There has been a flap at the castle. The Weasley boy has been poisoned. All are occupied with him, so I was able to slip away unnoticed."

"Poisoned, you said?"

"Indeed, my Lord. I suspect an... accident. But let us not dwell upon that now. This is a time for celebration! Narcissa tells me that we've received good news."

"Ah, but surely you already knew of Draco's success. Now that he has the cabinet in place, we wait only for Dumbledore's absence. Your information on his whereabouts and customs was most helpful. Draco has secured a common barmaid to alert us when the Headmaster has left the castle."

"Excellent, my Lord," Snape said. *Cabinet?*

"Quite. And now, Severus, it seems the witches have lined up to dance with you. I trust you will not disappoint them."

"Whatever pleases my Lord," Snape said, turning and bowing to Narcissa who still stood to his right. He extended his hand, and she placed her dainty one in it, consenting to be led to the dance floor.

"Bellatrix is ashamed of the way she treated you this summer," Narcissa said as he led her in a slow waltz.

"Tell her to think nothing of it. I never do," he replied.

"She will be most relieved to hear that, Severus. Perhaps if you danced with her, it would ease her mind?"

"Certainly. To dance with both of the Black sisters in one evening..." he said. "You'll spoil me, Narcissa. How is Lucius?"

He was not sure if he had imagined it, but she seemed to stiffen briefly at his words. "He is as well as one can be in Azkaban."

"I apologize, my dear. I don't mean to cause you distress."

"No, Severus, you were quite right to ask after him, and I will be sure to pass on your good wishes. It's just... I don't wish to think about Lucius today," she said, and once again, he was unsure if he was imagining things, or if Narcissa Malfoy had just tucked herself more firmly into his arms.

As they danced, Snape looked at the women around him, remembering them as they had been at seventeen, most of them newly graduated from Hogwarts: young, wealthy, sophisticated, ambitious. Bellatrix Black with her fall of shining black hair and her arrogant laugh; Maia Selwynn, who had been bookish and sullen in school but blossomed into a kind of austere radiance after she'd joined the Death Eaters; Delphine Rosier nee Prewett, who had danced so beautifully; Marigold Parkinson, whose long-lashed eyes and deep pocketbook had inspired the men around her to ever more ridiculous feats.

It had seemed, then, that money must create beauty, for there was never a ball that was not filled with delicate, privileged, silken-clad women, each of them seemingly more lovely than the last. He looked from face to face. He could have had any one he'd wanted; he'd needed only to say the word, so powerful he was, already, when he had joined. But he'd had eyes for no one but Lily. Somehow, despite the startling, garish red of her hair and her cheap Muggle clothes, she had made the rest of them look like painted harlots.

The song came to a close, and Snape released a rather reluctant Narcissa from his arms. Bellatrix stepped into view, and he approached her, once again extending his hand.

"Bella," he said warmly.

"Severus."

"Would you care to dance?"

"Why, thank you. It would be a pleasure." And she did seem a bit contrite.

As Bellatrix stepped into his arms, he was struck by how thin she was. There was, even yet, a kind of frantic energy about her, a grace that was born into her blood, but her cheekbones protruded startlingly and her hair... It caused him actual pain to look on it. So clearly, he remembered her hair. It had been like ink tinged silk. Now, it was shot through with wiry white and clearly charmed into a shadow of its former sleek beauty. Bellatrix was only eight years his senior, but the years had taken their toll on her. Though he supposed they had on him, as well. Azkaban was written all over her face.

Back in the early days, there had been rumours that paired him with this witch or that. Bella herself had been one of his supposed paramours before she married Rodolphus. It had been laughable, really. Snape hadn't had the slightest shred of interest in any of them. What he craved could not be found in this room, now or then. All he'd ever desired, from his earliest memory, was to be wanted. Not to be desired, nor needed, though he supposed those things would be pleasant if they followed, but

simply to be wanted. Simply to have someone choose him, over and over, for no better reason than that he was himself. The women in this room did not know how to judge a man by anything but his blood, his status, or his account at Gringotts. They were well-bred witches of a very particular kind. Love matches were not made here, but alliances.

He'd come to Voldemort like an open wound when Lily had married Potter. Up until the day of their marriage, he'd still believed he could bring her around. They'd had so much history together, and to him, it seemed so clear that she could provide what he needed most. What did Lily Evans care if he was poor, if he was ugly, if he was half-blooded? Lily had known him since he'd been an awkward, bumbling child in his mismatched Muggle clothes. If anyone could have seen beyond his flaws, it would have had to have been Lily, with her brave Gryffindor heart and the way she seemed to bring out what was truly fine in a person. But to have chosen *Potter*. Even thinking of the man brought a nasty taste to his mouth. He had never understood what it was that had made the prat so alluring to her. He saw no bravery, no honesty, no warmth. None of the things that he saw in Lily. When he thought of Potter, he saw a rich and spoiled brat, blessed from birth with good looks, gold and athleticism. Potter had never worked at school, never held a job; he had no flair for anything but pranks and Quidditch. He was just like the witches Snape danced with this evening: decorative and ultimately insubstantial. He'd thought Lily worth so much more than that. Frankly, he'd thought himself worth more than that.

So, he had come to Voldemort at last, prepared to succeed beyond anyone's wildest dreams, prepared to show her exactly what she had given up. With his intellect and the Dark Lord's power, what could be denied him?

"Severus," Bella said, startling him from his reverie. "You've hardly said a word to me."

"Forgive me, Bella," he purred. "I was simply remembering the old days. I confess you are a vision this evening."

She laughed her cold, tinkling laugh. "Ah, but those days are gone, old friend. It is time to embrace the new. Peregrine has been watching you all evening. Why do you waste your time dancing with Cissy and me? We're just old matrons now." Peregrine Lestrangle, Bellatrix's niece was, in fact, gazing on him with an appreciative eye. She was nineteen and recently graduated from Durmstrang.

"She is lovely, I admit, but nothing compared to you."

"You old flatterer, Sevy," she said. The song ended. "Do come and talk to Rodolphus. He's been just itching to consult with you about a potion, but we can hardly pop by Hogwarts, now, can we?"

Snape allowed himself to be led over to a knot of wizards who stood about with easy grace, sipping Firewhisky from Lucius Malfoy's etched crystal tumblers. One would never imagine, looking at them, that they were members of a dark and sinister society, ruled by fear. It was hard to picture any one of them, so well dressed and mannered, writhing under the Cruciatius or naked and begging, trying to escape that foul whip. "Avery, Gibbon, Lestrangle," he said.

"Snape!" Avery exclaimed, squeezing his arm in welcome. "Just the man we were hoping to see. You've been missed, friend."

"Gentlemen, it is a pleasure to see you. I'm afraid my assignment gives me little time for visiting. However, I think of you often. I, too, have missed our little... excursions."

Rodolphus chuckled nastily. "I'm sure you do, shut up in that castle all year. How is old Dumbly?"

"From what I hear, if he is well, he shall not long be," Snape answered.

The four men laughed together as Bellatrix drifted off into the company of Narcissa, Peregrine and Marigold. Peregrine, in her youth, stood out like a hothouse flower.

Yes, he had come to seize a bride and what fortune there was to be had. He looked appraisingly over the wizards, ostensibly his friends, around him. Of the three of them, only Lestrangle had been wealthy before joining the Dark Lord. His plan had not been an outlandish one. And yet, he had found himself unable to commit to anyone. There had been dalliances, but nothing that ever satisfied him in a way that made him want to make the situation permanent. He had waited. But for what?

For what? Was it possible that he was still waiting, still hoping that there was more to life than fear? For no one in this room truly liked him, truly wanted him. They simply admired his power and feared his wrath. Beneath the beautiful surface, this was no different from an Order meeting, and if they could have, they would have shunned him. Suddenly, it seemed quite clear to him that he could cross the room, ask Peregrine to dance, court her, ally himself to the strongest family of purebloods in the current wizarding world, and rise even higher in the Dark Lord's ranks. He could continue in his plan to aid Malfoy and secure himself a home like this one. He could even make cuckolds of the men around him, and they would be powerless to retaliate. He could have all this and more. The chance had not yet passed him by.

Gibbon guffawed, and Snape was forced, momentarily, to take part in a discussion of Dumbledore's sexual preferences.

"He likes the little ones, doesn't he, Snape? Tell us the truth, old boy. Does the Headmaster assign extra lessons to the first-year girls?"

"Rather the first-year boys," he replied, squashing the look of distaste that threatened to overtake his features. What a disgusting conversation. The men around him exploded with laughter.

"The first-year boys!" Avery wheezed, nearly clutching his sides in his mirth. "Oh, Snape, you're just the same. Remember when we used to--"

But Snape had no interest in Avery's recollections, as Peregrine was coming toward him.

"Master Snape," she said.

"Please, my dear, you must call me Severus, or I shall feel a very old man, indeed."

"Severus, then," she said graciously. "I don't flatter myself that you'll remember me, but--"

"Not remember Peregrine Lestrangle? That would be like forgetting the sunlight. How are you this evening?"

"Well, sir. And you?"

"Quite well, now that I am talking to you."

She blushed and looked away. "Would you like to dance, Miss Lestrangle?"

"Oh, do call me Peregrine, Severus. And that would be lovely."

He swept her onto the floor in a swirl of her pale green robes and was suddenly reminded of a very different young witch in green whom he had recently led onto a dance floor.

"So you teach at Hogwarts," she was saying.

"I do. A humble occupation."

"Far from it! I've just graduated from Durmstrang. I have the utmost respect for teachers. How... powerful, to shape young minds."

"Though I am sure you excelled in all you undertook, my dear, I assure you that the average student has no wish to be shaped, as you say."

She laughed appreciatively. "Perhaps not. But I am given to understand that you are a very talented Potions master."

"You flatter me, my dear. I simply enjoy the art."

"Ah, handsome and modest, too."

Inwardly, he flinched. Lies, all of it. Had she said 'accomplished,' or 'powerful,' or even, 'striking,' he might have been willing to continue the charade for another dance. But this girl had not a whit of sense about her. What sort of fool did she take him for? He had no interest in female blandishments. Nor, to be honest, any interest in young Peregrine LeStrange, or in a house like this, or in serving any master for the rest of his pitiable existence. What would he do with such a life? Snivelling for a living... coming home to a woman with whom he had to be polite? He could not imagine why anyone would want such a thing. If he were honest, what he truly wanted was to get back to Hogwarts and to find Miss Granger waiting for him in his chambers, to wash the stench of expensive perfumes from his skin and breathe in the pure smell of her hair.

"Severus? I do hope I haven't offended you."

"How could I be offended by praise from such a lovely girl as yourself," he said, relieved to note that the music was ending.

"Would you see me back to my father's house?" she inquired. "I'm afraid the champagne has given me a headache, and I'm loath to travel alone during these uncertain times."

"As lovely as that sounds, I must be heading back to Hogwarts," he said, leading her back to the cluster of women from which she had come. "Perhaps young Goyle?"

Releasing her, he took Narcissa's hand in his and raised it to his lips. "Narcissa, my dear, it has been a pleasure."

"But, Severus, are you leaving so soon? The guest of honor has not yet arrived!"

"I shall give Draco all my best wishes back at the school. As I told our Lord, I left in the midst of a bit of a keruffle. Once the confusion dies down, I shall be missed. But I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to enjoy your beautiful home and your lovely face. Give my best to Lucius. And take care, my dear."

"And you, Severus. I will not forget--"

"Hush, Narcissa. It is nothing."

He took his leave of the Dark Lord, assuring him that they would soon be meeting under many such celebratory circumstances, and Disapparated.

Once on the Hogwarts grounds, the wind bit at him, and he wrapped his cloak around him more tightly. The robes, though heavy, were no match for a March gale. He moved stealthily through the castle, not wishing to be questioned about his attire, but feeling that he must inform the Headmaster immediately that Draco seemed nearer to completing his plan, whatever it might be. He entered the spiral stairway into Dumbledore's office, grateful that he had seen no students on the way. He was about to raise his hand to knock when the hairs rose on the back of his neck.

Someone was there with him. He took a deep breath, but his senses were numbed by the assault of so many heavy perfumes. Still, though, he thought he felt...

"Miss Granger?" Had she come for him after all?

Her voice was choked with tears, but her anger cut through sharply. "Why? Why have I been able to see the ring *all day*?"

## Chapter Fifteen

*Chapter 15 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Some of Dumbledore's dialogue was inspired by his discussion with Harry concerning Slughorn's memory in HBP. Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. Many thanks to Irishredlass, whose thought-provoking discussions on the nature of Snape's emotional self inspired parts of this chapter, RedOrchid who kept me from being schmalzty, and, of course, all my love to Shellsnapelover, who not only betas this story with speed and grace, but made a beautiful piece of art to go with this chapter. [See it here.](#)

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*Merlin's fucking pants. The ring.* Snape did not hesitate, but pocketed his wand and reached out blindly with both hands. As soon as he had found her, he seized her and crushed his lips to hers in a fierce and possessive kiss.

"Miss Granger, I *will* explain. But I must see the Headmaster immediately. Go to my chambers and wait for me there."

"I don't know how to get there without the Floo," she said, and her voice was breathless but much calmer. "Parvati and Lavender--"

"My office--you can Floo from there."

"Of course," she said. "I don't know what I was--"

"Go."

He heard the swish of her robes and the clatter of her feet as she descended the stairwell. He waited for a moment for his heartbeat to slow and then knocked firmly at the door.

"I wondered when you might get around to coming in," Dumbledore said as he entered.

*Bugger it all to Hades and back. How much had he heard?*

"Forgive me, Albus," he said coldly. "The rings you charmed for my wife and myself occasionally have... unforeseen consequences."

"Consequences, Severus? Surely, you are not *committing* yourself to the girl?"

Snape took a deep breath before replying. Clearly, his performance was not yet finished for the day.

"Committing myself? You mean beyond the marriage that you so hastily arranged?"

"Your marriage, as you well know, is part of a plan--a plan made in wartime. I do not want you forming attachments that will confuse your loyalties. Your duty is to Lily Potter's son."

Lily Potter's son. Those eyes... He thought of Lily as he had first known her. The feisty witch on the playground with the flashing green eyes, the way the sun danced in her hair as if it had traveled light years just to take up residence there. Lily, gone. Lily, ended, and with her all the hope he'd had that someone might truly see him... And yet, it seemed that her memory had been handled a time too many, and she slipped like porcelain from his fingers and shattered. Why was he living for the memory of a woman who had never wanted him? It was the hope he had treasured, not the witch who had chosen so foolishly. He stared at Dumbledore. The man had a trace of smugness around his mouth, as if he had tasted his victory and found it sweet.

But hope was not gone. Hope sat in his living room, waiting for the man who had been chosen for her, and whom she'd chosen against all reason. Yes, he knew where his duty lay, and there the Headmaster was correct. His duty was to protect Potter, to see that he lived, to see that he triumphed. For if he could ensure that Voldemort was destroyed, he could give his fierce, Muggle-born wife back all her choices.

"I assure you, I understand my loyalties perfectly, Albus."

"Good. I'm pleased to hear it. Now, on to more pressing matters. Your note said you expected a celebration. What was Voldemort celebrating?"

"It seems that Malfoy has become assured of success. The Dark Lord spoke of a cabinet being in place."

"A cabinet?"

"I do not know. Malfoy still refuses to divulge his plan."

Dumbledore looked at him steadily. "And you feel you have done everything possible, used all your considerable skills, to pry this information from him?"

Snape stared back, unwilling to be cowed. "Alienating the boy by pushing him too hard seems unwise. He is past the breaking point already. He has become dangerous."

"My point exactly. How many students will suffer before you intercede? What if it had been Miss Granger in the Hospital Wing today?"

Did the bastard honestly think he had not considered that exact possibility? When the message had come that a Gryffindor had been poisoned, he had been truly afraid for the first time in years. Suddenly, it seemed, he had so much to lose.

"Fortunately for the students," Snape said, cocking an eyebrow, "the conclusion of our plan seems to be drawing near. The Dark Lord insists that your absence from the school is all that they wait for."

"At least that gives us a modicum of control."

"Indeed."

"Very well, Severus. Be ready. I shall contact you before I leave the school for any reason." Dumbledore looked unruffled, but his words brought home the truth of what he had promised to do.

"Albus--" Despite his anger, despite everything, he could not imagine how he would bring himself to kill the man who had saved him, who had offered him this final chance.

"You know what must be done."

Snape stood and turned quickly away. "As you wish."

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She was on the couch again when he stepped through the Floo, though this time she was awake, staring blankly into the flames. She was not crying; yet now that she was visible, he could see the distress he had caused her. Her eyes were swollen and puffy, and her skin was ashen.

"Miss Granger," he said, and she looked at him, as she so often did, with a nakedness that he could hardly bear. He felt sure he had never given anyone such a look, never laid so much of himself open.

She said nothing, but simply stared at him, waiting, he supposed, for an explanation. But what explanation was there to give? *Today, I visited my old friends. They looked a bit the worse for wear, to tell you the truth. They saw power in me, wholeness in me, and they wanted it. But all I wanted was you.*

"I was summoned to Voldemort, as you know," he said, and he saw the attention leap into her eyes. "It was a celebration of sorts. They expect... a breakthrough."

She remained completely still, watching him.

"There was music and food. Everyone wore their best robes, put on their best faces. The years have cost the Death Eaters their glamour, as I'm sure you can imagine. But today, everyone tried to look... powerful."

Nothing. She stared at him implacably. *What did she want him to say?*

"I danced, Hermione. That is all. I danced with women who saw, somehow, that I have not yet been broken--who saw life left in me, and who wanted it."

"Just dancing?" Her voice was harsh and grating as it cut across his.

"Just dancing," he agreed. She took a very deep, shuddering breath that seemed to drive out whatever anguish was left inside her.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I am unhurt," he said, though that was not precisely what she'd asked.

She stood and approached him tentatively. Her delicate hand reached out and fingered the fabric of his sleeve.

"You look," she said, considering, and he braced himself, "striking."

He closed his eyes. How could he do this, knowing what was to come? He pulled away from her.

"There are things we need to discuss. Wait here."

He left the room for his laboratory. His chest felt crushed. There would never be another opportunity; he was sure of it. He could have let her touch him. He could have...

But how many opportunities would there be to give her what she needed to carry out this godforsaken plan? The timing was ideal; now, he would pass her the potion.

Returning with a slim, unmarked phial, he held it out to her. "This is Vita Secundus."

"Second Life," she breathed. "But, sir--Vita Secundus takes--"

"Years to brew. I began it in your third year, when Pettigrew returned. Dumbledore felt, quite rightly, that it was a sign of things to come."

"And you intend to use it on--"

"I intend for *you* to use it. For Potter, should it be required."

She stared at the phial in her hand. "For Harry."

"Indeed. For Potter and ***no one else***. No matter what. Is that clear?"

"But why me?"

"I would think that would be obvious. Because you will be with him. Only you will know when and if the time is right to administer it. The potion is only effective on wounds, magical or otherwise. It has no effect on--"

"The Killing Curse."

"Quite. I suspect that the Dark Lord will not wish to try the Killing Curse on Potter a second time. But if he is... mortally wounded... the Vita Secundus will save him. It can only be used once, Miss Granger. There is no Third Life. So, you must be absolutely certain."

She nodded. "Why are you giving it to me now?"

"The Dark Lord is celebrating. The time draws near."

"The time?"

"You recall, I'm sure, that we married for a reason," he said archly. She looked away.

"You're leaving," she said. It was not a question.

"You know that I must."

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you that."

"Fuck double blind! Why are you leaving?" She did not say, *Why are you leaving me?* but the question hung between them all the same.

"Because it is absolutely necessary."

She said nothing, but the tears returned to her eyes.

"You must keep the potion with you at all times. Be constantly aware. Potter *must* live. He must succeed."

"Succeed at what? Killing Voldemort? But how?"

"That is between Potter and the Headmaster."

"And me?"

"You know what your job is. Your job is to believe."

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Hermione used her wand to create a small, cushioned pocket in her robes and slipped the phial into it. Then she turned back to him and said firmly, "I can do that."

"Can you?"

"I can."

His eyes looked far away to her, as if he were remembering other promises, unkept.

"I will," she said, but still he stood stiffly, and his eyes did not return to her.

"Professor?"

Finally, he seemed to focus on her. "Not 'Professor.' Not anymore. Not here."

At his words, something warm and heavy coursed through her bloodstream. From the moment he had entered his chambers, she had longed to claim him, to wrench him back to her from the arms of whatever witches had held him that day. But more than that, now, she wanted to give him her final reassurance, to force from his eyes the look of defense and defeat.

She nodded, though she did not have the courage yet to say his name. Instead she reached for the buttons on his tailcoat, carefully unfastening them from the top down. "These are lovely robes," she said. "But they are Death Eater's robes. They don't belong here."

When she had finished unbuttoning his coat, she pulled back and waited. She knew it had not been a proper invitation; there was something too blatant, too intrinsically sexual, about disrobing to have been truly considered an invitation, but it had been the best she could come up with on short notice.

He eased the heavy, brocaded tailcoat over his shoulders, and something that had been wound tight in her relaxed. He had accepted. He might not yet have accepted her, not the way she had him anyway, but he had accepted the invitation.

"This needs to be hung," he said, and it did, of course, or the silk would crumple, but wasn't there magic for those sorts of things? He turned and strode into the bedroom, and understanding dawned over her turbulent thoughts. *Ah, yes. Right. It needed to be hung.* She followed silently, afraid that if he so much as noticed her breathing, he would throw her out.

She watched, unmoving, as he attended to his coat. His movements were slow and deliberate as he smoothed the fabric of the garment and hung it in his armoire. When

he turned back to her, he was unfastening his collar. He said nothing, but gazed at her steadily as he freed each button from its hole, setting his cufflinks on the top of his dresser. Hermione knew that he could do this with magic; a flick of his wand would see everything removed and carefully put away, but he did it by hand, with maddening slowness. She could not tear her eyes away from his fingers, those long, dexterous fingers, guiding and pushing, pulling and smoothing.

"Yes?" he asked, finally.

"I--yes," she said, rising from the pit of desire she had been wallowing in and finding enough presence of mind to begin removing her own robes. Something inside her tensed as she waited for him to ask what in Merlin's name she thought she was doing, but he said nothing.

She shrugged out of her robes, revealing the same day-old clothes she'd thrown on that morning when her ring had burned. Silently, she cursed herself *You've had all day. You couldn't have at least come up with something clean?* However, Snape's eyes did not appear to register her Muggle clothes, seeming to look beneath them, perhaps even beneath her skin.

He was naked from the waist up, and she drank in the sight of him as she crossed the room. His skin was almost translucent in contrast to the dark green of his trousers and the black of his hair. He looked to her like something new and tender, too precious ever to have been exposed to sunlight. And yet, there were the scars, which spoke a very different truth. Some were still pink and fresh, others somehow more shocking for their very whiteness, paler even than his skin. Suddenly, she realized that he was not undressing at a snail's pace to entice her but to give her time to reconsider. Did he think she would be disgusted by what she found here? She'd done this work herself. She reached out and traced one of the newer scars with her fingertips. The seam felt smooth and straight. Her wandwork had been good, and it pleased her to think that she'd done well by him. Beneath her fingers lay the measure of the man she had married. Harry wanted proof? Here was the proof. He stood between her and madness and had this to show for it.

She pressed her palms to his chest and looked up into his face. He stood rigidly, and his eyes remained cloaked against her. What? What was he waiting for? He stood there like a statue for her inspection, seeming to think that at any moment she would turn and run. Only the slightest hitch in his breathing told her that he knew she was there at all. She took a step back and reached for his hand, pressing it between both of hers. As she leaned down to touch her lips to his fingers, she understood. It was the Mark. She could just see it beneath the tangle of her curls that had fallen over his arm as she'd leaned in to kiss him. It was ugly, yes, an abomination on what should have been the unblemished expanse of his skin. But she'd been here before, hadn't she? There wasn't an inch of him she hadn't seen. Perhaps he thought it would remind her to doubt him. Perhaps he thought she couldn't forgive him for ever having chosen it. But whatever reasons he might have had for taking the cursed thing, she knew in her soul that he was not a Death Eater.

He flinched as she touched it and nearly jerked his hand from her grasp, but she'd been expecting that and held on for all she was worth. Keeping his left hand captured in hers, she traced the Mark with the fingers of her right hand. It was so dark, so jagged, that she had nearly expected it to be sunken into his skin, and she was a bit surprised to find that had her eyes been closed, she would not have known that it was there at all.

"Don't," he said brokenly, but she ignored him and pressed her lips to the hateful thing.

In an instant, he had twisted from her grip and, seizing her wrist in his hand, yanked her upright. He brought her arm up above her head and caught her other wrist, bringing it up to join the first. She was afraid, but she did not struggle. If she had pushed too far, then it was best to let him lash out and pay the price now, rather than suffer his brooding silence. If not...

Opening his fist to accommodate both her wrists, he reached down with his free hand and tugged her t-shirt up over her head. She ducked out of it, and he released her hands to let her free herself completely from the garment. But as soon as she had emerged, he flung it to the floor and recaptured her in his arms. He had pinned her arms to her sides in his unyielding grip and tugged her hair until her head tipped back, swooping in and taking her mouth with the same fierce possession that he had shown in the stairwell. It was a kiss that claimed her, that subsumed all reason, and forced her to admit with her lips and tongue and teeth that everything she had promised was true: *my blood, your blood; my home, your home; my life, your life.* She kissed him furiously, breathlessly, trying with all her might to force a new language into his mouth, to swear that she would choose him above all things, that she would believe.

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Kissing her was like tumbling into a tunnel that had no bottom. It went on and on, changing in texture from time to time, sometimes demanding and sometimes yielding, but always warm and wet and welcoming. He felt certain he could stand there kissing her for eternity, never needing anything but the tiniest gasp of air to sustain him, and yet, the needs of his body were becoming more urgent than ever. He took a cautious step forward, urging her backward with his body, and though it was awkward, at least they were in motion now. He continued until he felt the slight bump that indicated to him that she had just run up against the end of the bed.

A whole language seemed to be born out of their kiss, and as they stood there, at the precipice, they carried out a furious conversation. He made reckless demands of her, forcing her to swear with her mouth that she belonged only to him. He knew that time was running short in more ways than one. He would have her now, yes; and it would almost certainly be the only time before his hideous treachery drove her from him. And then, in all likelihood, he would be killed. But he would not die without this--to have, just once, been touched, accepted by someone... wanted by a woman whom he wanted in return. He knew that he should not--must not--do this. How would she feel, knowing that she had given herself to the man who would rip her world apart? And yet, he was powerless to stop himself. He pushed her gently, and she sank onto the mattress.

He followed her, urging her toward the head of the bed with his mouth and hands. He could feel the power they were creating between them; the air seemed heavy and electric with desire, and every place she touched him felt like it was being consumed from the inside by sweet flames. He had never known anything like this. He thought of their wedding night, a memory so often revisited, and yet, this was infinitely better. Her body reached for him so easily, so greedily. There was no debt here, no duty, no sacrifice. Her arousal had nothing to do with his manipulation of her body, but simply his presence. He wanted to commit her every breath to memory, to be able to remember later what it felt like to be so desired, but he found he had no wish to do anything but experience it.

He managed to tear his lips away from hers long enough to bend and suck her breast into his mouth. He drew greedily on her nipple, which had already furled tightly in response. She had arched her back, urging her breast against his lips, and her hands clutched spasmodically at his arms. He took the bud of her nipple between his teeth, flicking his tongue over it until she gasped and writhed against the sheets. He could feel her hands trying to force their way between their bodies, and only then did he realize that he was grinding himself against her leg like a schoolboy. She fumbled blindly with the buttons of his trousers, and he reluctantly released her nipple to aid her. Nudging her hands out of the way, he whipped the buttons open, already beginning to struggle free of the offending material. Belatedly, he recognized that his shoes were still on, and he kicked them off impatiently. There was nothing graceful about the two of them wriggling out of their clothes, but he found it almost frighteningly arousing.

Hermione was prising off her own shoes and shoving her denims down her legs. It was a pleasure to watch her, her hair fanning wildly across his pillow, her breasts jiggling gently as she shimmied from her absurd Muggle trousers. As soon as her legs were free, he was upon her, reclaiming her mouth and thrusting a hand inside her knickers. Why hadn't she removed the dratted things? Well, he would be rid of them soon enough. He ran his index finger over her clit, tracing circles in her slickness. She spread her legs wider, reaching across her body to take him into her hands. He struggled to keep a hold on his mind when her fingers brushed his cock. Everything went dark and focused--he would explode; he would come, but he would *die* if she didn't continue to touch him. They were like teenagers, he thought, but the notion brought no disgust, even when his mind insisted on reminding him that she *was* a teenager. She was Transfiguring him. He was becoming something else. The idea of being a teenager suddenly seemed completely reasonable, even necessary. He would be a teenager, and none of these horrors would have happened yet; he would be free of his terrible choices at last, free to touch this lovely creature beside him without guilt, without fear...

Her hand continued to stroke him, perhaps a bit harder than he would have liked, but still, it was perfect... perfect.

"Hermione," he whispered urgently. "I--I can't wait."

"Then don't," she said and raised herself off the mattress to slide her knickers from her legs. She grabbed at his shoulders, dragging him over her. He settled between her knees and swiped his swollen tip through her folds, moistening it.

A low sound escaped her, and it was nearly his undoing. Merlin, what was happening to him? What was he becoming? He plunged into her, sinking as deeply as he could, and she cried out something unintelligible.

"Yes?" he asked, hesitating.

"Yes," she murmured, grasping his hips and urging him further on.

His rhythm was jagged and uneven, but she met his every stroke, pulling her knees higher and giving him more and more access to her body. He hooked one of her legs over his arm and drove into her wildly.

"Hermione--"

She opened her mouth, but the word seemed lodged in her throat. She rose to kiss him, but he pulled his face out of her reach.

"Hermione, please."

She closed her eyes and raised her hips ever higher, rocking against him.

"Say it," he gasped. "Please, say it."

She hitched in a breath, and he waited.

"Severus," she whispered, and everything was on fire, everything.

There was no world; there was no war; there were no masters excepting this tender and astounding one beneath him, no magic but what they made between them. He could not stop himself from shooting into her, and he clutched her to him tightly and whispered her name again and again into her hair.

When he had found himself again, he withdrew from her. She started to protest, but he growled, "Hush. We're not finished here yet." And crawled backward, kneeling once more between her legs. He lowered his face to her quim and swept his tongue between her lips, tasting his semen mixed with her essence. Bitter, so bitter and sweet, to taste them mingled and joined, and he attacked her with fervor, his tongue dancing through her folds, seeking what he had been too overcome to manage before--her release. She squirmed, but he held tightly to her hips, pressing his face more deeply into her, circling and plunging. Where? Where had she liked it best? He struggled to remember. But then he heard the hissing intake of her breath through her teeth, and he knew. Not a circle. Back and forth. Slowly, inexorably, he teased her with his tongue until she whimpered and bucked against his face, but still he did not stop.

Back and forth. He slid two fingers inside her, pressing until the heel of his hand rested against her. Back and forth. Her head tossed on the pillow. Back and forth. She was close now; he could feel it. Back and forth.

"Severus!" she cried, and he could feel her pulsing against his fingers. He raised his face to look into hers, and she was flushed with lust; her eyes seemed huge and black with it. And was it possible that he was hard again? *Had* she somehow stripped him of the years between them? He slid easily inside her, her passage slicked with the results of their desire. She shuddered as he entered her.

"Too much?"

"No... no. J-just... slow. Easy."

Slow.

Easy.

Yes.

He propped himself up on his hands and stared into her face as he slid... slow... easy... in and out of her. He swiveled his hips, making lazy circles as he moved, and he could feel the tension building in her again. He moaned, low in his throat, and she returned the sound, some wordless communication that went beyond speech.

He found he could not come again, but brought her there so slowly and deliberately that she cried when he broke her. She turned her face to hide her tears, and he rolled off her and tucked her into his arms, stroking her hair until she quieted.

Finally, she looked up at him, and he saw the same look in her eyes that he had seen when she had come to his office to warn him about Potter. It was a dangerous look, and he wished that he could snap and snarl and vanish it, but he had let them get too far, and now it could not be undone.

"How long do you think we have?" she asked after a time.

"I cannot say. It depends upon the Headmaster."

"Will I know when it happens?"

"You will undoubtedly feel... the effects. But I will try to warn you if I can."

"Thank you."

They lay in silence until he began to fear that they would fall asleep.

"Hermione, I think it best that this not happen again."

"I figured as much."

He wished he could say more to her, to explain that the more he grew to love her, the more paralyzed he would become. Already his tasks seemed impossible to contemplate. And then, of course, the more she permeated his thoughts, the harder she would be to hide. Whatever he had to show the Dark Lord, he would never reveal her face so pink-splotched with lust, her pupils expanded until he could nearly fall into the pits of her eyes. And yet, he never wanted to see anything else. He closed his eyes, and there she was again, her lips parted and wet, her breath shallow and uneven.

He banished the image from his mind. "I will get you a potion. But you must go back tonight."

"I know. Thank you, sir," she said, and he started at her words. 'Sir' cut so harshly across the bed they'd made. But truly, in that single syllable was every reason he loved her. She had known that, in a moment, he would have had to call her 'Miss Granger,' and she hadn't made him do it.

# Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All fully italicized text and anything else you recognize belongs to JKR. Thanks and hugs to my wonderful beta, Shellsnapelover.

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"... and the first thing that came to my mind was *Sectumsempra*, from the Prince's book," Harry said, sinking onto one of the couches in the common room and letting his head fall into his hands. "So, I used it."

Ron was leaning forward with interest, though Hermione could tell simply by Harry's tone and his blood-spattered robes that whatever had happened had been very bad indeed and that he had been severely punished for it.

"So, what happened?" Ron asked as Hermione said, "You used a spell from the Prince's book? And you didn't even know what it did?"

"It--it was bad. It cut him. There was all this blood--"

Ron went silent, but Hermione felt close to fainting. *If Harry had hurt Draco--badly enough to stop him--*

"Is Draco all right?" she asked quietly.

"What? Yes, Malfoy's fine. Snape burst in--"

"So, Snape was nearby," Ron said. "What was Malfoy doing in that bathroom? Do you suppose it was part of their plan?"

"Dunno," Harry said, "When I got there, Malfoy seemed really upset... like he might have... like he might have been crying."

*Crying?* She filed that away for later speculation.

"Poor ickle Malfoy," Ron began.

"Of course, *Professor* Snape was nearby," Hermione interjected angrily. "His office is just down the corridor from that bathroom. What did he do?"

"He gave me detention every Saturday for the rest of the term," Harry said dejectedly, and Ron gasped.

"No, Harry," Hermione said in a tone meant to convey that she felt his punishment was lenient at best. "What did he do for Draco?"

"Oh. Well, he ran over and used his wand to mend the gashes... and he sang a kind of incantation..."

"He *sang*?" Ron said incredulously.

"Yes, he sang," Hermione shot back. "Most counter-curses to heal wounds are sung. We learned that last term in Defense, but I guess you weren't paying attention. Don't feel you need to learn anything new now that you've got the Prince's bloody book, I suppose."

"Hermione," Ron said, "do you think you could give it a rest about the book?"

"You're going to defend that book when Harry nearly killed--"

"Look, I didn't mean to, all right? *You know I wouldn't've used a spell like that, not even on Malfoy, but you can't blame the Prince, he hadn't written 'try this out, it's really good'--he was just making notes for himself, wasn't he, not for anyone else...*"

Hermione relented momentarily. "I know you wouldn't, Harry, but this is serious. You could have been expelled! You could have killed Malfoy! You're lucky that Professor Snape was there."

"I know," he said. "But Malfoy's all right. Snape sorted him out--healed the wounds, you know, and took him up to the Hospital Wing. Said if he took Dittany it probably wouldn't even scar..."

Suddenly, in Hermione's head, the other shoe dropped. *In Defense that day, when he'd cursed Harry... Levicorpus... Potions book... 'My father was a Muggle'... the counter-curse to Sectumsempra... Snape was the Half-Blood Prince.*

"... anyway, it's hidden now. But I'm going back for it as soon as it's safe."

Hermione snapped out of her reverie. "What's hidden?"

Ron looked at her as if she had just suggested trying out for the Quidditch team. "The Prince's book," he said slowly as if she were hard of hearing.

"Wait--back up, sorry. I was thinking, and I've clearly missed something. Why did you hide the book?"

"Because Snape asked for it! He saw it in my mind--he knew that's where I'd learned the curse!"

"Professor Snape performed Legilimency on you?" she said. Privately, she doubted that he'd needed to. This new information only confirmed what she suspected. He knew where it had come from because he'd put it there himself.

"Yes! And you know I'm rubbish at Occlumency. He found the book in my mind right away."

*Or he saw it in your guilty face,* she thought. "Where did you hide it?" she asked.

"In the Room of Requirement. You should have seen it--it was brilliant, really. Loads of stuff hidden in there... books, furniture, potions, dead animals and things... I had to mark where I left the book, or I'd have never found it again. I put a wig and a tiara on an old statue..."

Ron laughed at Harry's description, but Hermione's mind had gone far away again. Snape's book. It was Snape's book. She'd always disdained the thing, but now she was

kicking herself. She could have learned so much more from him. The idea of truly learning to brew from Snape--not the ridiculous bat who taught in the dungeons, but Snape himself--was intoxicating. And something Harry said had stuck in her mind, *For all we know, he was making a note of something that had been used against him!* What if there was some glimpse, between the lines of those pages, of the young man that he had been?

There, too, she might find something of what they needed, something to prepare them to hunt Horcruxes. For Harry had finally had success with Slughorn just after Ron had been released from the infirmary. He had taken a swig of the Felix Felicis and somehow... *It all comes down to that book, she interrupted herself. Everything, all of it, down to Snape. Without the book, Harry would never have won the Felix Felicis in the first place...* Slughorn had admitted that he had spoken to a young Tom Riddle about the horrible invention. Hermione shuddered. To split your soul... just to think about it was an abomination. And yet, Dumbledore believed that Voldemort had done it six times.

*A seven part soul...* It was nearly as unthinkable as the idea that the three of them would leave school to hunt down and destroy the damnable things. Harry hadn't seemed to have made the leap of logic that had them on the run yet--but then, he hadn't had Snape's lessons to guide his thinking. Hermione realized that she had better start planning for all three of them. There was so much to work out before the end of the school year.

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Hermione sat in her bed, curtains drawn, laying out her lists around her. First, things that they would need: her books, of course, and clothing for all three of them. Medical supplies. Potion ingredients. Her expanded bag. Something to live in... perhaps a tent? She wondered what had become of the one they'd stayed in during the Quidditch World Cup, and made a note on the parchment to discreetly ask about at the Burrow, provided they made it to the Burrow before they left. Cooking pots--perhaps she could nick some from her parents? Failing that, the kitchens...

The second list contained things she would need to research. What, exactly, was a Horcrux? How did one go about making one? Slughorn's memory had suggested a spell. And how were they destroyed? Dumbledore's list of Horcruxes had included: the diary; the ring; Hufflepuff's cup; Slytherin's locket; the snake, Nagini... and something of the Gryffindor's or Ravenclaw's. The diary and the ring were destroyed, but there were still so many left to find. So, she should do some research on what relics, if any, the famous founders had left behind.

Thirdly, their families. Harry's family, though she hesitated to think of them as such, would need protection, but she thought she could count on the Order to move the Muggle family to some sort of safe house. Dumbledore would make Harry's peace of mind, even where the Dursleys were concerned, a priority. But what of her own family? It was clear that the three of them would not be allowed to speak to anyone about what they were doing. If Dumbledore would not even tell the Order that Snape was not betraying them, for fear that it would be tortured out of someone, it seemed logical that no one would be allowed to know where they were or what they were doing. Would he think to protect her family, a pair of Muggles that no one had ever met? She would have to see to it herself, just in case, and she made a note on the parchment to consult with Snape about it. And, of course, the Weasleys, who were already in such danger--the lot of them in the Order--such prime targets. She could not bear the idea that they would be subject to any further danger. Something would have to be done for the Weasleys.

Sitting there, surrounded by books and parchment, Hermione allowed herself to be truly paralyzed by fear for the first time. Oh, she had been afraid before, no question about that. More so every year, as Voldemort had become stronger and Dumbledore had revealed more and more of Harry's legacy to him. But she'd always been able to act--to cast a spell, to brew a potion, to start a club--there had always been something... well, something tangible and... dare she even think it?... age-appropriate to do. There was nothing appropriate about marrying her to her professor, nothing appropriate about sending three teenagers off to try to destroy a madman. Her heart raced. A madman who was damned near immortal. And she was armed with what? A disguise and a charmed bag? Surely, this could not be real.

She swept her lists up into a pile and shoved them under her bed. She could not bear to look at them, to see their bald truth in front of her any longer. She was beginning to feel lightheaded with panic. She wanted to use her ring, to call to Snape and make him comfort her, which was ludicrous, of course. She could not risk doing such a thing, and the very thought was an insult to the man who risked his life daily. Who was she to demand comfort, having suddenly discovered that it wasn't all a game? And yet, she wanted him, and senseless as it was, she felt that simply to look at him from across the room would slow the madly beating wings of her heart. It was a feeling she was growing used to, the sense that she *needed* to lay eyes on him.

She lay back and closed her eyes. She must sleep. She must. If she slept, it would be morning, and morning was breakfast in the Great Hall, and breakfast meant seeing Snape. But behind her closed eyelids, she saw her mother's face, her sweet mother who had not protested when Professor Sprout had showed up on the doorstep six years ago to explain that her daughter was a witch. Her mother, who had fought her father to allow her to come to Hogwarts at all, who never complained that it was all too difficult to keep under wraps, who never insinuated that perhaps she might find less... high-profile companions; her mother, who accepted her home each season with pride, though she could not understand her daughter's accomplishments. Though she tried to banish them, her mind filled with thoughts of masked intruders and cursed whips, her mother's screams, her father's broken body. She covered her face with her hands as if that would stop the terrible images that plagued her. She wouldn't even know when it happened. She would be far away, cut off, unable to help or to send help. No tears came to release the building feeling that all was lost. They were sure to fail--how could they succeed? They would be killed, all of them, Harry, Ron, her parents, Snape, herself. They would be captured, tortured, starved, broken. All their secrets discovered...

She sat up again and pulled out her notes once more. There would be no sleep tonight, that much was clear, and if she could not sleep, then she could work. Work would push the fear away. But the parchment sat untouched before her, and her thoughts drifted back to Snape's book. *I put a wig and a tiara on an old statue.* Harry's voice insisted in her mind. Even as she scolded herself--Snape had warned her about sneaking around the castle while Disillusioned--she was casting the charm. *This is a completely asinine thing to do,* she thought as she crept from her bed, sliding into her shoes. *You're no better than the boys, sneaking around and breaking rules. And for what?* She eased the door to her dormitory open, hardly breathing as she slipped through it. Each step she took down the winding staircase was punctuated by her insistence that she turn around. *Acting like a child. Snape would be furious if he knew. This is what you do with his trust in you? Sure to be caught. Expelled, most likely* her mind insisted as she crept through the portrait hole.

"Who's there?" the Fat Lady called, and Hermione ran.

She barely touched the ground with her toes, not wanting to make a sound. Belatedly, she cast the Muffliato Charm on herself. *What is wrong with you? Now you can't even hide properly? Use your brains!* She ran up the stairs, allowing her mind free reign to castigate her, as at least it kept her panic at bay and her thoughts far from the torture of her parents. When she reached the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy, she wheeled around, thinking, *I need to see Professor Snape's book.* After three turns, no handle had appeared in the wall, and she thought of Harry, trying to get into the room that Draco used. He couldn't get in because he didn't know what that room was for, she thought wildly. *I need to go where things are hidden.* She spun and thought again, *I need to go where things are hidden.* Once more. *I need to go where things are hidden.* The handle appeared, and she seized it and hurried inside.

Though Harry had told her what he had seen in the room, she was completely unprepared for the scope of it. Furniture in varying states of disrepair was stacked almost to the ceilings. Chunky, congealed potions caked inside partially melted cauldrons littered every surface; scores of empty bottles; desiccated animal carcasses--Hermione wondered how, even with Harry's description, she would ever find the book amid all this junk. Broken statuary; slashed paintings, their inhabitants crouching miserably in untouched corners; snapped wands; tarnished jewelry... it would take years to sort through it all. She scanned the room, hoping futilely to see a statue wearing a wig and a

To her left, there seemed to be a freshly cut path through the junk, and she followed it. Stacks of books and ancient broomsticks had been moved aside, and the dust here seemed thinner. She eagerly scanned the accumulated detritus, but all she saw at the end of the path was an old cabinet, which looked as if it had been dropped from a great height. No oddly dressed wizard statue. She returned, disappointed, to the center of the room to continue her search. It was difficult to tell where things might have been moved, as everything in the room seemed to be upended or somehow disturbed. But finally, just as she was ready to give it up as a bad job, she saw the statue she sought. She climbed over a magically graffitied bench--dozens of wizard swears moved unceasingly over its surface, flashing and changing color as they went--and reached the bust. At its base lay a worn copy of *Advanced Potion Making*.

Hermione ran her hand over the cover, almost expecting to feel some residual essence of Snape there, but it was, of course, just a book. She opened the cover and examined the words written in the precursor to the spiky scrawl she knew as her Professor's. *Property of the Half-Blood Prince*. She wanted to take the book and return to her dormitory, but thought better of it. Harry was sure to come back for it, and how would she explain? So she shoved aside a pile of mouldy robes and warped, swollen textbooks and settled herself the floor. She leaned back against a broken table and opened the book.

She flipped through the pages slowly, stopping to examine each modification and note in the margins. He'd been gifted from a very early age, she realized as she read. The were markings in a childish hand surrounding some of the more basic potions; one such note beside Boil Curing Potion read, *Lacerate daisy roots before chopping. Seems to yield more juice*. As he grew older, his notations became more cryptic. Beside Polyjuice Potion, he had written, *Two turn c-clkw to a clkw impr clarity*. Fascinating. If only she'd had his advice on her first brewing of the tricky potion.

She forgot Horcruxes and plans and strategies as she read, simply drinking in his expertise, until she reached the page that contained his notes on Sectumsempra. *Nvb! For enemies*, it said in his tiny print. Nothing else. For enemies, whoever they might have been. She thought of Harry's lessons in Occlumency. For Sirius? Harry's father? Had he used this spell against them? Had he, by God, invented it? Hermione rarely allowed herself to consider the fact that Snape had joined the Death Eaters of his own free will. Yet, here was the evidence of a man who could wound with more than just his tongue. That night--and heat rose to her cheeks just thinking of it--that night that she had touched his Mark, she had only thought to see past it, to see through it to the man she knew beneath those horrible, beautiful robes. Who had he been the night that he took the Mark? She covered his writing with her palm and closed her eyes, picturing the boy he'd shown her with the Dissimulo Juvenis Charm. But when she looked into that face in her memory, she saw Snape's eyes looking back at her, the same ones that had bored into her own as he'd begged her to speak his name.

Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted by a grating hiss that made her heart stop in her chest. The door was opening.

She slid down soundlessly until she was lying flat on the cold, stone floor. The Disillusionment Charm was still upon her, and she raised an invisible hand before her face to confirm that she was hidden. She remained utterly motionless, barely breathing, as she waited to see who had entered the room.

"...does not answer the question of what business you have in the Room of Requirement at two o'clock in the morning."

Before she had even recognized the familiar snarl of Professor Snape, her nerves had begun to tingle with her awareness of him. Who was with him? Did he already know she was there?

Her question was answered by a petulant voice she knew immediately. "I could ask the same of you, Professor. I have business here. That's all you need to know. Let me be."

"Draco, surely you realize that the Dark Lord has told me of your cabinet."

"Why would he--?"

"Because he knows what you are apparently unable to comprehend. You need my help."

"I don't! It's already worked out--I have a contact--"

"Madam Rosmerta, I presume?"

Draco's voice was screechy with frustration. "Yes! So, I don't need you--"

"And if he chooses the Hog's Head instead?"

"He'd never--filthy place, no one wants to be seen there--"

"So, you are not aware that his brother Aberforth tends the bar at the Hog's Head?"

"I--" Draco sounded unsettled. Hermione rose to her feet as quietly as she possibly could. She wanted see the wizards who argued so quietly, to read the looks on their faces.

"Leaving alone the distinct possibility that he might leave the school without visiting a bar."

"But you said yourself he always does! The Dark Lord said--"

Snape tapped his wand repeatedly against his palm. "The Dark Lord wants you to fail, Draco. He wants to punish your father for his... indiscretions. He told me of your plan because he intends--"

Hermione was distracted from the rest of Snape's sentence as her ring had begun to burn furiously. She removed the circlet. *GET OUT*, it read. So, he did know. But how could she get out? If she opened the door, Draco would know she was there.

For a moment, she nearly decided to just make a run for it. Draco Malfoy had never stood a chance against her before. But then she looked into his face, and Hermione felt cold terror trickling through her limbs. She'd known Draco Malfoy since he was eleven years old, but she had never seen a look in his eyes like the one he currently wore. It was the look she had sought in her memory of Snape's young face, the ruthless and desperate look of a Death Eater. To Draco, this was not a dance; not a game; not an intricate, duplicitous plan. She and Snape plotted; Draco intended to kill. She could see it in his eyes as she stood there, and suddenly she had no urge whatsoever to run for the door. If he found her there, he would kill her; or he would try, and Snape would have to stop him, and his cover would be blown. She'd put all their lives at risk. Why had it seemed so important to see that book?

She crept silently toward them. For one heart-stopping moment, Draco seemed to turn and look right through her. She glanced wildly at Snape and thought she saw fear dart through his eyes, but then they were black with malice once more. She edged silently toward the bench that she had climbed over. There was no way to get out without crossing over it. She knew that she had better do it before she became too frightened to proceed, and so, taking a deep but silent breath, she hitched up her robes in one hand and stepped onto it. Snape's voice grew louder as she eased down the other side.

"... efforts heretofore have hardly inspired my faith in your abilities! The necklace, the mead... tangling with Potter today--you could have gotten yourself killed!"

"I don't care what you think! The Dark Lord has faith in my abilities! He trusted this *time*, and when I kill--"

"Enough!" Snape thundered, charging toward the door where she stood, trembling, unsure how to slip out without being noticed. He flung the door open. "On your head be it, Draco. You know what the consequences will be if you fail."

Hermione ran through the door and ducked behind a suit of armor. Her heart beat in fits and starts; she could not seem to take a full breath. Snape slammed the door behind him and wrenched her from behind the armor in one fluid motion.

"Idiot child," he hissed, and there was no hint of affection behind the insult. "Clearly, I've given you too much credit. Just like your nasty, arrogant cohorts--unable to stay out of other people's business. I told you leave Draco to me."

"But, sir, I had no idea Draco would be in there--I didn't mean--"

"No? You were simply out for a stroll?"

She looked down at the book that was still clutched in one hand. His book. She tried to stuff it into her robes. He would be furious with her for invading his privacy.

"What are you hiding, Miss Granger?"

How did he know? His hand darted out and snatched the book from her grasp. As soon as it left her fingers, it was outside the charm's scope and was as visible as Snape himself. He looked from it to her with disbelief and scorn.

"Did Potter ask you to retrieve this?"

"No! Please, sir--I just wanted to--"

"To?"

"To see you."

"Get back to your room," he said coldly. "Much as I would dearly love to deduct the rest of Gryffindor's precious few house points, I want no record left that any of us were here tonight. For punishment, you will have the knowledge that your foolishness very nearly destroyed the Headmaster's plan, putting not only our lives, but the lives of everyone you know, at risk."

## Chapter Seventeen

*Chapter 17 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All fully italicized lines come from HBP and DH. Everything you recognize belongs to the formidable Ms. Rowling. Many, many thanks to Shellsnapelover for betaing this story.

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When it happened, it all happened very quickly. Hermione was sitting in the common room with Ron, who was prattling on about Quidditch. His recent athletic prowess seemed to have gone to his head. Or perhaps it was that he needed to be distracted from thinking about the fact that his best friend was now dating his sister. Hermione glanced at him briefly. He seemed to be taking it rather well, but one never knew...

Her thoughts, however, did not linger long on Ron. She felt, as she had for days, as if she were in physical pain, though it was simply continuing to be alive after ruining her relationship with Snape that pained her. She tucked her legs more firmly into the squashy chair she was curled in. She felt as if all her limbs would fly off if she did not hold them to her tightly. She wanted to sob, to scream, to run down to the dungeons and force him to hear her apology, but she did not dare, as she knew his words were completely deserved. She *had* been an idiot, a childish idiot, and she'd put him in danger and... oh, God. Her chest ached. How was she supposed to continue to breathe, knowing that she'd proven him wrong--wrong to trust her, wrong to care for her? Wrong.

When the ring burned, the adrenaline that shot through her system seemed to electrocute her. *Snape!* her mind screamed, and the heart she'd spent the evening cursing surged and fluttered.

"Ron--I--hold that thought. I'll be back," she stammered and ran for the steps.

Alone in the stairwell, she tore the ring off her finger. '*Lumos*,' she whispered and held the ring to the light of her wand.

*It's time.*

It's time? Wh--Oh, sweet Merlin. Time. It's time. For a moment she stood there stupidly. What should she do? And though she would never admit this, ever, to anyone, her first thoughts were pure relief that he was speaking to her at last, that he had kept his promise to warn her when he left.

But suddenly, she could hear Harry screaming her name from the common room, and she turned to run back down the steps, not knowing what she would hear, but knowing it would be whatever Snape had done. *Had been required to do*, her mind amended. She hesitated for a split second, as if delaying her knowledge would detain him, keep him from leaving her before she'd even had the chance to apologize.

"Hermione!" Harry called again, and she clattered down the steps.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"It's Malfoy! He's celebrating in the Room of Requirement--whatever he was trying to fix--I'm telling you, he's fixed it. Look--I've got to be quick. Dumbledore thinks I'm getting my Invisibility Cloak. We're--well, he's found a Horcrux and we're going to get it. So you two have to deal with Snape and Malfoy. Call the rest of the DA--"

He raced up the stairs to the boys' dormitory. Hermione looked quickly at Ron, whose face was set and determined. "Hermione, whatever you think, whatever you believe--I think we should watch Malfoy tonight. If he's planned something... something for Voldemort... and Dumbledore's gone--"

"I know," she said, though inside she was miserable. How had Harry got in to the Room of Requirement? Oh, Snape would kill her. Kill her!

Harry returned and thrust a pair of dirty socks into Ron's hands. "Take these," he said and then handed Hermione the Marauder's Map. "And take this as well."

*"Thanks," said Ron. "Er--why do I need socks?"*

*"You need what's wrapped in them, it's the Felix Felicis. Share it between yourselves and Ginny too. Say goodbye to her for me. I'd better go, Dumbledore's waiting--"*

*"No!" said Hermione, as Ron unwrapped the tiny little bottle of golden potion, looking awestruck. "We don't want it, you take it, who knows what you'll be facing! Even as she protested, a plan was forming around the edges of her mind. There might be a way... a way to maybe protect Snape, to undo the damage she'd done, to see that Ron could not impede him--"*

"I'll be fine, I'll be with Dumbledore," Harry said and took off for the portrait hole.

"Go get Ginny," Ron ordered her.

Hermione tore up the stairs and without letting herself think about it any further, she ran past the fifth year girls' dormitory to her own room. She burst through the door--the room was mercifully empty--and snatched her enchanted coin from her bedside table, where it had lain dormant all year. She touched the coin with her wand. *Gryffindor common room*. Then she threw her wand onto her bed and flew to Ginny's room, banging on the door with both fists. "Ginny! Ginny, come quick!"

She and Ginny nearly tumbled over each other as they descended the stairs, Hermione hurriedly explaining where Harry had gone and what they had to do. By the time they reached the common room, Neville had joined them, and she could hear Luna yelling from outside in the hallway. Ron opened the portrait hole, and she climbed in.

"Okay," Ron said. "Neville, Ginny and I will take the Map and stake out the Room of Requirement. Luna, you and Hermione watch Snape's office."

Hermione had the fleeting thought that Ron was much better under pressure than she would have expected.

"So, we'll each have a swig of the Felix--not too much now--there's got to be enough for all of us."

Hermione let the bottle pass from hand to hand until at last, it came to her. She took it.

"Wait! My wand! It's upstairs," she hissed. "Go... GO! I'll catch up!"

She pressed her thumb tightly over the mouth of the little bottle and raced back up the stairs to her room. Seizing her wand, she hurried to the hearth and threw a fistful of Floo powder into the flames. "Professor Snape's office," she said clearly and darted into the fire.

When she emerged in Snape's office, he was stuffing things into a bag much like the one she had created for her winter project. She watched as he jammed in his Death Eater robes and mask as well as various other items of clothing. Then he turned and saw her.

"What in Merlin's name do you think--"

"I--Professor--" She faltered. "Harry knows. He's gone off with Dumbledore, but he knows that Draco is celebrating. He knows that whatever it is, it is tonight."

"Potter is with Dumbledore?"

"Yes--they're both gone off... somewhere. I--I shouldn't say more. But sir, I wanted to make sure that--"

"Hermione, this is hardly the time."

*Hermione! He'd said, 'Hermione!' She cursed her foolish heart for its leap and patter.*

"No, of course not. I just--look, I wanted to make it up to you, and--"

"There is no need."

"Yes! There is! Harry's set Ron and the rest of us to stop Draco... and you. Neville and Luna and Ginny are out there--going to the Room of Requirement... and I have--I have Felix Felicis, sir. To make sure that whatever you're doing goes well."

"Felix Felicis? Wherever did you get--? No, that's of no consequence. I cannot take it."

"Why not?"

"Because you must take it. There will be danger in the castle tonight, and if you are going to be in the thick of it, then I insist you take it. There will be," he paused and seemed to decide that it was too late to hide anything further from her. "There will be death here, Hermione. Take the potion."

"I won't," she said stubbornly, though she knew she must sound like a child to him. She thrust the little bottle at him.

He stared at her for what seemed like a long time, considering, and then he seemed to relent and took the bottle from her fingers, raising it to the light and swirling it. "From Slughorn, I presume?" he said.

"Yes. Harry won it earlier this year. It's not poisoned, sir. Harry took some once--and tonight, all the others did, too. I saved mine for you. But I have to hurry--they're waiting for me."

"I did not presume that you would poison me," he said quietly and tipped the bottle to his lips. Then suddenly, he was upon her with his mouth, prodding hers open with his tongue. The potion swirled from his mouth to hers. It was creamy-sweet, thick... and somehow effervescent. She concentrated on not swallowing, urging the potion back into his mouth with her tongue. He warred with her; there was a furious struggle of wills and tongues, and his mouth was mashed against her own. But some of the potion was reaching her already, despite her refusal to swallow, for as they kissed, she felt an odd sense of purpose and light filling her. This kiss--it was perfectly necessary, perfectly right. This kiss was the way to say goodbye, though in a way they had already said it, and with this kiss she made her final promise to believe. Snape would be all right. He would survive whatever was going to happen; he would not be caught, and her sacrifice would not be in vain. Snape seemed to be feeling the effects of the potion, too, for he had all but swallowed her whole, and she felt forgiveness radiating off of him, as well as other promises she could not decipher, as if he had taken up his half of the conversation. She felt, from him, a kind of desperate apology of his own as he urged the remaining potion into her mouth and broke away.

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"Do you feel it?" she asked. And what he felt was so far beyond description that he almost could not reply. He was certain that he had not swallowed any of the potion, but it seemed to have reached him despite his best efforts. He felt... light--lighter than he had in years and completely certain of what he had to do. He tried to feel horror that he'd allowed her to help him. He could not imagine how she would feel tomorrow...even an hour from now... but he could not quite reach the self abasement he sought. It was as if he had somehow become disconnected from his mind and could finally... *finally*... be free of it, if only until the potion wore off. His limbs felt untethered from his body, almost tingling with purpose and clarity.

"I feel it," he said, unable to say more.

She smiled at him, which seemed absolutely right, and the corners of his mouth quirked in return. Distantly, he heard his own voice growling *Standing here grinning like a bloody idiot--Go! Go!* He would heed that voice momentarily, but some far more powerful part of his mind insisted that there were things to be done first.

"Disillusion yourself," he said, and she nodded, performing the charm without hesitation. "And cast Protego Horribilis. The potion and the Shield should be enough to keep you safe. Your charm work is excellent, Hermione, but it will be no match for the Death Eaters' power. I'd cast the charm on you myself, but if you were captured, I would want no trace of my magic on you."

"Quite right," she said. And after a pause, "Someone's going to come, I think."

"Yes, directly," he agreed. He stared into space where she should be. Though he knew it was ridiculous, he almost felt as if he saw her there, gazing back at him with her

potion-calmed, brown eyes. Suddenly, her hand was in his.

"Be safe, Severus," she whispered.

Before he could reply, the door burst open, and Flitwick flew through it, his purple robes billowing. "Severus!" he cried. "Death Eaters in the castle--hurry--the second floor!"

Snape did not hesitate, but flicked his wand lazily at the tiny wizard. "*Stupefy!*" he said aloud, so that Hermione would know how to help his colleague after he'd gone. He charged through the door, and seeing Miss Lovegood crouching outside it, he yelled, "Flitwick's collapsed--help him!" and ran down the opposite corridor, somehow knowing that Hermione was right on his heels. He stopped short when they were out of range of his office, and she whipped off the Disillusionment Charm. His heart beat painfully in his chest, and he longed to stand there forever, impressing each of her curls into his memory, but his feet seemed to pull him down the hallway, away from her. "Believe," he whispered and took off down a staircase that had just settled into place beside him, almost as if he had summoned it.

Snape arrived on the landing, and the crowd of dueling wizards seemed to part for him. He saw Yaxley dueling the Weasley girl; Gibbon, collapsed; Remus and Nymphadora, trading hexes with two Death Eaters whom he could not see clearly. Both sides stepped back, the Death Eaters clearly believing he had come to join them, and the Order the same. Almost as if it had been choreographed, a clear path emerged between the furiously battling wizards, and he could see Longbottom running up the stairs to the Astronomy Tower at the far end of the hall. He was thrown back, sailing down the stairwell, and Snape just managed to cast a wordless Cushioning Charm at the bottom before the boy hit. Still, he thudded to the ground audibly and skidded down the corridor. Snape ran past him, taking the steps two at a time. As soon as he'd seen the boy making for the stairs, it had seemed clear to him that the Astronomy Tower was exactly the right place to be. He could not see the barrier that had repelled Longbottom, but he knew instinctively that he could pass through it and did not hesitate as he careened up the stairs.

He swept onto the Tower, taking in Draco's pale, pinched face; the leering werewolf, Greyback; and the ridiculous Carrows, hopping about ineffectually. He knew he should feel frightened--he was late--Draco had already disarmed the Headmaster; their plan had nearly fallen through, and yet, it seemed to him that he had arrived at precisely the right time, for the scene was set, here, and Draco was clearly not up to the task.

"*Draco, do it or stand aside so one of us--*" Alecko Carrow screeched just as her brother took notice of Snape standing calmly in the doorway.

"*We've got a problem, Snape,*" Amycus said. "*The boy doesn't seem able--*"

Dumbledore lay crumpled against one of the ramparts. For the first time in the nearly thirty years that Snape had known him, he looked truly old, truly afraid. For perhaps it was the old man's power that had seemed to keep him so vital, and it was clear that his power had abandoned him. As Snape looked upon him, he seemed to summon the last of his strength to whisper, "*Severus...*"

For months, Snape had lain awake at night, imagining this moment, totally unable to think of any means, any motivation he could call upon to give him the strength, the *intention* necessary to cast the Killing Curse. But the Felix still bubbled warm in his blood, and suddenly, the answer came easily.

"*Severus... please...*"

He called up, in his mind, the night that Dumbledore had been cursed by the ring and heard the old wizard's voice echoing through his brain *see no need to tell Miss Granger that particular part of the plan... The more appropriate witches are dead...* It seemed as soon as he'd latched onto this particular notion, the memories piled atop one another, assaulting him with their clarity, as if he were the one on the brink of death, reliving his life in snatches. *You disgust me... Surely you remember the precise shape and color of Lily Evan's eyes? Send Hermione back to her room at once... Certainly not--you must do it... I do not want you forming attachments that will confuse your loyalties. Your duty is to Lily Potter's son...* It was only a fraction of his feeling for the wizard who lay at his mercy, but he could use it.

*No more masters,* he thought. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Green light shot from his wand and struck Dumbledore squarely in the chest. It seemed then that even the Felix was not enough to keep his hatred and revulsion at bay, for the moment the curse hit the old wizard and carried him over the battlements, Snape fought the urge to fly over it himself.

"*Out of here, quickly,*" he shouted, hoping that speech would drive away the urge to vomit. He grabbed Malfoy and headed back down the stairs, practically carrying the boy, who felt boneless in his grasp.

The potion still lingered in his bloodstream--not much was left, but enough to see that the clutch of wizards parted for him once more, and he was able to charge into the fray unharmed with Draco in tow. He caught one last glimpse of Hermione before he screamed, "*It's over, time to go!*" and shot out into the night.

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Hermione saw Snape as the crowd parted to let him through. He had Draco by the scruff of his neck and seemed to be guiding him toward the door. Draco's eyes had lost the look she had seen in the Room of Requirement; he no longer looked like a Death Eater, but a confused and frightened child. As she watched, Draco's head lolled back, and his eyes sought Snape's beseechingly. Snape shoved him forward without mercy. "*It's over, time to go!*" he called, and at first she thought he was telling her that the plan was complete, until she saw Death Eaters all over the room suddenly cease their dueling and hasten after him.

Through the crush of masked and robed figures hurrying out of the castle, Hermione caught a glimpse of Harry, which caused her heart to stutter in her chest. Harry was here? When had he arrived? He was running down the stairs from the Astronomy Tower, the same stairwell from which Snape had just emerged. This struck her as curious--whatever was going on in the Astronomy Tower? But then Harry was screaming above the din, "Stop them! Snape! Malfoy! Stop them!" at which point things began to get a bit hazy.

She ran, that much she knew, ran with the others out onto the grounds, Harry streaking past her--Hagrid's hut on fire--but it seemed that she knew already that the chase was pointless. The Death Eaters had a huge head start; frankly, she'd felt--they'd all felt--a little glad to see them suddenly turning and running. Things had not been going well inside. Their numbers had been evenly matched, but she could tell that the Order was unprepared for the ruthlessness of the fighting that had been taking place. She and Luna had been dueling a huge, blond Death Eater who'd been firing Unforgivables off at such speed that she'd felt as if she were dancing a wild sort of jig.

She fell back almost immediately after the cool night air hit her face; her feet slowed to a stop, and she looked up at the clear bright sky. Such a beautiful night; it seemed impossible that inside there was the evidence of war, blood and bodies and matted fur--she was almost sure she'd seen Bill Weasley go down under Greyback's attack, but she swiftly closed down that train of thought.

She could still hear Harry's screams in the distance, but she saw no Death Eaters--they had seemed to have no interest in continuing the battle once Snape had called to them and had quickly reached the Apparition point and disappeared. Lupin approached from behind her somewhere and touched her shoulder, startling her out of immobility.

"Hospital Wing," he whispered. "McGonagall's orders."

"But I'm not hurt," she said dazedly.

"Doesn't matter. It's over. We're all meeting there. Ron's on the way up... and Tonks, Moody, Luna..."

She turned and followed him wordlessly until they reached the stairs. Suddenly she stopped and clutched the sleeve of his robes, saying, "Harry! I saw Harry back there!"

"I've sent Ginny to go get him."

She nodded and proceeded to the Hospital Wing without further comment. When they entered the room, Hermione's senses were assaulted by the intermingled smells of fear, potions, blood and sweat. Ron leaped from his seat and charged her, taking her arms in his hands. "Hermione--thank God. I didn't see you after he--after they--"

"I'm fine. Ron... what about Bill?"

"Greyback attacked him. Madam Pomfrey says... she thinks..." He seemed unable to continue.

Lupin rushed to the bed where Bill lay motionless. His face had been savaged almost beyond recognition. Madam Pomfrey was smearing a thick, oily-looking salve into Bill's wounds.

"And you can't... you can't heal them with a charm?" Hermione asked the matron, whose face was drawn and pinched with worry.

"*No charm will work on these,*" said Madam Pomfrey. *"I've tried everything I know, but there is no cure for werewolf bites."*

"*But he wasn't bitten at the full moon,*" said Ron. *"Greyback hadn't transformed, so surely Bill won't be a--a real--?"*

Just then, Harry and Ginny entered the room. Luna leaped to her feet, and Tonks and Lupin seemed to move back to allow them into the fold of people crushed into the tiny space.

"*No, I don't think that Bill will be a true werewolf,*" said Lupin. *"But that does not mean there won't be some contamination. Those are cursed wounds."*

"*Dumbledore might know something that'd work, though,*" Ron said. *"Where is he? Bill fought those maniacs on Dumbledore's orders, Dumbledore owes him, he can't leave him in this state--"*

"*Ron--Dumbledore's dead,*" said Ginny.

For the first time in her life, Hermione felt she knew what Muggles meant when they said their knees had turned to water. She had not fainted, but she felt far from conscious, and it seemed her legs refused to hold her any longer. She sank bonelessly into a chair. Dumbledore dead? Impossible--his plans--there was still so much to do, so much they didn't know. She had thought that Snape was carrying out the Headmaster's plan, but how could he carry out their plan if Dumbledore was dead? It must have happened when he was with Harry looking for the Horcrux, she realized. But--he hadn't finished teaching Harry about them! How would they know what to do now? Dumbledore could not be dead. Ginny must be mistaken.

"*How did he die?*" whispered Tonks. *"How did it happen?"*

"*Snape killed him,*" Harry said. *"I was there, I saw it."*

Darkness seemed to take her, to surround her, driving out all sound and sense. Hissing, swirling blackness filled her eyes and ears. The room seemed close and hot; her heart beat in odd doubles and triples, feeling as if it might punch its way through her ribcage. She stared, unseeing, at Bill, at his grotesque, savaged face. There were no thoughts, no tears; her eyes were dry as dust. Her throat seemed to have shrunk to a pinhole, and her breath whistled in and out.

"*The Avada Kedavra,*" Harry said, and finally, mercifully, she did faint.

She woke to faces pressing in closely--too closely--around her, and the taste of something hot and peppery in her mouth. And yet, it did not seem to be the potion that had woken her, but a sound unlike anything she had ever heard, a sound that seemed to resonate inside her very cells and smoothed the beating of her heart. One by one, the others seemed to hear it, and they each froze in place, struck dumb by its haunting, terrible beauty.

"It's Fawkes," Ginny breathed.

Professor McGonagall had joined them, though Hermione could not remember her arrival. She was paused, like the others, with her handkerchief halfway to her leaking eyes, her hands balled into fists.

"*This is all my fault,*" she said suddenly, breaking the spell. *"My fault. I sent Filius to fetch Snape tonight, I actually sent for him to come and help us!"*

There was a chorus of protests, but Hermione's voice did not join the throng, for she was choked by her own protest. It was not Professor McGonagall's fault. It was hers. She had given him the Felix--she'd ensured that he would be able to complete... his plan. She'd played right into his hands.

The others recounted the evening's events, piecing together a whole that seemed possible, if not believable, but Hermione sat as silently as if she had been Petrified.

"*So if Ron was watching the Room of Requirement with Ginny and Neville,*" Harry said, finally turning toward her, *"were you--?"*

"*Outside Snape's office, yes,*" she said, her voice barely audible. *"It was nearly midnight when Professor Flitwick came sprinting down into the dungeons. He was shouting about Death Eaters in the castle... and--"*

"*What?*" Harry urged her.

Luna broke in. "Professor Flitwick burst into Snape's office, and then Snape came running out. He said Flitwick had collapsed, though I guess he'd just been Stupefied--Hermione brought him around right away-- and then he ran out, saying he was going to go help fight the Death Eaters--"

"*I was so stupid, Harry!*" said Hermione in a high-pitched whisper. *"I didn't realize, Harry, I didn't realize, I just let Snape go!"*

"*It's not your fault,*" said Lupin firmly. *"Hermione, had you not obeyed Snape and got out of the way, he probably would have killed you and Luna."*

Hermione looked at him blankly, wishing she could take comfort in his words. But she could not, as everything she'd said had been a lie, just as Snape himself had taught her, to lie with the truth...

Just then, Moody brushed past Lupin and seized Hermione's hand in his coarse, leathery one. "It's not your fault," he repeated, and Hermione turned her face away from him, refusing any more solace. "Miss Granger," he said sharply, and she looked up at the sound of Snape's name for her. He seemed to know exactly how to get her attention. "You did exactly what the Headmaster would have wanted you to do."

Both his magical eye and his normal one were fixed on hers, and she looked at him in wonder.

"Exactly what the Headmaster would have wanted," he repeated as Fawkes' lament pierced right through her.

# Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: As usual, everything belongs to JKR, including all fully italicized text from HBP. Shellsnapelover is a goddess. That is all.

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Classes were all cancelled, and arrangements were being made to bring in the Hogwarts Express two weeks early to ship the students home. No classes meant that students wandered the halls freely, as it had been agreed that anyone who wanted to stay to pay their respects to Dumbledore would be given the opportunity. The Great Hall was packed with people during meals, and yet Hogwarts seemed shrouded in silence and emptiness. The prefects had no need to patrol the corridors; no student would dare to set off a firework or hex a classmate in the atmosphere of grief and defeat that hung over the castle.

The lack of routine immobilized Hermione. She spent most of her time sitting on a couch in the Gryffindor common room, staring into the fire. Sometimes Ron came and sat beside her quietly for a while, and then, just as wordlessly as he had come, he would depart again. She knew he kept a vigil at Bill's beside at night, and his eyes had a bruised, pouchy look, but she could not bring herself to speak to him about getting more rest. And who was she to suggest such a thing, as she had slept but two hours the night before?

In one of the few moments in which the three of them had been together since that night in the Hospital Wing, Harry had come to the common room and explained, in a dull and weary voice, that nothing at all had been gained in his and Dumbledore's quest for the Horcrux. He dangled the fake locket before them and then snatched it away again, stuffing it into the pocket of his robes. None of them had wanted to discuss it. It was too painful to contemplate--a gut punch that that was robbed of its power because they had already been pummeled beyond feeling. Hermione knew that she *needed* to consider it, to plan for it, but her mind would not cease its endless circling around Snape.

She had lain in bed most of the first night wondering at what Moody had said to her in the Hospital Wing. He'd left shortly thereafter and had given her no further message, no knowing look thrown back over his shoulder. He'd simply announced that he would be going to clear out their parchment from Headquarters; no one needed to ask why that would be necessary, and Tonks and Remus had volunteered to go with him. Then he had turned and hobbled from the room, leaving her staring after him as if he were the last piece of driftwood and all the world an ocean.

Had it all been in her mind? Was she so desperate to hear that the man she loved had not betrayed them all and killed their leader that she was inventing messages that were not there? Was Moody simply spouting the same mindless drivel that they'd all been giving each these last two days? *It's not your fault... What he would have wanted...* Or was it what she'd thought she'd heard in Moody's words, that the plan had gone exactly as Dumbledore had intended?

Did she, could she, trust Snape? She looked into her mind and saw his pale face; the lines drawn heavily across his brow; the long, hooked nose; his thin lips. And in her mind, those lips formed a single word, *believe*.

Harry knew, now, the identity of the Half-Blood Prince. Snape had screamed it at him as he'd run across the grounds to the Apparition Point. However, something in Harry's report of their exchange troubled her mind. It seemed to her that Snape must have known all along that Harry'd had his book. From that first class, when she'd known the counter-charm to Levicorpus, he must have guessed. And Slughorn... always going on about how brilliant Harry was in potions... Snape *must* have known. Why would he have left that book in the Potions stockroom? Snape was many things, but careless could not be counted among them. Unless he had intended the book to reach Harry... Her heart beat painfully as she remembered his words on their wedding night, *He knows that Potter won't listen to me; the imbecile believes me a loyal Death Eater...* Unless he had intended Harry to find it. Had it had been his way of training Harry, teaching him spells and techniques he otherwise would never have known, never taken an interest in? But if he meant for Harry to learn from the book, why had he revealed himself as the Half-Blood Prince, knowing that Harry would discount it all now?

But then, that was just senseless. Why should any lessons be discounted simply because of their source? Should she forget Extension Charms, disguises, Occlumency just because Snape had taught them to her? Yet, she knew that Harry would say yes, and that it was more important than ever that she never reveal where she had come by the knowledge that would keep them alive.

*Believe.*

Despite everything, she wanted to believe. Hadn't he trained her? Hadn't he held her? Hadn't he... loved her? She'd thought he had. But worse than the idea that he had never loved her was the idea that she might have misjudged him, that he might still belong to Voldemort. For then, it would not just be Snape whom she could not trust, but herself.

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Snape had proceeded directly to Malfoy Manor from Hogwarts. His foremost concern was to see to Draco's well-being. He wanted to be present when the boy appeared before Voldemort, wanted to ensure that the tale was told so that Draco appeared in the best possible light. The boy's skin had gone cold and clammy beneath his fingertips as they had Apparated, and he had taken on an alarmingly ashen hue.

When they appeared in the entrance hall, Narcissa flung her arms around her son, sobbing unabashedly into the poor boy's hair as she clung to his neck. Draco was in no shape to be standing himself, let alone supporting his mother, so Snape gently guided Narcissa from Draco's arms to his own.

"It's all right, Cissy," he said, not unkindly. Though he had no particular affection for Narcissa Malfoy, he knew that her love for her son was genuine. She had proven that the previous summer when she had come to him, against the Dark Lord's orders, to beg him to assist Draco. There was something about the fierceness of her urge to protect her son that called to him. Narcissa Malfoy was not a fighter by nature. She had been born into pureblooded society and accepted its customs. She had married Lucius and borne a son to him because she had been expected to do so. She had joined the Death Eaters because Lucius and her family had desired it. To defy the Dark Lord, to try to ensure that her wishes triumphed over his--well, it went against everything she had been trained to be. And yet, she stood here, in her own entryway, with the Dark Lord only a few rooms away and tried, against all reason, to subvert him. He wished, in a vague and buried sort of way, that his own mother had ever taken his safety into her own hands.

She sobbed deeply; her whole body trembled in his arms. Finally, he could stand no more. This was no time for histrionics--the boy still had to face the Dark Lord, and his mother's tears were doing nothing to fortify him.

"Enough, Narcissa," he said, disentangling himself and forcing her to stand on her own. "Pull yourself together. We are not finished yet."

He strode toward the ballroom with the Malfoys in his wake. A flick of his wand and his cloak bloomed out impressively around him as he approached the throne-like chair that the Dark Lord seemed to favor. When he reached the pale, serpentine wizard, he dropped to his knees with a flourish.

"My Lord," he said. "Draco has succeeded. Dumbledore is dead."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Draco and Narcissa falling hastily to their knees.

Voldemort's lips pulled back into a horrible approximation of a smile. "This is welcome news," he said. "Draco, approach me."

Snape willed the boy to find a shred of his former arrogance, and he watched, pleased, as Draco rose to his full height and faced the Dark Lord. He was deathly pale, but he did not tremble.

The maniacal wizard gazed at Draco appraisingly. "Tell me, Draco. What did it feel like to cast the Killing Curse?"

Inwardly, Snape swore. He had hoped that a bit more of the story would be told first, but it was clear that Voldemort already knew that Draco had been unable... but of course, that had always been his plan.

But Draco surprised him. In his usual haughty tone, he replied, "I didn't get the pleasure, my Lord. Snape, here, was so eager for glory that he cast the Avada Kedavra himself."

"Indeed?" Voldemort said with threatening politeness.

"Now, Draco," Narcissa purred nastily. "You mustn't blame Severus for his... rash behavior. How would it look if his own student proved to be a more powerful Death Eater than he?"

Snape bowed his head before the Dark Lord. He longed to retort, but he knew that if he were to survive this, he must not argue, but accept his punishment willingly. How had he allowed them to back him into this corner? He had risked so much to save this boy from himself.

"Severus..." the Dark Lord hissed. "I thought I had made myself clear that you were not to interfere in Draco's plans."

"Forgive me, my Lord," he said, choking on his words, on Narcissa's duplicity. "Draco's plan was well executed. I sought only to help him to complete it--to help bring you this victory you have so desired."

The Dark Lord turned to Draco. "You have pleased me," he said simply. "You and your mother may leave us."

The Malfoys turned and walked from the room without so much as a glance at Snape, who remained kneeling on the marble floor. He fought to relax his muscles. The effects of the Cruciatius were much less severe if he did not fight it, if he simply submitted and let the Curse do to him what it would.

"You are lucky that you have been so useful to me, Severus," Voldemort said. "If I did not need you now, I would kill you as an example to my followers of what happens when they do not obey my orders."

Snape lowered his head until his hair was brushing the floor. "My Lord... I thought it was your wish that Dumbledore be killed at all costs. I thought--"

"Your problem, Severus, is that you think entirely too much. *Crucio!*"

Snape writhed under the Curse, twisting until he felt sure his bones would break under his muscles' insistence. He tried to force his limbs to stay fluid, while keeping the walls in his mind firm and rigid. The torture went on until he began to feel afraid--he could no longer sense the boundaries of his walls; behind his eyes, he found only heat and blackness.

When the pain finally subsided, he peered at the Dark Lord with reddened, watery eyes. Voldemort stared back implacably. He had not yet invaded Snape's mind, but Snape felt that he was considering it.

"You have always been a faithful servant, Severus. Others have doubted you, but I have always felt sure of your... loyalty."

"Yes, my Lord. Thank you."

"However, I find now that I require a certain, shall we say, demonstration of your loyalty."

"I live but to serve you."

Voldemort chuckled. "How true, my dear boy. How true. You know, I think that I wish you to take over as Headmaster of Hogwarts?"

"If that is your desire, I shall do it gladly."

"Your spying has been useful in more ways than one. Among my followers, only you are well acquainted enough with the running of the school to orchestrate my plans."

"What are your plans for the school, my Lord?"

"Tut, tut, Severus. Do not play the fool. It does not become you. You know as well as I do that I wish to build an army, to... cleanse the school of the unworthy and train the rest..."

"I can do that, my Lord. It would not be difficult--there are sympathizers on the faculty already--they have not come forward because they feared Dumbledore, but now--"

"Yes, yes, I feel sure you are up to the task. However--" The Dark Lord paused until he looked up. When he did, the wizards' eyes locked on his own, and Snape could feel him invading his mind. Subtly, sneakily, he felt the foreign presence easing into the deeper recesses of his thoughts, testing, seeking, tasting... looking for Miss Granger.

"Before I entrust to you so important a duty, I want to be certain that you belong to me as completely as you say."

"Whatever my Lord requires," Snape replied.

"You have shown... a weakness... for Mudbloods in the past, Severus."

Lily. Snape nearly smirked at the irony. His masters played a single card. He bowed his head, in seeming contrition, and waited.

"You do not deny it?"

"When I was a much younger man, I did, as you know, harbor feelings for Lily Evans. But that is past, my Lord, so far past as to be in another lifetime. You showed me that there are other, much worthier, choices--"

"And yet, you have made no choices. You have never married, Severus. Why is that?"

"Some men feel called to support the cause by raising a new generation of fine, pureblooded witches and wizards. My calling has always been to serve you, to see that there was an appropriate world in which to raise them."

"A true teacher, then? Is that what you wish me to believe?"

"It is an abomination to teach magic to those who do not deserve it. If you have seen displeasure in my thoughts, it stems from being forced to share our gifts with the

unworthy. But in a different world, in *your* world, my Lord, I would--"

"Enough. It matters not. There is a task I wish you to perform for me. Then, if you complete it to my satisfaction, you can return to your precious school and take up the position you claim to want."

"You need only to ask, my Lord."

"Your contact... Potter's friend?"

Every muscle in his body froze, but he kept his gaze steady. "Yes, my Lord?"

"Dispose of her family."

"Not the girl herself?"

"I think not. You bedded her, you said?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Then she may trust you, yet. She will not wish to think that she has given herself to a traitor. She may prove... useful... down the line. So I will not ask you to tell her that you have done so, but for my own peace of mind--"

"Consider it done."

"Thank you, Severus. Your obedience pleases me. Do you wish to remain here until the school year begins? I am sure Narcissa would be delighted to have you as her guest."

"Narcissa's hospitality is unparalleled, my Lord, but I do not wish to impose on her for such a length of time. I am a private man with few social needs. If it pleases you, I will return to Spinner's End for the summer."

Voldemort looked at him, considering. "You are a wanted man, now, Severus. For your own protection, I think a Fidelius Charm would be in order."

"Indeed, my Lord."

"Very well. Place the charm and return to me with the secret. You shall stay in Spinner's End if that is your desire."

"Thank you, my Lord."

"You are welcome. And Severus?"

"Yes?"

"I will expect to hear news of the Muggles shortly."

"Certainly, my Lord."

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When it came time for the funeral, Hermione took her place in line with the other Gryffidors, following Professor McGonagall out onto the grounds, into a world that had no right to be so bright or so beautiful. It was a perfect summer day. The trees had budded, and the wind carried the sweet fragrance of the flowers over the lush green of the grounds.

Chairs had been set up in widening semi-circles, and a great number of them were already filled by all manner of witches and wizards. Moody, Lupin and Tonks sat together beside Kingsley Shacklebolt. She saw Madam Malkin from the robe shop in Diagon Alley, several salesmen she recognized from Flourish and Blotts, and Argus Filch, who was wearing the oddest assortment of clothing she'd seen in some time and sitting beside Madam Pince, who was weeping silently into a long, black veil. The Weasleys formed a large, red-headed cluster to the left; even Percy had showed up to pay his respects, though he sat beside Rufus Scrimgeour in one of the front-most rows. Improbably, on the other side of Scrimgeour sat the barman from the Hog's Head, and--

The barman from the Hog's Head? Snape's voice sounded in her head. *So, you are not aware that his brother Aberforth tends the bar at the Hog's Head?* Had he and Draco been discussing Dumbledore? Was that Dumbledore's brother? Her stomach gave an almighty lurch. Why else would he be sitting in the front row? And if that were Dumbledore's brother then... *Your foolishness very nearly destroyed the Headmaster's plan!* The Headmaster's plan. The **Headmaster's** plan!

Harry filed down a long row of spindle legged chairs with Ginny right behind him. Hermione followed, nearly blinded by her own tears. She kept her eyes on Ginny's feet and edged along the seats. She sat down beside Ginny, and Ron took his place on her other side. Each of them reached out to take one of her hands, and she closed her eyes, tears still running unchecked down her cheeks and spattering her robes. The Headmaster's plan. The Headmaster's plan. She could think nothing but those three words, and they chased each other, tripping, dancing, screaming through her mind. The Headmaster's plan.

The merpeople had come to the surface of the Black Lake. The strange and garbled sound of their singing filled the air and seemed to Hermione to be an echo of her thoughts. She could not understand a word of their lament, but she sensed that it had to do with painful truth, with loss and confusion and war, with terrible sadness. Hermione glanced at Harry, who wore an odd look of complete attention and determination. The song of the merpeople seemed to be filling him with a sense of purpose, and she briefly wondered if it sounded different to each person who heard it.

But before she could examine others for their reactions, Hagrid was proceeding up the aisle that ran through the center of the chairs, carrying Dumbledore's body, shrouded in spangled purple cloth, in his arms. She stared at the limp figure, which looked so tiny compared to Hagrid's huge frame, as if it could answer all the questions that raged in her soul.

Had *this* truly been the Headmaster's plan? When he had called her to his office in September, he had told her that he did not expect to live much longer--in fact, he had said that Voldemort was forming a plan to have him killed within the year. She had not believed it, not believed it possible that *anyone* was powerful enough to kill Dumbledore. Perhaps no one was, not unless... unless he desired to be killed.

Someone was delivering a eulogy before Dumbledore's body; Hermione could see the top of the wizard's head bobbing above the crowd, but she could not hear a word he said. Instead she heard the Headmaster's voice as it had been on her birthday, as he asked for her help.

"*You realize that there will have to be some action on Professor Snape's part, some parting blow that delivers him safely to the other side?*"

"Yes...?"

"*If you chose to protect Professor Snape and his secret, I would need to believe that your faith in him would not be broken, no matter what he had to do to leave the Order. I would have to be confident that you understand perfectly that all Professor Snape does, he does for the Light. He and I have made this choice together because we believe that he will be able to protect Harry more effectively from the other side.*"

A sound escaped her, a rasping, whistling sob, and Ron put his arms around her, and she leaned against him. This was what was supposed to have happened, goddamn it. This had been the plan all along. She had no idea who she was crying for anymore. For Harry, who had lost the last of the piteous few father figures he'd had; for Snape, who had born the terrible knowledge of what he must do without every being able to share it with anyone; for Dumbledore, a man she had trusted with her life and with her fate, who she had believed would save them; or for herself--for she felt more alone with her secrets than she had ever felt in her life. What sort of a plan was this? She wanted to yell at Dumbledore's body, which was now encased in a magical tomb. Who set this kind of pain in motion?

The ceremony ended, but Hermione sat slumped, limp with fear and rage and sorrow, still wrapped in Ron's brotherly embrace. Dimly, she was aware that Harry and Ginny were whispering to each other next to her. There was an odd sound in both their voices, but she chalked it up to the day's events and paid it no mind. But then they were gone, and Ron was speaking quietly to her.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"I think it's time that we tell Harry."

"Tell him what?"

"That we're going with him."

Hermione looked at Ron. When had he figured out what they were going to do? When had her boys grown up? She had the sudden urge to blurt out all her secrets to him. *Ron, I--I married Professor Snape. He'll help us, I swear it--* But, of course, that was totally senseless. He might understand where they were going, but he could never understand that.

"What about Lavender?"

"You mean if she's speaking to me after this?" he said with a small, rueful smile, releasing her. "She'll have to wait, won't she? She'll understand when she realizes where I've gone. And if she doesn't... well..." His voice trailed off.

"Do you think that Ginny knows?"

"I think he's telling her now."

Hermione looked over to where Harry and Ginny stood and watched as he walked away from her. Ginny's eyes were blazing with tears, but she looked... proud of him, and Hermione's heart clenched with love for her friend.

"Hermione, I know how much you wanted to finish school--"

"Stop it. You know that's not important."

He nodded slowly. "Come on. He needs us now."

She stood and crossed the grounds with Ron, nearly trotting, to catch Harry, who was dodging quickly among the trees to avoid Scrimgeour.

"Harry, wait!" Hermione called, and he slowed but did not turn to face them.

"Harry--" She closed the last of the distance between them and lay her hand on Harry's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Harry turned and looked up at the castle, and she followed his gaze. The huge, stone building seemed even more enormous with the late afternoon sun glinting off the towers. It was almost impossible to imagine that they were leaving it for good.

"We're coming with you," Ron said quietly.

Harry began to protest, but Ron simply shook his head. "The train leaves this afternoon. I have to go home for Bill's wedding, but after that--"

"After that, we go," Hermione finished for him. "Do you have a plan?"

Harry's words tumbled out of him in an angry rush. *"I've got to track down the rest of the Horcruxes, haven't I?" he said, his eyes upon Dumbledore's white tomb, reflected in the water on the other side of the lake. "That's what he wanted me to do, that's why he told me all about them... I've got to find them and destroy them, and then I've got to go after the seventh bit of Voldemort's soul, the bit that's still in his body, and I'm the one who's going to kill him. And if I meet Severus Snape along the way," he added, "so much the better for me, so much the worse for him."*

Hermione nodded, though his words struck fear into her blood. Someday, somehow, she was going to have to tell him. She shoved the thought away. "I have to check on my family," she said. "But I'll meet you at the Burrow--two weeks at the latest."

She took Harry's hand in one of hers and Ron's in the other, and together they walked up to the castle to pack.

## Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 19 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: And so we leave HBP behind. Thanks for sticking with me! And thanks, always, to Shellsnapelover, without whom there would be no story.

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Hermione packed the last of her robes into her trunk, on top of the Horcrux books she had summoned from Dumbledore's office just after his funeral. She hadn't truly

expected the charm to work. *'Accio Horcrux Books'* had seemed a bit far-fetched, but they had come sailing through her open window, almost as if Dumbledore had planned it that way. Which, she supposed, he might have. She closed her trunk and took a final look around the room that had been hers since she had arrived, eager and terrified, at Hogwarts six years before. Lavender and Parvati were still flitting about the room, tossing items haphazardly into their trunks and arguing over who got to keep the hair pins adorned with moving purple butterflies over the summer. Hermione's third of the room was as empty as she had ever seen it. Gone were the stacks of books that she kept beside her bed. Gone, the quills and half-filled ink bottles that had littered her desk. Gone, the Muggle picture of her parents that she set on her nightstand each year at the beginning of term. She fingered the crimson hangings that surrounded her bed before drawing them closed. She longed to touch the mirror above her dresser, to caress each of the drawers that had held her clothes. She wanted to press her hand against the cool stone walls and say goodbye to each of these familiar things, never noticed, but always present.

Her trunk would be taken to the train by house-elves. There was nothing left to do but to say goodbye to the girls and meet Ron and Harry in the common room.

"Lavender, Parvati," she began. She choked slightly. These girls, they were not her friends, particularly, but they had been her companions. And there had been good times, hadn't there? Nights when she had put down her books and helped them charm tiny hearts into their nail polish; the night of the Yule Ball, when Parvati had taken a huge jar of Sneezezy and her wand to Hermione's hair. There had been times, yes, when they had been almost like sisters, fighting over who made too much noise in her sleep, who had left her robes all over the floor.

"I hope you have a good summer," Hermione said, for she could not give them a proper goodbye. There must be no hint from her that she might never see them again.

Parvati turned and looked at her sharply. "Hermione, are you crying?"

"No--no, of course not."

Lavender came over and touched her gently on the arm. "Of course, you're crying," she said. "We're all terribly sad about the Headmaster."

Hermione nodded as if this were exactly the reason for her tears.

"But we'll have the summer to get used to it. I'll see you at Ron's before you know it. And then we'll be back here, just like we've always been. And I'll be getting my hair all over your robes, and Parvati will be telling us both that we snore, and Crooks will be into everything... just like it's always been. Enjoy the respite," she said.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, I imagine you'll both look forward to a couple of months without my homework planner screaming us all awake at six a.m."

"Don't you doubt it for a second," Parvati said, but she hugged Hermione briefly before returning to her own packing. "Take care."

"You, too. Both of you. Take good care," Hermione said and turned and walked from the room.

She felt chilled as she descended the stairs, though the castle was no cooler than usual.

Ron and Harry were waiting for her in the common room, and when she arrived, they climbed wordlessly through the portrait hole. All three of them turned and looked back at the Fat Lady as she swung back into place.

"Get along, dears, or you'll miss the train," she said. Her eyes were splotchy from crying. Hermione wondered if this were only for Dumbledore, or if she was always a bit sad when the students left.

Harry and Ron turned to make for the steps, but Hermione still stood, transfixed by the guardian of their house.

"You know, I never..." she began, "I never asked your name."

"Brunhilde," the Fat Lady said, sniffing.

"Goodbye, Brunhilde."

"Goodbye, Know-It-All."

Laughter burst out of Hermione's mouth before she could think to hold it in. Her voice rang through the hushed corridor, echoing off the stone walls.

"Turnabout is fair play, I suppose," she gasped at last, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. Harry and Ron were looking at her with vague alarm. But this was a much better way to leave--this was the Hogwarts she knew, stuffed to the gills with students and their laughter. Suddenly, she thought of Fred and George and their glorious exit from the school the year before. Yes, laughing was the right way to go.

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On the train, she and Ron sat in the Prefects' compartment, having no real urge to patrol the corridor, nor to visit with anyone. They had watched earlier as Harry had chosen an empty compartment at the very back of the train. It seemed obvious to her that they were, the three of them, closing down. The world would narrow down to their own familiar faces and their blind determination. No one else would be let in for the duration of their task.

She stared out the window of the train, watching the green countryside hurry by. Finally, she turned and spoke quietly.

"You're not telling your family, are you?"

"Not where we're going, no. But I'll have to tell them that I'm not coming back to school. You?"

"No, it'd be too dangerous, by far. I haven't quite decided what to do with my family yet. It seems like," she said, her voice beginning to tremble, "like they'd be--"

"Prime targets," Ron finished.

"Yes. And your family, too."

"Blood traitors, the lot of us. I know. I don't want to put them at any more risk. Not that they wouldn't understand it, but--"

"I know. I've been thinking a great deal about that ghoulish in your attic," she said.

She pulled a bit of folded parchment from her pocket, and Ron made a show of rolling his eyes, but he bent his head next to hers, and they spent the next few hours outlining a plan involving, of all things, pajamas and spattergroit.

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The station was subdued when she and Ron descended from the train. It was clogged with families, as usual, but there were no shrieks of welcome, no buzz of excitement. Mothers and fathers simply stepped forward, sweeping their children into worried embraces, gathered baggage, nodded quietly to other families, and left. Her parents stood solemnly beside the Weasleys. Her mother clutched a piece of parchment in her hand; Hermione assumed it was the letter they had received telling them to pick her up early from King's Cross.

"Are you all right?" Her mother whispered as she crushed Hermione to her.

There was no response but to cry, to allow herself for one last moment to be her mother's child. Her father patted her back nervously. Hermione broke away and turned to Ron.

"I'll be there soon," she said.

Ron nodded and reached out to squeeze her hand. She hugged Ginny fiercely, gave Mr and Mrs Weasley a watery smile and then followed her family to the baggage area, where they collected her trunk and proceeded to the car.

The car seemed stuffy and weighted with things unsaid. Her father finally broke the silence.

"So, this... this Dark wizard? He was responsible for the death of the Headmaster?"

Hermione considered. "Yes," she said finally.

"I thought you were supposed to be safe at Hogwarts!" her mother said. "I thought that Professor Dumbledore was supposed to be stronger than--"

"He was, Mum. He was just unlucky. No students were hurt. The Headmaster would never have allowed that to happen."

"But you won't be going back, surely. Not with you being... Muggle-born. Didn't you say that this maniac hates Muggle-borns?"

"No, I very likely won't be going back," Hermione said quietly. She hadn't yet worked out what she would tell her parents, but this seemed as good an excuse as any for the time being.

She thought she saw a look dart between her parents, and her mother seemed to twitch uncomfortably in her seat.

"How's Harry?" her father asked.

"He's all right. He... well, he's physically all right. This is a hard time for him."

"He's not planning to try to take on this wizard, is he? I know that... Voldemort... killed his parents, but he's not thinking of going after him alone?" Even her mother, a woman who knew so little about the wizarding world, seemed to have trouble saying Voldemort's name. But there was something else in her hesitancy. They had asked after Harry, but Hermione thought that they were actually asking about her plans. She felt, for a moment, very *known*, very cherished. Her parents knew her well enough, it seemed, to realize that she would not be able to stand by and let this happen to those she loved.

"I think that, when the times comes, Harry will want to do what he can to see that Voldemort is stopped," she replied.

"But what good can the child do?" Her mother protested. "If Voldemort is strong enough to overtake Professor Dumbledore, then--"

"Harry learned a lot from Professor Dumbledore," Hermione said quietly. She still had the sense that they were not talking about Harry, exactly.

"But that's just it--that's just learning! It's all very well to *learn*, Hermione. But surely, Harry is not prepared to fight such a wizard. He'll get himself killed! He has a Muggle family, doesn't he? Why doesn't he just leave magic for a while--not forever! Don't give me that look! But until this blows over..."

"It's not going to blow over, Mum. And I'm not leaving magic! Not now--not when--"

"There's someone at the house, Hermione," her father said tersely, and she got the feeling from his tone that this was why her parents were so adamant that she lay down her wand. "Someone to see you."

"Who?"

"A man--a wizard. Someone who says he knows you from school. He arrived just before we left. Pulled up in a little Citroen, just as normal as you please. It's funny--he doesn't look magic. But then, neither do you, I suppose."

Hermione's blood ran cold. She remembered Professor Snape's words at Christmas *I am sure you have realized that as a Muggle-born and a friend of Potter, the Dark Lord has taken a special interest in you*. Who had he sent? And why hadn't he killed her family already, unless he was waiting to take all three of them out at once? Well, he would be sorry, if that's what he'd had in mind. She would give any Death Eater a fight to remember. And why had her parents left an unknown man alone in the house while they came to fetch her? Had he put them under the Imperius Curse? She struggled to look into her mother's eyes. She didn't look Imperiused, but... In her mind, she began to strategize. An Anti-Apparition Charm on the house would prevent him from escaping, but would trap her there, too. Protego Horribilis, of course, on herself and her parents. Would it work on Muggles? No reason why not that she could think of... She moved her wand from the pocket of her robes, which were balled up on the car seat next to her, to the waistband of her denims.

"What does he look like?" she asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"An older gentleman, a bit on the portly side," her father replied. *Slughorn? He always said he wouldn't choose sides, but he was the head of the Slytherin house...*

"And did he say what he wanted?"

"All he would say was that it was imperative that he see you. He seemed to think you'd be home already."

"Hermione," her mother said, "I know you like to... well, to get involved. And that's good, honey. We've always been very proud of you. But you haven't joined Dumbledore's 'Order of the Phoenix,' have you? Because I really think--"

"Did the man say he was from the Order of the Phoenix?"

A tiny flame of hope sprung to life in her chest. Had the Order sent someone? Had Dumbledore made arrangements for her family after all?

"No, he wouldn't say anything but that he had to see you. We offered to take him to the station with us, but he refused. He seemed not to want anyone to know he was there--asked us not to mention it at King's Cross. Hermione, have you joined Dumbledore's group?"

"No, Mum. The Order won't admit anyone that's still in school."

"Well, thank heavens for small--" her mother began as they pulled up in front of the house.

"Dad, I thought you said he'd arrived in a Citroen." Hermione was scanning the street. There were no unfamiliar cars there. In fact, there were no cars there at all.

"That's odd," her father said. "Well, maybe he's left, and all this fuss was for nothing."

Hermione tried to tell herself that, in fact, the wizard who had so discomfited her parents had gone. But her unease grew as she looked from house to house. The street had an odd, abandoned feel to it. Usually, there would be someone mowing the grass or gathering up the post... someone coming home or a child playing in a yard.

"Come here," she said and motioned her parents around the side of the house, under the cover of the beech tree that shaded her bedroom window. Her parents followed

her uneasily.

"Hermione--" her father began.

"Mum, Dad, listen. Maybe you're right and whoever was here is gone. But like you said earlier--Muggles are targets to Voldemort, and I don't want to go in that house until I know that you're protected. Will you trust me?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing that could hurt you. I'm just going to cast a Shielding Charm on you."

Her mother and father exchanged another worried glance. Her father seemed about to speak, but her mother interrupted, saying, "All right."

Hermione took her wand out from under her shirt. "*Protego Horribilis!*" She considered and rejected the Anti-Apparition Charm. There was a tiny part of her, too ludicrous to be acknowledged, that hoped it was Snape in there waiting for her, and she didn't want to trap him in the house if that were the case. She crept quietly toward the door with her parents behind her, her wand stuffed up her sleeve, but ready to be drawn at a moment's notice.

She opened the door. "Hello?" she called. There was no reply.

She turned from the hallway into the sitting room. There, at the far end of the room, stood a short, stocky man with thick, blond hair. A man with a rounded nose and tanned, freckled skin. A man with hard, black eyes that caught and held her before she could speak.

"Hermione?" her mother said hesitantly from the doorway. Hermione held up a single hand, staying her parents, but she could not speak. Her eyes were locked with Snape's.

"Who was the fourth person at my birthday party?" she whispered.

"Alastor Moody," he replied. His voice was slightly higher pitched, but it had the same silken quality she knew. "What did I give you for Christmas?"

"*The Encyclopedia of Toadstools*," she said, her eyes never leaving his. They stood there for a moment, unmoving, and she began to survey him. The glamour would hide most of the damage if there was any, but the way he stood... he seemed unharmed.

"Are you all right?" she finally choked out, and he began, at last, to walk toward her.

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He was paralyzed for a moment, unsure how she would receive him. But her eyes had sought his immediately, and he saw that she had kept her promise. Her right hand still rested on the butt of her wand where it poked out of her shirtsleeve, but she made no motion to retrieve it. When she spoke, he knew that he would not be forced to hex her. As he took a step toward her, he was filled with a gratitude more profound than any he had ever known, an almost dizzying relief, and yet, it was countered by an immediate wave of nausea. What had he done to her that she would still look at him with trust?

He was struck by the sight of her mother standing behind her, but already moving to step between them. Hermione was so like her mother that it was a bit unnerving. Snape felt as if he were somehow allowed to gaze upon the woman that she would become, and some unnamed emotion tugged at him until her mother spoke.

"Hermione, do you know this man?" she asked sharply. So like Hermione... and the question of why the girl had been sorted into Gryffindor was quickly resolved. Her mother, a mere Muggle, was advancing on him in a nearly predatory stance.

Hermione reached out and took her mother's arm. "It's all right, Mum. I know him. He's my professor." Her eyes glanced to his for permission, which he granted with a slight nod. "It's Professor Snape."

Her father entered the room then. He was a mousy man with a thick gray mustache. "But I thought Professor Snape was... well, you always described him as... I mean to say, why didn't you tell us you were Hermione's professor?"

"I am sorry to have intruded upon you without explaining myself fully. Events at the school being what they are, we are all compelled to positively identify each other before we are free to speak." He knew that her parents would assume that he had been bound to silence by a magical compulsion, and he encouraged the notion. In fact, he had not been at all sure that Hermione would not alert the Aurors if she knew he were present in her home. And he had needed time to place the Distraction Charms necessary to ensure their privacy along the street.

"Forgive me," Hermione said. "I don't know where my manners are. Mum, Dad, this is Severus Snape, professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts. Professor Snape, my parents, Helen and Richard Granger."

"Mr and Mrs Granger, it is a pleasure to meet you. I'm sure you realize what an extraordinary daughter you have. She is among the brightest students I have ever had the pleasure of teaching. Thank you for allowing me into your home. I hate to impose upon you again so soon, but I need to speak to Hermione alone."

Her mother raised an eyebrow at this, but Hermione turned and said, "It's all right, Mum," and the woman took a step back. Hermione led him into a small parlor at the end of the house and shut the door, locking and warding it.

"*Muffliato*," Snape said. It was as if the charm released her. She flew at him like a banshee, her voice harsh and screechy.

"How could you not have told me? You can't imagine what I felt! It was days before I was completely sure and I--"

He seized her fists, which had been beating with remarkable strength against his chest.

"And then you come here! And you don't even look like you! Here, with my parents! Not a word from you all this time! I've been afraid to contact you--"

"Would you feel better if I removed the disguise?" he asked quietly. His voice was so low and smooth that it seemed to make her realize how crazed she sounded. For a moment, it looked as if she would pull herself together, but then she whipped her wand from her sleeve and pointed it at him, shouting, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

He stood there, still and silent before her, wearing Muggle clothes that were now spectacularly unsuited to him. His pale ankles were exposed below the hems of trousers that were five inches too short, and his waistcoat sagged around his middle.

"Oh, Professor," she said. "You're hurt. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm fine. It's been several days, and it wasn't the worst I've suffered by a long shot. And I don't know when you expected me to tell you. Should I have squeezed it in between blows?"

She looked slightly abashed and then furious once more. "Oh, no, you don't. You don't get off that easy. Why didn't you tell me? You can't imagine how sick, how confused, I felt when I heard. I thought--I mean--with everything we've--I just thought you might have had a bit more--"

"You know very well that the Headmaster did not wish for you to know--"

"Bollocks!" she yelled. "I know now! And I'm at much more risk of being captured than I was at Hogwarts, so don't give me that double blind bullshit! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I believed that if you knew, you would try to stop me." He looked at her steadily. It seemed the only way to weather this strange storm was to be as direct and calm as possible.

"I--," she sputtered. "I--well, I admit that at first I might have done. But just at first! Give me some credit--I believed in you, in Dumbledore! And don't you think I can see what this has done for Harry?"

"The very fact that I risked coming here at all should tell you how much credit I give you, Miss Granger. And not having laid eyes on Potter since he tried to hex me on the grounds, I have no idea what this has 'done for Harry,' as you say."

She glared at him. "Oh, come off it. If I had been Harry, I would have tried to hex you, too. In fact, if I had been Harry, I would have succeeded at hexing you."

He couldn't help it; the corners of his lips turned up. He hid it quickly in a smirk. Her answering half-smile told him that the danger had passed.

"Harry is more determined than I have ever seen him," she said quietly. "He is ready."

"But you, as yet, are not," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I have told you before that the Dark Lord has taken an interest in you."

She nodded, pale once more, and he steeled himself to continue. "He has asked... that is, he has ordered me... I came because he ordered me to kill your family, Miss Granger."

## Chapter Twenty

### Chapter 20 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All that you recognize belongs to JKR. I make no money. Thank you to Shellsnapelover for beta reading this chapter, and OpalJade for cheerleading it. The kiss is for Irishredlass. Love you, ladies.

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She did not gasp, nor cry out, but she had gone a sickly gray. She stared at him, immobile and silent.

"Surely, you don't think that I--"

"No," she said slowly. "But you've taken an enormous risk to come here, so you must be planning something."

"I have thought of only one option that might hide them successfully," he said. This was true. He had spent the last two days thinking of nothing except how to get out of this and had dreamt up and discarded what felt like a hundred plans.

She waited. It struck him how often Hermione stood, watching him, waiting for him to speak, and he wondered briefly if her two little friends had ever seen this side of her. Had anyone? Once again he was nearly paralyzed with shame. Her trust in him--it was not right. It was not *decent*. But the look on her face brought him back to the situation at hand. He wanted to break the plan to her slowly, but he found he could not.

"A Memory Charm," he said baldly. "One strong enough to convince them that they are other people, with other hopes, other aspirations.... If we could move them far away from here--"

"Take me from their memories, you mean?" she said, and at first he thought she was protesting. "Erase everything about magic, everything about Hogwarts, everything even about who they are... like Witness Protection..."

He nodded.

"No one could break them," she murmured, "but would they be safe?"

"I think we could hide them well enough. With new names, new jobs... It would be a risk, but I think--"

"It would be a huge risk, maybe too huge a risk. What if Voldemort were somehow to discover--? I mean," her voice broke, but she managed to continue, "I can't bear the thought of sacrificing them. I can't. But I can't sacrifice you, either."

"I do not wish you to consider my situation," he said. He would not allow her to choose him this time. He simply would not allow it.

"Really? Well, I'm sorry, but that is not possible."

"Hermione, this is exactly why I did not wish for us to become involved beyond--"

"Please. Are you really trying to tell me you'd have taken this risk if it weren't my parents?"

"I do not kill the innocent."

"Dammit! You know that's not what I'm implying. I cannot tolerate the idea of exposing you any more than you can bear the thought of murdering my parents."

"The Dark Lord wants to weaken you, Hermione. This is to force you into hiding and to render Potter unable--"

"I know that! Of course, I know that. But this whole marriage was designed to keep you alive, to keep you in contact with Harry. And I cannot risk that."

"Which is why this is the only thing that makes sense."

"I don't even know if I could perform a Memory Charm that complex," she said. Her color had returned, and he knew he had almost won.

"I will do it."

"Severus--" she began, and he knew that with his name, she had played her last card.

"Hermione," he said firmly. "It's a risk either way. Even if you performed the charm, I would still have to take evidence to the Dark Lord of their deaths. I would still have to disassemble. This way, at least there will be less risk that we will permanently damage their minds."

She looked at him, and in her look he could read mind-numbing fear, sadness, resignation, defeat... and hope.

"Do you think that there's any chance that the charm could be removed... if we were to live?"

"If you were to live, I think there is a chance that it could be undone, yes."

"All right." She set her jaw in a pose he recognized as determination. "With the understanding that if we live, we track them down and undo the charm."

He nodded, but the word 'we' pained him. Why would she not accept the fact that there was no chance he would live through this war?

"Will I get to say... that is, will we tell them what we are going to do?"

"Do you think they would allow you to do it if you did?" He watched her face carefully as he asked the question. Her answer would tell him a great deal about whether she understood why he had kept the Headmaster's plan from her.

"My father maybe. But my mother, no." She paused for what seemed an eternity. "Shall I Stupefy them?" she asked, and though she did not move, he could sense that she was about to unlock the door.

"Eventually. But first, there are other things to consider. I want you to think carefully through the house. You will only have a few moments to retrieve anything that you might wish to keep."

"What do you mean?"

He pulled a bone from his pocket. "You remember Bartemius Crouch, I presume?"

She nodded mutely, a vague look of disgust crossing her features.

"We will have to destroy the house to keep anyone from looking too closely. I have what will pass for bodies. When it is time, you must go quickly through the house. Get your school things and anything else that you... want to save. Transfigure it and keep it with you. We'll Apparate out."

"But where will we go?"

"You shall go on the Burrow. They are expecting you for the Weasley wedding, are they not?"

"Yes, but--"

"And I will take your parents with me."

"Where?"

"Do you really want to know that? If you were captured--"

"I need to know," she said quietly. *Good girl*, he thought. Perhaps this meant that she did understand that when the war was over, she would find them alone.

"I thought Australia."

"Can you go that kind of distance with two Muggles by Side-Along?" she asked.

"I will have to."

This answer seemed to satisfy her. He was quietly impressed. It seemed Hermione understood the relationship between possibility and necessity.

"Do you have your bag with you?"

"It's in my luggage."

"From now on, you will need to be prepared to leave at any time. That bag needs to be packed and on your person."

"I will see to it tonight."

"Fine. I have some things for you." He removed from his pockets several flasks. "This was all I had outside of Hogwarts," he said, holding them out to her.

She turned the bottles over in his hands. "No. I won't take this. You need them."

"Need I remind you that I can get more? If you've found a shop selling Dittany and Murtlap in the forest, please do enlighten me."

She glared at him. "You needn't snap at me. You can't go back to Hogwarts, and I hardly think popping into Slug and Jiggers would be wise. There's a price on your head."

He looked at her very seriously. There was no way to say this without frightening her, so he simply plunged ahead. "Not for long. The tide is turning, Hermione. Soon, I will walk the streets like any man."

She blanched, but took the bottles.

"I also wish to discuss with you the movement of Potter from his home to the safe house."

She looked guarded. "Is it wise that we--?"

"I told you that there would be times that we would need to confer. This is one of those times. Before... Dumbledore's plan, I understood that the Order intended to move Potter on the eve of his seventeenth birthday."

"That's my understanding, yes."

"That will need to be changed."

"But--oh. I see."

"Yes. Sometimes I have to tell the truth."

"Of course."

"In addition, I think the Order is unprepared for the ferocity with which they will be watched and attacked."

"If the other night at Hogwarts was any indication, that will surely be the case," she said.

"I have an idea that might get Potter out safely. I'm going to plant it on Mundungus Fletcher."

"Mundungus? But why? No one really pays any attention to him."

"Indeed. So no one will question where such an idea came from. But you are to take up for it immediately. You *must* make sure that his plan is followed. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Mundungus will bring your plan to the Order. I will make them see its merit."

He shuddered. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Repeat the plan back to me. It will make it harder to hide. And it makes it sound as if I've Imperiused you."

She grimaced. "All right. Is there anything else?"

"Nothing else. Just that I--I'm pleased you did not attack me when you arrived." It was as close to an apology or an expression of gratitude for her trust in him that he could muster.

She turned away from him very slightly, toward the door. "Why did you do it?"

"Because he asked me to."

"I know that! I just mean... what did it accomplish besides allowing you to change sides? I'm sure there could have been other ways to--"

"You said yourself that Potter is changed."

"Yes. But--"

"For many reasons," he said, interrupting her. "Not all of which I was privy to, myself. Because a young man would have been killed if I had not. Because I needed to be in a position to take over as Headmaster of Hogwarts, to protect the students from my Death Eater 'friends.' Do these things satisfy you? Is this what you wish to hear?" Somehow, as he spoke, anger rose and nearly choked him. For it all sounded flimsy--flimsy and avoidable. How could he ask her to accept these reasons when he hardly knew why he had accepted them himself?

"Severus, I know it was his plan; you don't need to justify yourself--"

"No? That's not what you were asking?"

"Please. I just... I just want to understand." She reached out and took his hand, and he began to feel completely unhinged. A moment ago he had been ready to force her to share his bitter confusion; now, he simply wanted to kiss her until it was all driven away, reduced to a dull throb at the back of his mind.

"Dumbledore did not--he did not trust me with everything. He felt I was too... close to Voldemort. 'Dangling from his arm,' I believe was how he put it. He simply insisted it was necessary. I wish I had more answers to give you."

"It's all right," she said. "I know what it is to have to take things on faith."

How could she compare his treachery to her sacrifice? He did not deserve that kind of compassion. Better simply to force her away before he harmed her, broke her irreparably. Already there was too much damage. He began to turn away, but she spoke again, calling him back. Always, always, she called him back.

"I don't know when it's safe to contact you by the ring. I don't know when you're alone like I did at Hogwarts. I won't do it unless it's an emergency. But you--you should do it any time you like. I've never had too much trouble throwing off the boys."

He smirked in response. "Very well. But the rings... I never taught you shorthand. There are so many lessons I wish I could have given you. But that is immaterial," he said and shook his head as if to clear it. "You realize it is safe to go to Grimmauld Place?"

"Headquarters? Yes, I suppose it would be. Of course, the Order has moved out."

"All the better. No one will ask questions. There is a portrait there of a Black family ancestor, Phineas Nigellus Black. Take it with you, if you can. I will have access to his portrait in the Headmaster's Office, if everything proceeds according to plan. He is bound by the Headmaster's Oath. We can communicate through him."

"All right. I'll go there as soon as I can get away."

He looked at her for a moment. He wanted to remember the way she looked before he orphaned her, for he knew that it would change her, change her permanently to be so alone, to have no home to go back to. Already she looked older, or perhaps it was just that she looked more worn. He ran his hand over the unruly tangle of her hair. She reached up and covered his hand with hers. She angled toward him, and briefly, he brushed his lips over hers, breaking away before he could become lost.

"Go to the living room and make small talk," she said. "I know what I want, so it will only take a moment. When I join you, we'll..." Her voice trailed off.

"*Dissimulo Adversus!*" he said, turning his wand on himself before she could cry. "Go."

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When she thought back on her choices later, Hermione would wonder what on earth had made her decide that she could not leave the house she'd grown up in without her mother's Christmas decorations. Of all she could have saved--scrapbooks, baby clothes, a favorite blanket or a well-loved book--all that she had thought of when Snape mentioned saving things from the house was a large and tattered box kept in the back of her mother's closet. But perhaps everything that she wanted was in that box after all, she thought as she dragged a high backed chair across her parent's bedroom. In it was her childhood: ornaments of paste and glitter, desiccated strings of cranberries, ribbons and cards. And it held for her, perhaps, more memories than a photo album could have done and spanned the years both pre- and post- magic. She climbed onto

the chair, shoving shoe boxes and extra quilts aside and seized the box, Transfiguring it to fit into her pocket. Then she hastened to the living room, where she found Snape sitting stiffly in a wingback chair, a glass in his hand.

"Sixteen years," he was saying as she came through the doorway.

She looked at her mother, wanting to read her eyes, wanting to know what she thought of the wizard who sat, chatting idly, in their home. Did she like him? Did she ~~know~~? But a quick glance told her that her mother was already insentient. Her eyes whipped across the room to Snape whose wand was barely exposed beneath his jacket's sleeve.

"I thought it best to do it quickly," he said.

"Yes," she agreed, though she would have liked... well, it didn't matter what she would have liked. She would have liked not to be Obliviating her parents. She would have liked not to be living in a world in which her husband was considered a murdering traitor; in which, for that matter, she could admit she had a husband. She refused to give the dignity of thought to the idea that in a different world, she would have no husband. What did it matter if she would have liked a last look into her mother's eyes?

"I'm going to begin with a simple Oblivate," he said. "Then, I want you to watch and listen closely as I perform the Memory Charm. You will need to remember it clearly in the event that you need to undo it."

"I understand," she said.

Snape pulled his wand from his sleeve. "*Oblivate!*" he said.

She would not have thought it possible that Stupefied people could look even more blank and... terminal was the word that leapt to her mind. Ended. They were simply bodies, as surely as if they were dead. She felt like screaming.

"Do something," she whispered.

"Are you calm? You need to--"

"Do it, Severus."

He seemed to understand. "I'm placing them in a suggestible state. I believe the Muggles call it 'hypnosis,' though their understanding of it is limited," he said. "It is related to the Imperius Curse."

She watched in a state of horrified fascination as he used an Obliteration Charm on her parents, erasing her name and history from their minds. He suggested to them that their names were Wendell and Monica Wilkins and that they had harbored a lifelong dream of relocating from England to Australia. He further insinuated that they had recently retired and were planning to realize that dream on their upcoming vacation.

His voice droned on and on, providing them with false memory after false memory, inventing, in his dry and clipped tones, a chance meeting, a courtship, a marriage. A career in medicine for her father; for her mother, life as a homemaker. They had not wanted children, he told them. Their marriage had been rich and satisfying enough that there had been no need to expand the family. Yet, they had always wanted to travel. They had quite enough saved up, he told them quietly. Enough to enjoy themselves in Australia, where they had always longed to spend their retirement years. This was their chance, he whispered, and on this trip they might look for a house. Everything at home was tied up; they were perfectly free to do as they chose. Unencumbered, just the two of them, as they had been years before when they had married, before careers and mortgages... free to do as they liked. Why not move? It was hardly impulsive. Hadn't they been discussing it for years?

She felt perversely grateful that he had given them a happy life, that they would believe themselves quite satisfied, accomplished, passionately in love, that they might think themselves lucky.

"Pack," he ordered her, and she raced back up the stairs to her parents' bedroom.

"*Pack!*" She said, flicking her wand at the closet. "*Pack!*" The dresser. "*Pack!*" The bathroom. She levitated the trunks down the stairs, just in time to see Snape filling her father's pockets with Muggle money.

"You don't have to--" she began.

"It has to be at hand. They must ask no questions, want for nothing. Hopefully, we can avoid setting off any memory loops. Is there anything in those trunks that might remind them of you?"

"I--I don't know--"

Snape threw the trunks open, one by one, and rummaged through them. He found a single picture. It was one of Colin's--a moving one he'd taken of her at Christmas. She'd forgotten that she had even sent it; thank goodness Snape had found it. And then he shut them up tight again. He cast a Feather-Light Charm on the trunks and Transfigured them into a ring of keys, which he pocketed.

"Are you ready?"

"Almost." She Transfigured her own trunk, placed it in her pocket and scooped up her school robes.

"I have one last thing for you before I depart," Snape said formally.

"Yes?"

He handed her a scrap of parchment. Before she could read it, he reached back into his pocket and pulled out two bones. "Turn around," he said, and his voice told her that it was best to obey him. She heard an odd, squelching sound as the bones hit the floor; he had hit them with Finite Incantatem. "*Confringo!*" he shouted, and the wall behind her crumbled.

"Get out now!" he told her. "*Incendio!*"

She did not look around her. Her memories would have to suffice. Clutching the bit of parchment he'd given her tightly in her fist and holding her robes to her chest, she began to spin. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him grasping her parents firmly to each side of his squat, unfamiliar figure. Surely, he could not manage their weight alone, she thought, but she was afraid to try to go back for fear of Splinching herself.

When she arrived in the meadow outside the Burrow, the world seemed unreal in its serene quiet. She unrolled the parchment, now sweaty and crumpled.

*If all is lost, it said, go to the last house on Spinner's End, Manchester.*

He had not left her homeless after all.

It took all she had to burn it.

# Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter 21 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: As usual, all fully italicized text is from DH, and everything you recognize belongs to JKR. All else is mine. Thank you to OpalJade for her insights on this chapter and to Shellsnapelover, my beta extraordinaire.

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Snape was walking down a narrow, moonlit lane. He had rarely approached Malfoy Manor from the street; more often, he Apparated directly indoors, but the Death Eaters found themselves more paranoid than ever, now, just before their inevitable rise to power. Voldemort insisted that nothing be left to chance any longer; Snape had not argued, and yet he knew he took a chance just walking down this deserted street.

A figure, hooded like himself, appeared at the other end of the lane. He gripped his wand more tightly in his fist until he recognized Yaxley. Ridiculous oaf. Still, he nodded in greeting.

Yaxley prattled on as they approached the Manor and raised their left forearms to be admitted through the gate. Snape startled suddenly as they entered--it seemed he'd caught the briefest motion from the corner of his eye. Yaxley drew his wand, confirming that there had indeed been a disturbance. Snape turned slowly, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling as they tried to rise. He raised his wand--

And found that he had been about to curse a peacock. A pale, white peacock. Several thoughts darted through his mind, the first of which he buried so quickly it was as if he had never thought it at all. He had wished that Hermione were there, for he could almost hear the sound of her laughter at the self-important bird. Dangerous, terrifying, that sort of feeling, and yet he'd had it more and more often since he had seen her at her parents' home.

Secondly, he realized that the bird was a sign. Lucius had returned from Azkaban. The peacocks were unmistakably Lucius's. They were exactly the kind of crass, ostentatious, thinly-veiled symbolism he favored. Third was a surge of pure hatred for Lucius Malfoy, for the Malfoy family in general. They stood for nothing. He'd had more respect for them when he'd thought they truly believed in the Dark Lord and his plans. He wished that this did not have to be done in their house.

Still flanked by Yaxley, he entered the Malfoy drawing room, taking the indicated chair beside Lord Voldemort. Above them revolved the immobilized body of his former colleague, Charity Burbage. She was as good as dead. Snape refused to glance upward as he sat. Clearly, the image was meant to discomfit them all, and he would show no sign of it.

"News, Severus?"

*"My Lord, the Order of the Phoenix intends to move Harry Potter from his current place of safety on Saturday next, at nightfall."*

*"Good. Very good. And this information comes--"*

*"--from the source we discussed," said Snape.*

Yaxley moved to interrupt, but the Dark Lord squashed his protest with a look. "And of your... task?"

Snape pulled from his cloak a Muggle newspaper, opened and folded to the second page, and slid it across the table to the Dark Lord. The article it revealed gave the details of a gruesome robbery, ending in the deaths of two quiet Muggle dentists and the torching of their home. Muggle authorities were at a loss for any motive, and the killer or killers had left no fingerprints, no sign of how they had entered. No sign, even, of how the occupants had died--if they had been murdered or if they had simply succumbed to the fire, for their bodies had been immolated beyond recognition.

Voldemort glanced through the paper, and his lips drew back in a dreadful rictus of pleasure. He tucked the paper into the folds of his robes. The other Death Eaters at the table looked curious and disappointed, as it was clear that he would not be sharing Snape's news with the rest of them.

Yaxley recovered first and began again to protest. "But, my Lord, *Dawlish, the Auror, let slip that Potter will not be moved until the thirtieth, the night before the boy turns seventeen.*"

Snape drew his lips into his customary smirk, allowing the others to read the self-assurance there. *"My source told me that there are plans to lay a false trail; this must be it."*

He had been pleased to receive Hermione's message in his ring in the small hours of the morning, telling him of the revised date of the plan. So, it seemed, she had been able to follow through in getting the Order to accept Mundungus's idea. Finding Mundungus in order to plant the plan on him had proved much more difficult. He had tracked the sneaky, little slime ball for days before finally finding him in a Muggle bar, of all places. A Muggle bar where he seemed to have been quite the favorite. When Snape had found him, he'd been sitting, squashed between two scantily clad and rather buxom females, in a worn, beaten looking pub, being served some hideous concoction by a grinning barman who kept referring to him as Mundy.

The look on the little thief's face when he had recognized Snape had been worth all the effort. But Snape had quickly dragged him aside and Confunded him, and the look was replaced by a blank kind of stare, a stare Snape hated. With extreme distaste, he had suggested quietly that the date of the move be changed, that Polyjuice Potion be used, not to disguise Potter, but to make duplicates of him, as many as they could round up. He further suggested that Mundungus would have no memory of seeing him and would present the idea as his own. Hermione's message had confirmed that things were proceeding as he'd hoped.

The rest of the meeting was simply distasteful. The Dark Lord had always been prone to grandiosity, but his efforts seemed, lately, to be almost vulgar in their affectation. The snake slithering around his neck, the killing of the Muggle-lover... The only high point was when the Dark Lord requested a wand and took Lucius Malfoy's, to the man's obvious discomfort and displeasure. Wandless, Lucius resembled nothing so much as a sulky teenager, denied the latest broomstick by his wealthy parents for his naughty behavior.

When Snape arrived back at Spinner's End, he hesitated just before opening the door, as he had done each time he'd returned since he had foolishly given Hermione that piece of parchment. He had known as he'd written it that it was likely the most incredible risk he'd ever taken, outside of joining the Death Eaters. She could not tell his secret; no, not with her mouth. But she could take the parchment directly to the Aurors. She could Apparate onto his doorstep with an Order member riding the tail of robes. He had known it was unwise, and yet he had done it anyway. And even as he'd handed it to her, he knew he should be forcing her to read it then and there, to make

her burn it in front of him. But her face, back in her parents' house, her tortured face, still open to him... it would have been an insult to her to indicate that he did not trust her, when she'd stood there, trusting him with everything.

He pushed the door open and was greeted, as always, with silence.

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In fact, Hermione had secured the plan only the day before.

"Hermione, I'd like a word." Arthur Weasley had barely stepped out the flames and into his kitchen when he spoke. His face was unreadable, but in his hand he held a newspaper--a Muggle newspaper. Her heart dropped. She had suspected this might happen but had been hoping for a more opportune time. Ron had not yet broken the news to his family that he would not be returning to Hogwarts in September, and she had not wanted to discuss her parents with the Weasleys until Ron, too, was ready to unveil his plan. She cast a significant look at him as she rose from the kitchen table, where she had been snapping peas for Mrs Weasley in preparation for the evening's Order meeting.

Wordlessly, she followed Mr Weasley into the cramped sitting room of the Burrow with Ron right on her heels.

Mr Weasley shot a disapproving look at his son, but seemed to realize he was defeated and held out the paper to Hermione. "You said your parents were going on vacation," he said. When she looked into his eyes, they were clouded with concern for her.

"Sir, I'm very sorry to have lied to you. I didn't mean to impose upon your trust," she said. She glanced at Ron. He needed to step in here, to explain.

"Hermione, it's not my trust I'm concerned about. I want to know what's going on here. Is this true? And if it is, why didn't you tell us? This is too much to bear on your own. Surely, you know that we wouldn't have turned you away."

Is that what he thought? That she had been afraid to tell them for fear that they wouldn't take her in, that they would see what terrible risk followed her presence? She felt miniscule. Worse than lying to them, she had not even considered the risk she caused the Weasleys. They were harbouring a Muggle-born.

"I--I know that, sir. And I'm very grateful. You have always treated me like family. I didn't tell you, well, because--"

For a moment, she could not go on. What could she say that would make him understand what she'd done?

"Hermione, it's all right," Mr Weasley said gently. "I understand if you don't want to talk about it. This article isn't common knowledge--no one outside of those with Ministry connections has seen it. It won't be reported, you know that all the news is being--"

"No, it's not that," she choked. "I didn't tell you because--"

"Because it's not true," Ron broke in. *Took him long enough.*

Mr Weasley looked flabbergasted. "Beg pardon?" He was still brandishing the newspaper.

"Her parents are fine. Hermione was afraid for their safety, so she moved them."

"Moved them? But--"

"I modified their memories," she said, lying quietly and with great regret. "And I hid them far away. They no longer remember having a daughter or anything about magic. Even if Voldemort were to find them somehow, he wouldn't be able to torture anything out of them."

Mr Weasley sank onto the worn looking couch. "Anything about what?" he asked wearily.

Hermione and Ron exchanged another glance.

"Whatever it is, come out with it," he said, clearly losing patience. Why hadn't she noticed before how awful he looked? His face was gray with fatigue and thinner even than usual. Even his eyes seemed to have dulled.

"Dad, Hermione and I aren't going back to Hogwarts."

Mr Weasley sat silently. He seemed to be sizing them both up.

"It's Harry," Hermione said. "He's been given a job. By Dumbledore. And we're going to help him do it. My parents... they didn't know anything more about this than you do. But they knew a lot about Harry, about his history, and I didn't think--"

"You didn't think," he repeated quietly, but there was no venom there. He sighed. "That was very brave, what you did, Hermione. I can't imagine how hard it must have been." There was silence for a moment, and the weight of what they were setting in motion settled like storm clouds in the air. "Your mother is going to kill you, Ronald."

"I know, but Dad--"

"I can't know, can I? What you're doing?"

Ron looked down, and Hermione wished she could comfort him. He was nearly trembling. But she was immensely grateful to Mr Weasley, who was not protesting, who was, in fact, talking about this as if it had already been decided.

"No."

"Have you thought about what you're going to tell your mother?"

"Only every moment for the last week."

"I wish you had come to me."

"I didn't--I don't--want you to think that I would leave you vulnerable. No more so than you already are. Hermione and I have come up with something you can say when I don't show up at Hogwarts. I didn't want to tell you until I was sure it would work, but we've been having trouble and--"

Mr Weasley stood and quickly embraced his son. Hermione had never seen Ron cry, not even when they had been children, not even during Dumbledore's funeral, but she could tell by the way his back twitched with his breathing that he must be crying into his father's chest. She stood there awkwardly until Mr Weasley's arm snuck out and folded her in.

"Tell me your plan, and I'll do what I can to help. No matter what your mother says, Ron, she will be proud of you. You are a good man."

Ron shook harder, and Hermione felt tears pricking at her eyes. She wanted her own father so fiercely.

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The Order members began to arrive just before dinner, Apparating into the meadow, just as she had done on her arrival. The twins, Ron, and Hermione had been given the job of escorting them through the wards and into the house. Remus and Tonks arrived first, Tonks sporting electric pink hair and holding firmly to Remus's hand as if she intended never to let him out of her sight again. She swished her left hand in Hermione's face, dissolving into very un-Tonks-like giggles as Hermione goggled at her wedding ring.

"It was my mother's," Remus said gruffly. Fred and George took charge of the two of them and led them toward the house.

Moody appeared next, and before Hermione could speak up to claim him, he said, "Miss Granger?" and offered her his arm.

Walking on Moody's arm was difficult, as he didn't so much walk as hobble, but Hermione was grateful for the chance to speak with the gruff and scarred old wizard alone.

"I saw the paper," he growled in his strange, low pitched voice. "I take it you've heard from our friend."

She nodded and gathered her courage. "Sir, did you know?"

"Know he would kill him? They didn't come right out and tell me, if that's what you're asking. But I had a pretty clear idea of what would happen. I'm surprised you hadn't figured it out, Miss Granger. Perhaps you're not quite the brain everyone says you are. I thought the old man had made it quite clear on the night of your birthday. I thought that was why you... made the choice you did."

His words stung, but Hermione knew there was truth behind them. Why hadn't she guessed? In retrospect, it had been quite clear what Dumbledore had been trying to tell her.

"Either way," he said, "I could see in your face that night that you had a hand in it. Brave of you. But you'll want to work on your acting, young lady. I'd have thought our friend would have taught you that."

"Yes, sir," was all she could manage.

"Ministry's on the way out," Moody said as they approached the door. "It'll be Death Eaters in charge before we know it. You've kept your bargain, Miss Granger, that much is clear. If you like, I could destroy the records."

"No," she blurted before she'd had time to think, to stop herself.

"That's what I thought. Fair enough. But remember--your acting."

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then," he said and released her arm, stumping his way into the kitchen. "What smells good, Molly? I'm starved."

She turned and walked back to the meadow, her head spinning with thoughts. Should she have allowed him to erase the records of their marriage? Would the binding spells between them still hold if she did? What did it matter? It was just a piece of parchment and a spell. It was just a plan. It was just... but in some way that she could not articulate, it mattered to her very much. Snape was the only family she had now, the only home, the only person who shared her secrets. If their marriage were nullified, would he drop from her life as quickly as he had come?

And yet, if the Death Eaters were taking the Ministry, Moody would not be in a position to cloak their records any further. She could not bear for harm to come to Snape because of her foolish desires. Not to mention what the boys would think, what the Weasleys--who had not even blinked when she'd shown up two weeks early, but welcomed her wholeheartedly into the fold--would think. She resolved that she would speak to Moody and change her decision the next chance she got.

She passed Ron, who was escorting Hagrid to the house, and watched as George joined up with Kingsley Shacklebolt, who had just appeared. Hermione took the arm of Dedalus Diggle, who had removed his purple top hat with a flourish when he saw her, and stooping, escorted him to the meeting.

Fred was the last to return to the kitchen with Mundungus Fletcher in tow. Mundungus looked deeply conflicted, an emotion that rode oddly on his pouchy face. Clearly, he did not want to be here in the slightest, yet something compelled him.

As soon as the last bite of treacle tart had been taken, he blurted it out, seemingly unable to contain himself any longer.

Having downed more than his fair share of the wine that, to be honest, had been flowing rather freely that evening, his words came out in a slurred rush. "So, I've been thinking about moving Harry--"

He was abruptly cut off by Molly Weasley, who exiled Ginny to her bedroom.

Ginny sat defiantly in her place. "Why can't I stay? Don't I have just as much right to know what's going on as anyone here?"

"Ginevra, you are not of age," Mrs Weasley said, glaring at Ron and Hermione as if she thought that they had been terribly inappropriate in turning seventeen.

"Molly--" Mr Weasley began.

"No. I've given all my sons to this cause," she said, her voice alarmingly near tears. Her eyes swept the table. There were an inordinate number of redheads seated there. "I will not give my daughter as well. Not until I absolutely have to."

There was an awkward silence until Ginny relented and exited the room, though Hermione suspected she would be employing one of Fred and George's Extendable Ears before they had got in more than a few sentences.

"Right, so as I was saying," Mundungus said. "I was thinking that now that Snape's gone, moving Harry on his birthday isn't such a good idea."

"Yes, we've already agreed that the date--" Kingsley began, but Mundungus would not be deterred.

"No, listen, see. They'll know--and I'd bet all my gold they'll know we know." Mrs Weasley gave a rather undignified snort at that, presumably doubting that Mundungus had any gold to be wagering. "They'll be hanging round that house he's in, won't they? Watching, waiting. We'll need a better plan than the one we've got."

"Yes, we see the problem," Kingsley said shortly.

"Well, I was thinking. What if we had more than one Harry?"

Remus rolled his eyes and turned to Hestia Jones. "Have you secured the safe house for the Dursleys?" he asked.

But Moody was looking thoughtfully at Mundungus, Hermione was pleased to note. "More than one Harry," he growled in a considering way.

"You know, Polyjuice a bunch of people to look like him--they won't know which one to chase!"

This seemed to have caught everyone's attention.

"You know, that could work," Mr Weasley said slowly.

"But whoever looked like Harry..." Mrs Weasley said, "whoever looked like Harry, they'd be in terrible danger." Hermione knew that she was concerned for all her sons, who were sure to volunteer.

"More than we are now?" George said, indicating the Weasley family clock with his fork. All hands stood, as they had for months, on 'Mortal Peril.'

"He's right, Mum," Fred said. "What's important is to get Harry someplace safe. Without Harry, we might as well all pack it in, hadn't we?"

"We would need volunteers," Moody said. "At least six to play Harry, to make it worthwhile, and seven escorts. I could secure enough Polyjuice."

"I'll do it," Hermione said.

"And me," Ron said.

"No! You're too young; you don't know what you're risking!" Mrs Weasley interrupted.

"Yes, I do," Hermione said quietly. "I'm Muggle-born. If Voldemort can take Harry... I'll be dead or in hiding for the rest of my life. I'd rather die fighting. And it has to be us, doesn't it? There aren't enough of you to play Harry and the escorts, too. And I'm sure they'll be expecting Harry to have the strongest protectors we've got. It wouldn't look right to see me trying to defend Harry--"

"We're in," said Fred firmly.

Mrs Weasley looked mutinous.

"I will do it," Fleur Delacour said, unexpectedly, before Mrs Weasley could speak again. Hermione's head whipped around to stare at the beautiful silvery-haired witch who sat proudly beside her fiancé. "This is important, yes? Maybe the most important thing we do. I will help."

Hermione felt the oddest stab of tears behind her eyes again. She had expected the twins and Ron. But sometimes valor came from the most unexpected places. She did not really know Fleur Delacour, but suddenly, she felt that she would die to protect her.

"We need one more," said Moody.

No one spoke.

"Mundungus?" he said pointedly. "It was your idea, after all."

"Oh, no, I don't think... that is, I'd rather be a protector if it comes to that--"

"Nonsense," said Moody firmly. "As Miss Granger said, they'll expect our most *powerful* Order members to be the protectors. So, Dung, Miss Granger, Miss Delacour, and Ron, Fred, and George Weasley will play Harry." Mrs Weasley looked as if she would be sick any moment. "Naturally, I'll be a protector. We'll need six more."

Bill, Remus, Tonks, Mr Weasley, Kingsley and Hagrid all volunteered in quick succession.

"We move him next week. Saturday. Everyone to a different location. Then we'll Portkey back here. They'll have to be unregistered Portkeys. Pius Thicknesse has turned, which means the normal modes of transport are out. I'll take care of that--"

The meeting proceeded on in the same vein as the Order members volunteered their families for safe houses. It was agreed that they would meet every night until next Saturday. There was much to be done--the enchantments on all the safe houses; acquiring the Polyjuice; modes of transport (Mr Weasley had volunteered to add extra charms to Sirius's flying motorcycle for Hagrid); getting Harry's sizes for robes and glasses to be distributed among the Harry imposters; making the hiding place ready for the Dursleys.

Hermione was nearly asleep on her feet when the meeting finally broke up. She crept into the room she was sharing with Ginny. Her friend was splayed, fully clothed, across her bed, deeply asleep with an Extendable Ear still held tightly to her ear. Hermione took it gently and rolled it back up. On impulse, she threw it into the bag that was packed with Ron's and her things. Perhaps she should speak to Fred and George about getting some supplies... Peruvian Darkness Powder... maybe even some Skiving Snackboxes...

She inched around Ginny's bed and climbed into her own, pulling her notes out from underneath the mattress. She unrolled the list she'd made for this week. Next to 'Tell Ron's Family,' she placed a firm checkmark. She also checked off 'Take Up for Mundungus's Plan' and 'Make Sure Moving Date is Changed.' Remaining on the list were 'Transfigure Ghoul,' 'Pack Harry's Things,' and 'Update Friend.'

She placed a checkmark next the last one, and checking to make sure Ginny was still sound asleep, touched her wand to her ring.

*Saturday next. All go,* she sent. And wished she could add, *How are you?*

On the list she kept in her heart, 'Get Phineas Nigellus Black's Portrait' was still hanging, unchecked, at number one.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*Chapter 22 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All fully italicized text is from DH. Some of Voldemort's dialogue with Bellatrix was inspired by his words in The Dark Lord Ascending. Endless thank yous to my lovely beta, Shellsnapelover.

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It was a chilly night. Snape circled high over Surrey on his broomstick, followed by the other cloaked and hooded Death Eaters. Though he could not see them, he knew that all their eyes were trained on a single house below. The nondescript building was identical to all its neighbors. It had the same roofline, the same matchbox yard. The only difference was a cluster of petunias planted along the walk. It would be impossible to know by looking at it that, at this moment, it contained fourteen witches and

wizards about to enact a desperate plan. His desperate plan.

He'd been circling on and off all week. He told himself that this was not because he did not trust Hermione, but because she might not trust him. There was still the chance that she'd given him the wrong date. But tonight, they had seen Hestia Jones and Dedalus Diggle come and escort the Muggles away. They had watched, Disillusioned, from the clouds as the Order members had arrived. Snape knew that she had kept her word. He dove lower for a moment. There was no sign of what was happening inside.

Snape was nervous. He knew the plan was the right one; he had been able to think of no other way to move Potter safely, but there was enormous risk in this for all of them. He would have no more idea than the other Death Eaters which one was the real Harry--no way to identify and protect him. And no way to protect Hermione. He had no doubt but that his Gryffindor had volunteered to impersonate Harry. In a way, it was probably for the best, he thought. If he knew which Harry she was, he would want to be the Death Eater going after her, and he was at great risk of blowing his cover tonight even without the added incentive of protecting his wife.

He was sweeping around the rear of the house when the back door burst open, and seven Harry Potters and their escorts tumbled forth into the night. He looked hard at their modes of transport, though it was difficult to concentrate when so many Death Eaters had begun to yell and swoop at once. He could feel their back wind buffeting him through the air.

"Seven of them!"

"Which one is the real one?"

"The one with Moody! We heard he'd be with Moody!"

"It's a trick! Snape! Which one do we follow?"

If he had to guess, he'd say that Potter was on one of the broomsticks, with Hermione on a thestral or in the flying bike. He knew she detested broom flying. But then, that could just be a false trail....

There was no time to think. Suddenly, they were off and soaring upward. The Death Eaters shot toward them, dropping their Disillusionment Charms. At first it was all confusion--Snape could make out nothing but black cloaks and green light... and screaming. So much screaming.

"Enough!" Snape bellowed. "Back off, choose a pair and pursue! If you are certain you have the right Potter, summon the Dark Lord. But NOT BEFORE! Kill the escort if you can, but save Potter for our master!"

As the Death Eaters began to fall back, Snape chose the Potter escorted by Lupin, for no better reason than that he was nearest, and took off after him. He could see Dolohov beside him out the corner of his eye. Lupin dipped his broomstick sharply downward, just as Dolohov sped up, leaving Lupin almost directly beneath the Death Eater. Snape fell back once more. He wanted a clear view of the all the players before he began firing.

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Hermione clung to Kingsley's back as they pushed off the ground, the thestral rising with alarming speed and power toward the clouds. Before the ride had even begun to smooth out, the air was thick with Death Eaters, melting into existence all around them. She ducked instinctively and, using Kingsley as a shield, began firing off Stunning Spells into the black, faceless crowd. Hermione didn't know what a Stunner would do to someone on a broomstick, but, in the hailstorm of curses flying around her, she found she didn't much care.

The green lights flashing through the air were nearly blinding. She watched as one streaked by, mere inches from her left ankle. She heard confused screaming from the other Order members, and she could distinctly hear Harry begging for Hagrid to go back. The hood of one of the nearest Death Eaters blew back to reveal the big blond man she had seen at Hogwarts the night that Dumbledore had died. Somehow to suddenly see a face where there had been nothing but blackness brought home to her that there were people under these robes. Snape could be out there. She stopped firing, looking around her frantically. Kingsley tugged the reins sharply to the left, and the thestral, who was breathing in great frothing gasps, took a hard turn. Hermione leaned into it, her fists--Harry's fists--white-knuckled from clutching Kingsley's robes.

She heard a voice--it seemed like Snape's, but in her confusion and with the rushing of the wind, it was impossible to know--ordering the Death Eaters to split up. "Choose a pair and pursue!" the voice ordered. Hermione turned around as far as she dared and watched as Hagrid and Harry broke off to the west. As she watched, the bike shot forward, and a solid brick wall seemed to materialize out the exhaust pipe. Several Death Eaters dropped suddenly to avoid it. She could still see Lupin and George slightly off to her right, but Bill and Fleur were gone, and she hadn't seen Moody and Mundungus since the fight began. The two of them had been swarmed immediately. Perhaps this was because Moody had been originally scheduled to take Harry from the Dursleys; perhaps the Death Eaters still believed that only Moody would be entrusted with Harry's safety. In any case, she assumed they'd gone back or headed off to the east, beyond where she could see.

Five Death Eaters had chosen Kingsley and herself. She didn't want to curse any of them until she could make a positive identification, but in a moment, she would have no choice, as the three of them were firing red and green blasts of light unceasingly at Kingsley. No one fired at her. At first she thought that Snape might be holding them back, until she realized that she was being spared because there was a chance that she was the real Potter, and the Dark Lord himself wanted to finish Potter. This sent a shiver of pure terror through her. She hoped that Hagrid and Harry were far away by now.

The wind seemed to bite through her now that their speed had increased, and she was grateful, as it helped to clear her mind. The Death Eaters behind her picked up speed as they gave chase. One pulled up alongside them and took aim at Kingsley.

"*Stupefy!*" she screamed, and her Stunner hit the hooded Death Eater squarely in the chest. He fell from his broom, and one of his cohorts dropped out of the race to dive after him.

The remaining three Death Eaters fell back for a moment, perhaps to regroup. She whipped her head from side to side, and in the distance, she could see Lupin and George still hurtling to the east with several Death Eaters on their tail. A hood whipped back, and she saw Snape, his black hair flying in the wind, his long hooked nose bent nearly to his broomstick, looking for all the world like some monstrous bird of prey. He raised his wand--

Her attention was immediately redirected to the Death Eaters around her, who had not, perhaps, been regrouping after all, but hoping for her inattention. They were surrounded.

Kingsley was screaming to her. "If I am hit, you must stay on the thestral! Do not try to save me! Get to a safe house!"

She drew her wand in sweeping arcs, firing off silent Stunners as quickly as she could. The Death Eaters bobbed and swerved, avoiding them easily. Kingsley was doing all he could to control the spooked thestral that was now trying desperately to return to the ground. Her knees clutched painfully at its heaving sides. Fortunately, the jerky, uncontrolled motions of the beast were making them harder to hit. "*Sectumsempra!*" she screeched in desperation and heard the answering scream of one of the Death Eaters. Her eyes squeezed shut. Had she just killed someone?

They were losing altitude fast. Hermione's heart was beating a furious tattoo against her ribs. The remaining two Death Eaters were flanking something now, something that looked like a gigantic bat, a bat with a snake's face, flying at them with enormous speed, and clutched in one cadaverous hand, it held a wand pointed directly at her.

"Kingsley!" she screamed. Voldemort. It was Voldemort. Her mind screamed and gibbered. How was he doing that? It wasn't possible. He was flying.

"Hold on, Hermione! We're almost there!"

Suddenly Voldemort retreated.

"The Mudblood," she heard him hiss. "Do with her what you will." And he flew off into the star strewn sky. The two Death Eaters resumed the chase. They were falling--falling so fast now--but the Death Eaters were catching up. Their hoods were blown back; she could see their faces, twisted and lit with hunger--

She was frozen, watching them approach, knowing they were coming for her now, that they would care nothing for Kingsley anymore. Her wand trembled in her hand. Kingsley turned suddenly, and shot a Stunner over his shoulder, barely missing one of the Death Eaters. Hermione looked down and saw the ground approaching much too quickly.

"Kingsley!" she screeched again, just as the thestral crashed gracelessly in a heap into someone's garden.

Hermione screamed, certain the Death Eaters were upon them. She was scrambling to her feet, backing toward the house they'd landed beside, her wand drawn. When Kingsley rose, she nearly hexed him.

"It's all right, Hermione. We've made it."

"Where are we?"

"My back garden. It's all right. Lower your wand. They can't follow us here."

"You think--you think the enchantments will hold?"

"They must have done. Otherwise, they'd be here already. Quick--the Portkey!" He held up a bent and rusty coat hanger that he had just retrieved from the shrubbery.

"But the thestral!"

"We'll send Hagrid back for it. Come on! We've got to go!"

Her fingers touched the wire just as it began to glow, and she felt as if someone had taken hold of her stomach and was trying to draw it out of her through her throat. It ended almost as quickly as it had begun, and she was stumbling into the Weasleys' front lawn. Harry was coming toward her, and she collapsed into his arms.

"You're all right," she whispered.

Kingsley turned his wand on Lupin and then Harry, demanding that they identify themselves. *Someone betrayed us! They knew, they knew it was tonight!*

Hermione's face burned hot in the darkness.

"So it seems," replied Lupin, *but apparently they did not realize that there would be seven Harrys.*"

"Small comfort," snarled Kingsley, though to Hermione it was large comfort indeed. *Who else is back?"*

"Only Harry, Hagrid, George and me," Lupin replied.

Hermione's ring began to burn, though she could not pull it off in front of Harry and the others. The warmth spread through her hand, biting and sharp, but it soothed her nonetheless. Snape had survived the battle.

She cast a wordless Impervius Charm on her hand.

"Are you hurt?" Harry asked.

"No, no. Just a bit of a brush burn from where we touched down. You?"

"I'm fine. But George lost an ear."

"Lost an--?" repeated Hermione in a high voice.

"Snape's work" said Lupin.

Hermione did not stay to hear Harry's outraged reply. "Excuse me," she mumbled, hurrying toward the house. Fleeting, she greeted Mrs Weasley as she ran for the loo. As soon as the door was closed, she ripped the ring from her finger.

*Accident, it read. Was it you?*

*George, she sent back. Severed ear. All right.*

*Thank God, was all she got in response.*

She pressed the ring to her chest and closed her eyes. She didn't know how long she stood there, offering prayers of thanks and supplication to whatever gods there might be. *Thank you for letting me live. Thank you for keeping him safe. Please send Ron and the others home in one piece. Please hurry. Please give us word. Thank you for Harry. Thank you.*

Then Ginny was pounding on the door. "Hermione! Are you all right? Dad's home and Fred!"

*Thank you, she thought one last time and opened the door. Hermione looked into the family room where the Weasleys were clustered around George, who was lying on the couch. The scene felt too intimate to intrude upon, so she headed back out to the lawn, where she waited with Harry and the others.*

Hermione looked at the stars, twinkling on, impervious to their fear and suffering. Was there something out there? Something watching over them? Something beyond their own skill, their own magic? When she begged for help, who sent it? A tingle ran down her spine, seeming to chill and warm her skin simultaneously. She felt for a moment that something was out there, something dark and warm and benevolent. She meant to pray, but her feelings were tangled and confused, and it seemed to be Snape she prayed to. *Please, let it be all right.*

When Ron appeared, something tight and painful in her chest let go. She would not know how to explain it later, but in the moment, she felt she had been answered. She pulled Ron into a fierce hug, reaching out blindly to pull Harry into the mix.

"We survived," she whispered. "We survived." Ron squeezed back tightly, but Harry fought free.

"But where are the others?" he hissed, his face once again turned toward the night sky. "Where are Bill and Fleur? Mad-Eye and Mundungus?"

As if in answer, a thestral glided into view and landed, taking a galloping circle around the house as it slowed and finally stopped. Bill and Fleur slid to the ground.

Mrs Weasley ran toward the last of her children to return. "Bill!" she cried, seizing him.

Hermione stepped toward Fleur and embraced her. She had not forgotten the other night.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Fleur did not answer, but looked at Bill, who said, *"Mad-Eye's dead,"* in a flat and toneless voice. *"Voldemort went straight for them. Dung panicked. Mad-Eye tried to stop him but he Disappeared. Voldemort's curse hit Mad-Eye full in the face, he fell backward off his broom and--there was nothing we could do, nothing, we had half a dozen of them on our own tail--"* He looked away.

Hermione stood, stunned, and the feelings of safety and rightness and protection she'd had drifted away like so much smoke on the wind. She felt abandoned by that presence she had sensed in the sky. Mad-Eye dead? She knew the others were exclaiming, making plans to retrieve his body, beginning to pay tribute to their friend and protector, a man who had seemed indestructible. But she could not pay attention to them. All she knew in those moments was that she was completely alone. There was no one to help her anymore, no one who shared her secret, no one to know how to comfort her. The wind blew leaves in circles and eddies on the ground. She looked at them, both seeing and not seeing them. She was all alone.

"Hermione, are you all right?" Ron asked. He turned to Harry. "I think we'd better get her inside."

She felt their hands on her arms, but it no longer meant anything. They had been lucky; that was all. They were three teenagers pretending at bravery, but slowly, all their protectors would be killed, and they would be revealed for the helpless children they truly were.

The warmth of the house stung her skin, but she sat obediently at the kitchen table and took the glass of firewhisky that soared toward her.

"Mad-Eye," Bill said.

"Mad-Eye," she repeated dully and drank. Mad-Eye. The war had begun.

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They reconvened in Malfoy Manor, bearing their dead and the body of Mad-Eye Moody. The Death Eaters were hooded once more, as if they sought to hide themselves from Voldemort, as if their punishment would be less if they bore it as a single, faceless unit. It was difficult to tell, but it seemed that Runcorn carried Moody's body, depositing it before the Dark Lord. Snape nearly flinched as the old wizard hit the stone floor like so much meaty baggage.

"Correct me if I am mistaken," Voldemort began, his sibilant voice deathly quiet, but still echoing around the silent ballroom, "but I believe I sent thirty of you, thirty of my most trusted followers to take out fourteen wizards."

No one dared to answer. There was manic light in the Dark Lord's unblinking eyes. Snape thought that he had rarely seen him in such a temper.

"One. You bring me one."

Goyle, always a pitiful excuse for a wizard, dared to speak. "My Lord, we didn't know--Snape didn't tell us there would be seven of 'em. We didn't--"

"*Crucio!*" Voldemort bellowed. Goyle collapsed, twitching, to the floor. "Snape gave you the date--the*correct* date. What else could you have needed? I have armed you with magic so far beyond what those fools could imagine, and still, you fail me!"

"My Lord," Goyle gasped.

"Silence! I am beginning to believe that there is no one here who wishes to see me rise to power."

Bellatrix Lestrange stepped forward, dropping her hood. "I wish you to see you in power, my Lord. I wish to see you revered beyond all others, to rule our world with the strength of a thousand wizards."

"So you say, Bella. So you say. Where, then, are the bodies of the rest of the Order members? You could not even bring me that oaf, Hagrid?"

Bellatrix's eyes filled with tears. "I am sorry, my Lord. I have failed you."

"Your niece and her husband, the werewolf--were you not to sever her from your family tree? To prune that which has become diseased? Was that not what we discussed?"

"My Lord." Bellatrix sank, pleading, to her knees.

"Would you have me believe that she is more powerful than you are, Bellatrix?"

Bella lowered her head the floor until her nose was nearly pressed against it.

"Or is it that you cannot bear to part with her? Would you prefer to leave me, to join up with freaks and children?"

"No, my Lord!" Her voice was anguished.

"Children!" he bellowed. "Five of their number were barely of age! And yet you wish me to believe that they have outmatched you!"

The Dark Lord's attention was removed from the now-sobbing Bellatrix by the idiot Travers. "My Lord, we were afraid to kill the children. Your orders were clear that Potter was to be kept for you. They all looked like Potter!"

"Did I hear you correctly, Travers? Did you tell me that you were AFRAID to kill children? For I promise you, I will give you something to be afraid of. And Lord Voldemort *keeps* his promises."

"I--my Lord..." Travers stammered.

"Approach me," Voldemort said coldly.

Travers trembled as he left the throng of Death Eaters and fell to his knees at the Dark Lord's feet.

"Remove your cloak."

Travers undid the clasp of his cloak, shrugging out of it gracelessly. Snape had the sudden thought that he looked very small, though Travers was quite a broad man, indeed. Voldemort twitched his wand, and Travers's shirt flew wide open, exposing the man's chest. The Dark Lord pressed his wand against his flesh, and Travers gasped. The sound seemed deafening, as every person in the room seemed to have ceased breathing.

The Dark Lord traced his wand over Travers's skin, as if he were some perverse living parchment. Withdrawing, he spun Travers around with his wand until he was facing the crowd and levitated him into the air so that he was in perfect view. The word 'COWARD' had been carved into his chest. Snape looked at him steadily.

"I have other matters to attend to," Voldemort said coldly. "Severus, see what you can do for our*friend* here. If he dies, leave him with the others. You are all dismissed."

Snape expected to see the lot of them hurrying from the manor and was surprised at how many Death Eaters lingered, seeming to feel that there was some way to worm their way back into the Dark Lord's graces yet. Snape sealed Travers's wounds quickly with his wand, but he had nothing with him to ease the pain, as he had given it all to Hermione.

"Keep those clean and consider yourself lucky," he hissed in the injured wizard's ear and strode off toward the door.

"Snape! Wait!" cried Bellatrix. She remained kneeling on the floor where the Dark Lord had left her. What did she want? Lessons?

"Didn't you hear our Lord?" he asked coldly. "You're dismissed." And with that, he headed out into the night.

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Snape got no sleep that night. He sat in the cramped and mouldy sitting room of Spinner's End, swirling the same firewhisky around in a dusty glass. He stared into the amber liquid as if it would help him make sense of what he had seen and who he had become. There, in Malfoy Manor, he had felt nothing. Once he had ascertained that Hermione had survived the skirmish, he simply felt blank. As he stood with the other Death Eaters, he felt no fear that the Dark Lord would single him out or punish him. Had he been called, he would have stepped forward calmly. Pain would not have touched him. He would have welcomed death. When the Dark Lord had spun Travers before them, no horror touched his mind at the sight of the man's bloody, ravaged chest. He simply took it in.

He received word in the small hours of the morning that Voldemort wished him to be ready to relocate to Hogwarts at a moment's notice. It mattered little. He had left most of what he owned at the school, but for the sake of something physical to do, he gathered a few robes, several phials of potions ingredients, and books and tucked them into his charmed rucksack. He hesitated at a bookshelf and pulled down a heavy, unmarked tome. He tapped the cover with his wand in three places, and it sprang open, revealing itself as a sparsely populated box. He had made it in his first year at Hogwarts, inspired by the hiding places of the Muggle children he had seen in his neighborhood. He had never kept much in it; there was not much he had wished to save or remember from his childhood before Hogwarts. For years, it had held nothing but his mother's few letters and the first potions essay on which he had received an O.

As he had grown older, the book had become ever more ornate and the wards on it equally more complex. Its contents had grown to include his OWL scores, a rock Lily had found by the lake and admired, and a small silver Snake pin that Lucius Malfoy had given him on one of his return visits to Hogwarts. Remembering, it seemed to Snape that Malfoy had burst into the Slytherin common room each time like a conquering hero, and he winced to remember how slavishly he had admired the blond, arrogant boy. Finally, he had added his NEWT scores and his cloak clasp, which had been replaced by Lord Voldemort when he had joined the Death Eaters. He had added nothing to the box since leaving the Death Eaters. Nothing until this summer.

Now, atop it all, there rested the picture of Hermione that he had retrieved from her parents' luggage. In it, she stood in Slughorn's office, glaring at the boy (what was his name? McCormack? McLaggen? Something like that) beside her. As he watched the photo, she stood up straight, gave her pale green gown a flounce to straighten it, and smiled broadly for the camera. Snape's lips twisted into what he supposed could pass for a smile. It felt foreign on his face. But there was something so amusing about the way she rolled her eyes, heaving a gusty sigh and looking up as if she expected help to arrive from the heavens and remove her from this idiot's company. Then, just as quickly, the look would disappear, and she would smile brightly, her head held high, her hair swept off her long, graceful neck. It was the perfect summation of the girl he had known. As she slumped, nearly tapping her foot in annoyance and peering at her companion with a look of disdain, a funny, strangled bark escaped Snape. She rose up, brushed a curl from her forehead and smiled winningly.

He laughed. He laughed until his sides ached, until he was barely standing. He laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks and he was gasping for breath. He laughed until he was no longer laughing; he was sobbing, and he collapsed to the floor beside the bookshelf, clutching her picture, heedless of the tears that soiled her image as she pursed her lips and shook her head in disgust. He was nearly retching with grief.

This girl, the girl in the picture--she was not the girl he had seen at her parents' home. The girl in the picture was gone, replaced by a thin, determined-looking warrior who had no use for fancy dresses, nor irritating dates, nor parties. He had taken her and honed her razor sharp. He had taught her to lie, to act, to shield, to strike. He had taught her to live on nearly nothing, to hide what she cared for, to focus everything onto a single point. He had taught her to be cautious, to be sneaky, to obey. He had taught her to hit fast, to hit hard, to hit first. He had turned her into himself.

As he lay there, spent and broken on the floor, he thought seriously of turning his wand on himself. What he had been unable to tell her that day at her parents' was that it was not simply that he did not expect to live through the war; it was that he did not want to live through the war. He could not tell her that she had given her life to save a man who no longer wished to be saved. For what kind of life could he offer her, should the unthinkable happen and they both survive? He could not bear to try to start again; he had made too many starts already. He simply had nothing left for her. He could only free her by dying.

He held the picture in one hand and his wand in the other, frozen with indecision. She glared fiercely, and for a moment, he imagined that look was meant for him. Then her face broke open, so bright and lovely, and he replaced the picture in the box and warded it shut once more. He tucked it into his bag and laid his wand down.

There were things yet to be done.

Not tonight.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

*Chapter 23 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All fully italicized lines belong to JKR, from DH. The rest is mine! Thank you so much to Shellsnapelover, my dear friend and wonderful beta.

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The morning of Bill and Fleur's wedding dawned breezy and warm. Hermione was up before most of the rest of the house, though she could hear some pattering in the kitchen that she assumed was Mrs Weasley. Ginny was still sleeping, slack jawed and snoring lightly, on the bed beside her, her bridesmaid's robes hung proudly by the door. Hermione pulled her lists from underneath the mattress and checked over them one last time. Her parents were hidden. The ghoul was transfigured and ready to be moved into Ron's room. Harry's things were stowed inside her bag, along with Ron's and her own. They had a tent; all the extra stock that Fred and George could provide them; all the books she felt would be necessary, including the mysterious book of children's stories that Dumbledore had left her; and all her medicines and potion ingredients. She was as ready as she could be, just as Snape had instructed her. She tucked her lists into the bag. For some reason, she felt certain she wouldn't be coming back to this room again.

She climbed out of bed, and Ginny stirred.

"What time is it?" she asked, her voice muzzy with sleep.

"Still early. You can catch a few more minutes."

Hermione took her wand from the bedside table and charmed her green robes lilac. Somehow she couldn't bring herself to wear them as they had been the night she had danced with Snape at Slughorn's party. She turned and looked at the bag thoughtfully. Finally, she lifted her wand and Transfigured it into a small, beaded handbag that would match her gown. She was hardly going to leave it behind today, and she could not be seen carrying about a leather drawstring bag.

She leaned over and retrieved the slim phial of Vita Secundus from under her pillow. During the day, it rested against her heart in the pocket she had made in each of her robes for it. At night, she slept with it clenched tightly in her fist. She glanced quickly at Ginny to make sure that her eyes were closed once again; then, she opened her hand to marvel at the potion there. For a moment, she believed so strongly in the life contained in the little glass tube that it seemed almost to pulse in her hand, as if it had a heartbeat of its own. Two tiny things he had given her: a scrap of parchment and a phial of potion no bigger than her little finger, and yet she drew enormous strength from them. She felt *armed* in a way that even her wand could not make her feel.

Working carefully, she opened one of the seams in the bodice of her dress robes and tucked the phial in, disguising it among the boning. She was most secure when she could feel it touching her. Though she knew it was really just her own stored body heat, Hermione fancied that the potion had a warmth she could feel through her clothes. She closed the seam and turned her wand on her hair.

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Later, from Grimmauld Place, it would seem to Hermione that she could barely remember the wedding itself. When she tried to think back on it, all she saw was Fleur, walking toward Bill on her father's arm. Her face had been luminous with joy, and it had been clear from her look that Fleur was living out the greatest dream of her heart. Hermione had been shaken all over again by the magnitude of Fleur's gesture in volunteering to play Harry. She had put not just her life, which was difficult to quantify, but this *wish*, which was likely extremely well-realized in Fleur's mind, on the line. Hermione had wished that she could have given Fleur some kind of bride-gift. Perhaps when the war was over, she could find something appropriate, something that would remind Fleur of how she'd felt on this day.

*Provided she lives through the war*, her mind had added cruelly. *Provided you live through the war*. She had shoved the thought down. This was a celebration, and though she knew that it was made poignant by loss and looming despair, she, like everyone present, was determined to hold this day apart from all the others; to enjoy a last moment of peace and happiness; to believe, if only momentarily, that things turned out the way they ought to.

Hermione had thought she would feel jealous of the ceremony, her own wishes for a real wedding having been dashed long ago in Dumbledore's office. However, she had simply felt a deep connection to and longing for Snape, wherever he was. And when the little wizard performing the ceremony had invited those in the audience who were married to take the opportunity to revisit their own vows, she had thought, quite fervently, *From this day forward my blood will be your blood; my home, your home; my life, your life*. With Moody had died any chance there might have been to undo her marriage, and though she felt deeply guilty that it put Snape in more danger, in some unconsidered and unarticulated way, she was grateful that she would not have to make that choice. To lose him would be unthinkable enough. She did not think she was capable of giving him up.

When Kingsley's patronus had come, she knew there had been a part of herself that had been waiting for it. His words were few and dreadful.

*"The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming."*

A strange calm had settled over her as those around her began to panic. Harry was at her left elbow, and she took his hand firmly in her own.

"We have to find Ron," she yelled over the noise and confusion.

"I think I see him, over by the punch table," he said, and she had heard in his voice the same quiet certainty that all of this had been somehow meant to happen. She ducked her head and charged through the crush of witches and wizards, all frantic to collect their loved ones before Disapparating, pulling Harry behind her.

When they had reached Ron, Hermione took his free arm and turned on the spot, depositing them in the middle of Tottenham Court Road. It had been the first place she had thought of that would be completely free from wizards--a Muggle shopping district in which many electronics, for which wizards would have no use, were sold. She had spent many a day here with her parents, shopping for the holidays.

*"Walk, just walk," panted Hermione. "We need to find somewhere for you to change."* Harry's disguise had begun to fade, which was not the least of her worries, as the three of them were still in their dress robes. Though many of the Muggles on the street did not seem to be fully in their right minds, it did not stop them from staring at the three oddly dressed teenagers hurrying down the road.

*"Hermione, we haven't got anything to change into,"* Ron said under his breath.

*"It's okay, I've got the Cloak, I've got clothes for both of you."*

They ducked down the nearest alleyway. Hermione began frantically digging through her bag. It had seemed best to her that the tent be most accessible, back when she had packed it. Now, she was shoving that aside--there was a loud clanging as her cooking pots tumbled over with it--and grabbing jeans and sweatshirts for the boys.

*"How the ruddy hell--?"* Ron began.

*"Undetectable Extension Charm,"* said Hermione, praying that neither of them would ask where she had learned such a thing. "Why did you think I kept asking for your clothes and books? For my personal collection?"

*"When did you do all this?"* Harry asked as Ron stripped off his robes.

*"I told you at the Burrow, I've had the essentials packed for days... I just had a feeling..."*

*"You're amazing, you are,"* said Ron, handing her his bundled up robes.

She gave Ron a thin-lipped smile. "We need to find someplace to sit down and regroup. We need to make some plans." Harry donned the cloak, and she hustled them out of the alley and down the street. Ahead, she saw a café, which seemed just the thing. It was well lit and extremely Muggle in appearance. No one would dream of looking for them there.

When she pulled the door to the restaurant open, a little bell tinkled their arrival. Hermione led Ron and Harry to a booth. The boys slid in, leaving her to the opposite seat with her back to the door. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. She did not like being unable to see who was coming in. Snape's voice was lecturing her in her mind. *Keep your guard up. Never let them corner you.*

They ordered coffee and began to argue over the best place to go. Both boys wanted to return to the wizarding world as soon as possible. She knew that they were both sick with fear for those they had left behind at the wedding, but they needed to see that going back would only put the others in more danger. It was Harry the Death Eaters wanted now. Where he went, they would follow.

The bell at the door jingled again, and Hermione craned her neck to try to see who was coming in, but could not quite manage it over the high back of the booth behind her.

"I still think that we could get to Diagon Alley--maybe cast one of those talking Patronuses and see if we got an answer--maybe they're gone, and it would be safe to go--"

Hermione stopped listening, watching as Harry's wand emerged from under the cloak. *'Stupefy!'* he yelled.

Her head swiveled frantically. Where was the danger? What was he doing? Then she saw two men at the bar--one of whom was obviously Thorfinn Rowle. Why hadn't Ron said something?

Harry's aim was true, and Rowle slumped over in his seat; however, his companion was uninjured. He was a dark haired wizard with a rabbit-like face--he looked positively ineffectual beside the hulking Rowle, but he was quick. Magical ropes sprung from his wand and wrapped themselves tightly around Ron.

Hermione ejected herself from the booth in time to watch Harry accidentally Stun the waitress. *Good!* her mind shrieked. Less to explain.

*"Petrificus Totalus!"* she said, felling the smaller Death Eater.

Hermione stood there for a moment, completely unsure what to do. How had the Death Eaters found them?

"Erm, a little help?" Ron asked, breaking into her thoughts.

She freed him from the Binding Charm, and he joined her and Harry where they stood, looking at the two men who had come for them.

"That's Dolohov," Ron said as Harry rolled the smaller one over with his foot.

*"Never mind what they're called!"* Hermione said, starting to panic. *"How did they find us? What are we going to do?"*

*"We just need to wipe their memories,"* said Harry. *"It's better like that, it'll throw them off the scent. If we killed them it'd be obvious we were here."*

*"But I've never done a Memory Charm,"* said Ron.

*"Nor have I,"* said Hermione, *"but I know the theory."*

Ron turned and gave her the oddest look, making her blush deeply crimson, but Harry paid her no mind, simply getting out of the way to let her work.

*"Obliviate!"* she said, and *at once, Dolohov's eyes became unfocused and dreamy.* She performed the charm a second time and ordered the boys to clean up.

Her mind raced, trying to come up with a place they could hide. If the Death Eaters could find them in a Muggle café in the middle of London, they could find them anywhere. If Harry's Trace was back on, which was the only explanation that Hermione could come up with that made any sense to her rattled mind, then the only safe place to go was somewhere they *could not* follow. Grimmauld Place.

*"Snape can get in there!"* Ron said when she raised it.

She took a deep breath, preparing an argument. But she needn't have worried. *"They've put up jinxes against him,"* Harry countered.

Hermione opened her mouth, but Harry continued, *"And so what? I swear, I'd like nothing better than to meet Snape!"*

Hermione's heart continued to race. She prayed that Snape would not, in fact, be there when they arrived.

*"But--"* Ron began.

*"Look, Snape's only one Death Eater. If I've still got the Trace on me, we'll have whole crowds of them on us wherever else we go."*

Hermione gave Ron a look meant to convey that she'd been reluctantly convinced. Grimmauld Place would be safe. And, a tiny voice in her mind piped up, from there, she could get the portrait. Ron continued to look terrified, but nodded. *On Harry's count of three, they reversed the spells on their three victims... and turned on the spot and vanished into the compressing darkness once more.*

The three of them rushed toward a house that only they could see. Hermione whipped her head from side to side, scanning for anyone who should not have been there, but she saw nothing out of the ordinary. Once inside the door, they all stopped, clustered together in the entryway.

"Aren't there supposed to be jinxes against Snape?" Ron asked, giving voice to their reluctance to proceed.

"Well, maybe they're just for Snape," Harry said, taking a decisive step forward. Hermione followed just behind him.

Moody's disembodied voice sent flashes of cold through her heart and lungs. *'Severus Snape?'* he asked.

Once she had recovered her ability to breathe, Hermione was deeply relieved. If Moody had been the one to set up the jinxes, there would be nothing that could truly hurt Snape if he needed to take refuge here.

As she took another step forward, her tongue rolled up unpleasantly in her mouth. She could hear Ron coughing and gagging as the Charm finished.

"It's okay," she said. "That was just a Tongue Tying Charm."

But then a spectre rose from the end of the hallway that startled her so badly she screamed, waking Mrs Black. While the portrait shrieked, a horrible vision of Dumbledore advanced upon them. Rage was written across his kind face, his teeth bared...

*"No!"* Harry shouted. *"No! It wasn't us! We didn't kill you!"*

The phantom exploded, showering them with particles of its strange dust-like self. Mrs Black screamed on and on until Hermione hit her with a Silencing Charm and wrenched the curtains closed over her portrait.

Hermione cast *Homenum Revelio* to ensure that no one else was in the house, but still the three of them crept, close together, through the hallways, opening doors and peering into rooms with palpable fear and trepidation. Hermione jumped several times at the sound of their own feet on the carpeted hallway, and nearly screamed when the door to Sirius's bedroom stuck and then wrenched free with a squeal of protest as Harry rammed it with his shoulder.

Satisfied that there was no one in the house, the three of them made their way back down the hall to the stairs. Sleeping on the first floor--being able to hear the door opening if it did--seemed much less frightening than being taken unawares in an upstairs bedroom. Not that Hermione had much expectation of getting any sleep.

As she walked down the hallway, last in their unspoken chain, she scanned the walls for the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black. How would she know which one was him? But her question was answered not a moment later, when a pale, beaky looking wizard in a portrait waited for the boys to pass and held up a single long finger, pointing it

directly at her.

She nodded curtly to the portrait and continued down the stairs.

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"Harry Potter has arrived in the house of my forefathers," Phineas Nigellus reported suddenly from his portrait on the wall.

"Indeed?" Snape asked in a bored tone. "And the others?"

"The Weasley and the Mudblood are with him."

"Do *not* use that word." Snape sat upright, fixing the portrait with a stony glare.

"Fine. *The Granger girl.*"

"And were you able to contact her?"

"I indicated to her that I was aware of her presence."

"Good." And then, belatedly, he added, "Thank you."

Phineas Nigellus sniffed in response.

Snape turned and surveyed the Headmaster's Office. He had been relieved to see that Dumbledore was absent from his portrait when he had entered. He had not been sure how their reunion would proceed, as he had felt almost certain in the Astronomy Tower that Dumbledore had known what he had drawn upon to cast the Avada Kedavra.

Though he had known for nearly a year that he would be occupying these rooms, it still horrified him to be unpacking his things into the Headmaster's suite. There was a part of him that wanted to keep everything exactly as it had been, yet he knew that for appearance's sake, he must fully overtake the space. He flicked his wand, banishing all traces of Gryffindor crimson from the room.

He had spent the better part of an hour going through Dumbledore's books, removing those he did not care to keep and replacing them with his own, which the house-elves brought in batches that towered over their heads. One such elf was tottering across the room, laden with volumes, when Snape heard a voice, startling him in the stillness.

"Ah, eradicating me so soon, Severus?" the voice chuckled.

*Dumbledore.* His heart thudded, but he rose with his usual smirk.

"I can hardly imagine what need you had for *Gardening with Muggles*," Snape said, holding up the book in question and placing it pointedly in the discard pile.

"I liked to have a broad spectrum of information at hand," Dumbledore said, twinkling maddeningly in his frame.

"I see," Snape replied, in a voice that made it clear he did not. "I think I will be more selective in my tastes."

"By all means. It is yours to do with what you will."

It was the reproach Snape had been waiting for. He had known, he had *known*, that when it was done Dumbledore would hate him for it. "I never wanted it," he snapped.

"Ah, but you have it, my dear boy, and now you must make the most of it. Speaking of which, how is Miss Granger?"

"Now she is 'Miss Granger'? Weren't you the one who flaunted your right to use her first name?"

Dumbledore nodded slowly and tented his fingers, that old gesture that set Snape's blood to boiling. "Hermione, then. How is Hermione?"

"Miss Granger has kept her end of the bargain," Snape said in a clipped, even tone. He watched as the color of Dumbledore's painted skin seemed to deepen, to fill in with richer, warmer pigment. The man was relieved, he realized, though he would never admit it.

"Naturally, naturally. And do you have news of where she is? Where Harry is?"

"So far as I know, they are currently in Grimmauld Place. The Weasley wedding took place today. It was interrupted," Snape said in the same inscrutable voice. "The Ministry fell. Yet all three have turned up at headquarters, according to Phineas Nigellus. I have not yet spoken with her myself."

"I see," said Dumbledore. "Do you plan to?"

"Are you asking if I plan to visit Headquarters? I can hardly imagine the welcome I might receive from Potter."

"Ah, but surely you can ask Headmaster Black *togo between*," Dumbledore said.

"Yes," Snape replied curtly. "Though I'm sure Headmaster Black will quickly tire of carrying messages back and forth between us. The girl, as you may recall, is long winded at best."

Dumbledore smiled indulgently. "Phineas Nigellus Black is bound by the Headmaster's Oath. There is nothing you can say that he can report without your permission."

"I'm well aware of that, thank you."

"But he can, of course, unlike the living, exist in two places at once."

"Whatever are you talking about, old man? I know how portraiture works! Headmaster Black is either here, or he is there."

"Listen," Dumbledore said.

Snape heard mumbling, the indistinct sound of voices raised in the distance, and a scraping, screeching noise that made him think of chairs being dragged over stone floors.

"What is that?"

"Courtroom Ten of the Ministry of Magic."

Snape glared at him. "Explain."

"My left foot is in my portrait there," Dumbledore said. Snape looked at the wizard carefully and saw that Dumbledore's foot was indeed outside the frame.

"But," sputtered Phineas Nigellus, "I have been a portrait in this office for nearly eighty years! How is it that I have never--"

"I would never have discovered it myself if Dilys were not such a restless sleeper," Dumbledore replied. "One late evening, I heard what was unmistakably a wizard whose head had been accidentally transfigured into a teakettle in the intake ward of St. Mungo's. Dilys had slipped out of her chair, and her left leg was missing up to the knee."

"One wonders what they saw at St. Mungo's," Phineas Nigellus said nastily.

Dilys Derwent, who had heretofore been pretending to sleep, gave a ladylike sniff.

"As the poor man sounded as if he was coming to boil, I doubt very much that they had any concern for the esteemed Headmaster Derwent's portrait," Dumbledore replied.

"Fascinating as this all undoubtedly is," Snape said, "I have much to do this evening. If you will excuse me--" Inwardly, his thoughts were racing. Would he truly get the chance to speak properly with Hermione? To hear her voice? He had not realized how lonely he had become, cut off from the world at Spinner's End, spending time only with people with whom he had to be careful. Even if it were only for a few moments, it would be good to talk to her. If only he could see her, watch her mouth as she spoke, and read the look in her eyes. *Be grateful that you can speak to her at all,* he told himself. Then, *Ridiculous that you should set so much store by a seventeen year old girl.*

"I have one final thing to request this evening."

"By all means," Snape said in a long-suffering tone, raising an eyebrow.

"The Sword of Gryffindor. It must be hidden. The Ministry, I think, will come looking for it before long. You'll want to have replica--a very good replica--available for them."

Snape gave the portrait a questioning look. "What interest would the Ministry have in the Sword of Gryffindor?"

"Quite simply, I believe that they will want to keep it out of Harry Potter's hands. However, you must see that it reaches him safely. And the first step to doing that is hiding it. I thought behind my portrait might be a safe location. I trust I will continue to intimidate the poor Ministry's underlings as much in death as I did in life."

Snape gave a slight chuff, but nodded.

"Very well, Severus. Do keep me informed."

Suddenly, Snape realized that even if he were to be able to speak to Hermione directly, there would be six witches and wizards to hear him. Even if he could pretend that Black was not there between them, there was no way he could speak freely to her in front of Dumbledore. What was it he had said? *Surely, you are not committing yourself to the girl? I do not want you forming attachments that will confuse your loyalties.*

"I can't see that I can very well do anything else. You are, as usual, in the thick of things."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Indeed." He settled back into his chair and closed his eyes, as all the former Headmasters were wont to do, though Snape had little doubt that he continued to monitor the room quite closely.

How would he tell her that they must remain in character, even here, seemingly alone?

It was several hours later that Phineas Nigellus Black sat up straight in his portrait and said loudly, "Headmaster Snape, the Granger girl is summoning me."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

*Chapter 24 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Anything you recognize is the property of the formidable Ms. Rowling. All else is mine. Thank you to Shellsnapelover, without whom there would be no story.

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Hermione stood, quivering, in the inky darkness of the upstairs hallway. Half her mind was trained on the boys downstairs. They were both sleeping soundly; neither had stirred when she'd crept from the room and up the stairs, and she had cast Muffliato on herself, but still, she strained for the sounds of movement on the lower floor. The rest of her was focused intently on an empty frame. Phineas Nigellus Black had just assured her that he was entering his frame at Hogwarts to tell Snape that she was waiting. It would be the first time she'd been able to communicate with him since their brief exchange on the night that they moved Harry, and she was nearly desperate to speak to him.

There was nothing she needed to communicate in particular, no plan to relate, no information to pass, but she needed to hear from him, needed reassurance that she had not invented it all somehow in her mind. Snape was still out there somewhere, wasn't he? She was not drifting alone in this new and horrible world?

There was a small explosion in her heart when she heard his familiar voice coming through the frame. Why could she hear him? Shouldn't it be Headmaster Black, come to give her his message? For a moment, she was terribly afraid that he had died, that all that she had left were daubs of paint in a magical frame, until she realized that that was completely illogical. Snape could not inhabit Phineas Nigellus's portrait, and besides, he wouldn't have had time to have a Headmaster's portrait painted. No, somehow, it was Snape himself who was calling, rather insistently now, through the blackness.

"Miss Granger? Miss Granger? I thought you said that she--"

"She did! Unless she's run off again. Young people are so very flighty, you know," Black muttered.

At the sound of Headmaster Black's voice, Hermione nearly began to laugh with relief, but she knew that if she began, she would very likely be unable to stop. Snape was alive. Unaccountably, they were both still alive, and her husband, her brilliant husband, had found a way to speak to her across the distance between them.

"I--I'm sorry. I'm here. I just didn't realize that it would be you I would hear!"

"Yes, a surprise for all of us," Snape said formally. "Dumbledore informed me earlier this evening that he had uncovered this secret of portraiture. Headmaster Black has been good enough to agree to temporarily inhabit both of his frames."

*Both of his frames?* she thought, but then she saw a disembodied hand wagging its fingers at her in the left corner of the portrait. So, he was creating some kind of magical connection... Then suddenly, it dawned on her. *Dumbledore. We're being watched.*

"Thank you, Headmaster Black," Hermione said automatically. Phineas Nigellus sniffed. Had she said anything that could be construed as too familiar? She thought frantically back through her words.

"So, you have arrived in Grimmauld Place. I trust the enchantments have held?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Potter? Is he well?"

Hermione thought of her parents briefly--her mind glanced over them almost as if it had been she who had been Obliviated, it stung so to think of them--and a conversation in which they had seemed to be discussing Harry.

"He is well, sir."

"He escaped the battle unscathed?"

"Yes, sir. Thanks to you."

Snape snorted. "Does he need for anything? I can't imagine how he and Weasley must be whinging on already, accustomed as they are to Molly Weasley's ministrations."

Hermione smiled into the darkness. "He has been well prepared, sir."

"Fine."

"And you, sir?"

"Pardon?"

"Are you, that is, congratulations on your appointment. Is all well at Hogwarts?"

"Rather impertinent, isn't she? As if the running of Hogwarts is any of her concern," Phineas Nigellus said querulously.

"Things are, as you say, well at Hogwarts, Miss Granger. And if there is nothing else?"

She strained to think of anything she could say that would hold him there, anything that could be twisted, changed. Surely, this could not be it. "No. Nothing, sir."

"Very well. Do keep the portrait on hand, Miss Granger."

"I will, Professor."

"Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight. Thank you again, Headmaster Black."

Phineas Nigellus accepted her thanks, and his hand retreated from the portrait. She stood there, unmoving, for what seemed to be hours, hoping against reason that he would suddenly return, that Dumbledore would absent himself, and Snape's voice would come back to her and whisper whatever words would soothe her heart. But no one came; even Phineas Nigellus seemed to have no interest in residing any longer in his portrait in Grimmauld Place. Finally, she turned and crept back down the stairs. She stepped carefully between Harry and Ron and resumed her place on the sofa in the parlor. She would have to find a reason to get that portrait into her bag. She would have to find a reason to speak to him again.

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Classes would begin in a few short days. Snape glanced through the names on the roster before him. Hogwarts' enrollment was down from the previous year--no surprise after the events of last term and the recent announcement by the Ministry that Snape himself had been appointed as Headmaster. Though he understood their decisions, he feared for the families who had kept their children home--dissonance of any kind would earn them the Dark Lord's attentions. And then there was the lack of Muggle-borns. Very few of Muggle parentage would be admitted to Hogwarts this year. Hermione would not have been permitted to finish her studies even if she had not chosen to accompany Potter on this fool's errand. He had seen her name on the Daily Prophet's list. The Muggle-borns were being required to register themselves, and slowly, the Ministry held 'inquiries' and relieved them of their wands.

He could not deny that he feared for her. He knew that she had been warned about the Ministry; he could only hope that she did not run afoul of it.

It was time to hold the start-of-term meeting of the faculty. The knowledge of what was to come had been lurking at the back of his mind for weeks. Snape had not spent much time in residence at Hogwarts; he had been summoned by Lord Voldemort for endless meetings and debriefings. Privately, Snape thought that the Dark Lord was becoming even more unhinged, if such a thing were possible. He had become obsessed with wand lore, convinced, Snape assumed, that it was the problem of the twin cores that prevented him from vanquishing Harry Potter. By day, the madman traveled the world in search of the wandmaker Gregorovitch, and at night, he returned to Malfoy Manor, calling his followers to him to hear their tedious reports from various outposts of the Ministry, their rumour-mongering and toadying.

The rest of his time he spent sequestered at Spinner's End, though there was nothing there to occupy him but the well-traveled paths of his mind. It was preferable, however, to slinking about Hogwarts, taking meals surrounded by those who wished him dead.

He did, however, return to the Headmaster's office each day to stare at Phineas Nigellus Black's portrait, hoping and fearing, in equal measure, that he would have news from Hermione. He longed to hear her voice, even if it were in pleasantries and platitudes, though he knew that a message from her would likely bring ill tidings.

But now, school would begin and he could hide no longer. He was holding the meeting in the Headmaster's Office, in the hopes that the trappings of authority combined with his domineering presence would be enough to quell the uprising of his former colleagues. And then there were those to be introduced--Amycus and Alecto Carrow. Why the Dark Lord had sent him such bumbling idiots was beyond his ability to comprehend.

And, of course, there was the portrait, and Dumbledore, no doubt, would choose to make himself available for the occasion. Snape knew it could work in his favor, that a visible reminder of who had defeated whom might be the thing that rendered them silent, if not compliant. But it made him sick to think of it, of Dumbledore staring placidly--peacefully, goddammit--at the lot of them as he, Snape, postured and sneered for them, as he debased himself completely before their eyes. McGonagall's eyes. He dreaded to see Minerva. The *disappointment* he would see in her face, as if he were second-year again, and in need of stern correction.

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They arrived at ten, as per his summons, just after breakfast, his staff. *His* staff. He had dreamt of this once, back before Voldemort, before Lily had twisted his heart into

something dark and bitter, before everything. He had so enjoyed potions back then, and Slughorn had suggested teaching. He had returned to his dormitory that night and dared to imagine a life in which he stayed at Hogwarts year round, in which he never had to return to Spinner's End again, in which he might find a true home. And because he had been young and given yet to flights of fancy, he had imagined himself the Headmaster, the first Slytherin Headmaster since the famed and hated Headmaster Black. He had imagined himself revered, in charge of the formidable school, of raising Hogwarts to some vaunted new height. He had, and it shamed him now, imagined himself beloved.

Flitwick entered first, followed closely by Sprout. Sinestra, Hooch, Hagrid, and Trelawney. Vector, Binns, the Carrows. Slughorn, Pince, Pomfrey, and Filch. And lastly, a minute behind the others, as if she had considered not coming at all, McGonagall. They arranged themselves uncomfortably into chairs of their own creation. He could have cast an Extension Charm on the room, could have filled it with chairs, lit the fire... but he did not. He meant to make them feel unwelcome, to make them understand that it would be his whims they catered to. He did not meet their eyes, though he felt them upon him. A quick glance behind him, masked with a flourish of his robes, told him that Dumbledore had indeed joined them. The old bastard had the gall to wink at him.

Flitwick, Sprout and McGonagall were sitting, clustered together, at the far end of the office. They were silent, but there was something about the way their heads were inclined that gave him the impression that they had just been whispering to one another. He was suddenly reminded forcefully of the Gryffindor trio, and when he opened his mouth, he nearly snapped, "Silence!" as he would have done before his potions class.

Instead, he simply sneered and said, "So."

No one moved.

"Another year begins. And with it a few changes in... staffing. I trust you all have met the new members of the faculty? Amycus Carrow joins us, taking on Defense Against the Dark Arts, and his sister, Alecto, teaching Muggle Studies. I hope you will welcome them into the fold, as it were."

Amycus and Alecto beamed at him, though the rest of the teachers continued to stare at him stonily.

"Syllabi are to be handed in to me by three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. I will notify you of any changes before your first class on Monday."

"You intend to review my syllabus?" McGonagall said.

"I intend to review the syllabi of all my staff," Snape replied. "Circumstances at Hogwarts have changed, Minerva. I think it best that Hogwarts' curriculum reflect those changes."

McGonagall nodded, but looked as if she wished she could hex him then and there.

"Horace, are you prepared to take over the Slytherin house?"

Slughorn looked surprised and then vaguely gratified. "Certainly."

"Fine. See me after the meeting, and I will brief you concerning the wards."

Filch slowly raised his hand.

"Argus?"

"I wondered if we might review your *disciplinary* policies?"

Several of the teachers leaned forward slightly.

"All disciplinary action will be issued through this office, with the exception, of course, of house points. Should you find it necessary to grant a detention, submit your request in writing, and I will be happy to make... appropriate arrangements," Snape replied.

"Again, Headmaster, I must ask if that is necessary. I am the Gryffindor head of house. Surely, I should be the one to assign detentions to my students. How would it look if it appeared that I lacked the authority--"

"I am not concerned with how things *appear* to the students. I assure you, there will be interest in your actions from those much better connected than a group of first years."

"Is that so? And will you report to him directly, Snape, or should we expect--"

"Enough! I will not tolerate insubordination. You can stay here with your students and follow my rules, or you can be turned out into the street. There are many who would like your job, Minerva, and far be it from me to deny them. I shudder to think how long you would last on the outside."

"Are you threatening me, Severus Snape?"

"You can take my words as you will, Minerva, as I'm sure you always have. My policies will not be questioned."

"I see."

"I pray that you do," he said icily. He picked up a sheaf of parchment from the desk and sent the pages soaring through the air with a lazy flick of his wand. "I have your rosters here. They will, of course, be updated after the sorting on Sunday night. Are there any further questions?"

Pomona Sprout surprised him by speaking. "Will we be given the opportunity to speak to Albus?"

Almost involuntarily, Snape glanced over his shoulder at the portrait of the former Headmaster. He was sitting, exactly as Snape had imagined him, in his chair, hands tented beneath his chin. Dumbledore made no effort to interject.

"I think it's clear that he has nothing to say to you."

McGonagall broke in angrily once more. "Perhaps he has nothing he wishes to say in front of you."

Snape breathed in deeply through his nose and gambled it all. "Professor Dumbledore, do you wish to speak to any of these people in private?"

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. "I'm sure I have nothing to add. You seem to be doing quite well on your own, Severus," he said serenely.

Professor Sprout sucked in sharply through her teeth and clutched her handkerchief. Hagrid let out a tortured sound. Minerva's hand strayed to her wand, but then she clearly thought better of it.

"Nothing further, then?" Snape asked with chilling politeness.

She snorted and rose from her chair, vanishing it and exiting the room with a flourish he himself would have been proud of. He felt a crushing weight descend on his chest as she left, so real he nearly wondered if she had managed to hex him after all. He had hoped... so deeply that he had never admitted it to himself, but hoped nonetheless that she might have figured it out. He thought that perhaps the right words might trigger--but, no. Things were as they had always been. The rest of the staff followed

Minerva's lead, all excepting Slughorn who stayed to review the needs of the Slytherin house. Snape sighed as he handed Slughorn the roster of the previously enrolled Slytherins and a list of the various passwords and secrets of the dungeons.

"Time is short," he barked when Slughorn opened his mouth. "I'm sure this covers everything. You may Floo me with anything further." And with that, he ushered the rotund wizard from his office, warding the door behind him.

He sank into the chair behind Albus's--his--desk. "You did well, Severus," Dumbledore said from his portrait. "Do not be too disheartened. Minerva will come to see--"

"As if I would waste my time worrying what that senile old bat thinks of me!"

Dumbledore continued smiling serenely. "Of course not."

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The train came as it always did, and the school flooded with students once more. There was an odd sense of normalcy around Hogwarts--classes and meals followed their usual schedule, and if there were a few less Gryffindors here or there, well, it was difficult to notice any real difference, as those that remained were up to their usual hijinks. His new disciplinary policy had been tested from the first, when he'd discovered Longbottom and the Weasley girl creeping out of his office with the sword of Gryffindor. Fools. Had it been the real sword of Gryffindor, he might have let them get away with it, as it would have been one less thing for him to worry about. Unfortunately, however, the real one was hidden, as Dumbledore had suggested, behind the portrait, and all that the idiots had managed to steal was the replica he'd made for the Ministry. He'd had to make rather a production out of catching them and delivering them to Hagrid for detention in the Forbidden Forest.

Oddly, he missed teaching. He spent too much time in his office, answering owl post and coping with the barrage of detention notices coming in at all hours--the faculty, it seemed, had decided to test his mettle by assigning detention to every student who so much as breathed without a by-your-leave. But these duties, though as vexing as they were intended to be, did not occupy his mind, and he began to long for his classroom and the ever-changing faces who passed through it. That, at least, had never been boring.

Phineas Nigellus had been silent now for nearly two whole weeks. Snape glanced up at the frame--it was empty, currently--and wondered what on earth Hermione and her little friends were doing. Had Dumbledore intended all along that they would end up at Grimmauld Place, and if so, why had he spent the winter months teaching her to survive? Surely, that twisted old house elf was cooking for them. They were warm; they were together...

The mark began to burn, startling him from his thoughts. It was mid-afternoon. The Dark Lord did not usually summon him until the evening hours. This sent alarm coursing through his veins. He stood abruptly.

"I know you aren't sleeping, Albus, and I have no idea why you feel the need to pretend that you are." Panic made him feel short and irritable. "I'm being summoned, and if the time of day is any indicator, something is amiss. If I do not return, I hope you will make the appropriate inquiries." Before Dumbledore could reply, Snape dropped the anti-Apparition wards around his office, one of the few benefits of this otherwise thankless job, and spun.

When he arrived in Malfoy Manor, he was greeted with the sight and sound of dozens of other witches and wizards popping into being in the entrance hall. Since the fall of the Ministry, Voldemort had become sure enough again to allow them to Apparate directly into the Manor.

"What's happening?" Avery whispered as they joined the throng of wizards moving toward the ballroom.

Snape shook his head. "We'll soon see," he said.

The ballroom was cacophonous with whispering, but the mood was quite different than the last time they had been gathered together in this room. Who had failed? How seriously would they be punished? Their numbers had grown since Narcissa's ball, as well, though even Snape found it difficult to determine who had joined and who had been Imperiused.

But Yaxley, Runcorn and Rookwood stood nervously by the Dark Lord's side, leading Snape to believe that whatever fiasco had taken place, it had been in the Ministry.

Voldemort rose from his seat and the figures in the room tumbled to their knees in a wave of black fabric.

"Potter and his friends paid us a visit at the Ministry today," he hissed.

Snape dropped his head, allowing his hair to fall around his face. He bit his lip nearly hard enough to bleed. *Stay focused. Think.*

No one spoke.

"It seems he'd got his hands on some Polyjuice Potion and decided to join us for a little round of free-the-Mudbloods."

Murmurs swept the crowd. *What the fuck?* Snape thought. *What the fuck had she been thinking?*

"What puzzles me," he said, his voice dropping dangerously, "is how he has managed to slip through my hands once again. The boy entered the Ministry of Magic, Ministry. Entered and left again, as neat as you please."

Snape hardly heard the stammering pleas of those who had been involved, those who had failed once again to deliver Potter. Frankly, he could not care less what happened to the men quaking beside Voldemort. He could not think of anything but Hermione. Why on earth would she have gone to the Ministry? Bravery was one thing, but this was sheer asinine defiance! What did they think they would accomplish beyond taunting and enraging the Dark Lord? So they'd saved a few wands. How many lives would be lost if Potter were captured?

He waited, his frustration building as Voldemort exacted his revenge on Yaxley. That girl was going to wish the Dark Lord had captured her by the time he was through with her. He'd thought she'd understood what was at stake here, thought she knew what she was sacrificing--not for him, but for Potter. Hadn't they agreed, all those months ago, that this was all for Potter's chance? She had his potion for Merlin's sake! How could he trust her with such a key piece of the plan if she could not restrain herself from pointless heroics?

When they were dismissed, it was after nightfall, and he Apparated directly back into the Headmaster's Office and replaced the wards. He slammed his wand into his fist with unnecessary force. *Portrait!* he sent through his ring, and marched over to Phineas Nigellus's frame to wait.

Phineas Nigellus seemed only too delighted to stick a foot into Grimmauld Place. Snape assumed that he was quite looking forward to hearing the 'Mudblood' get her comeuppance, as it was clear that Snape was in high temper and prepared to unleash the full extent of his wrath.

"Professor?" her voice said tentatively.

"Miss Granger, what the *bloody hell* did you think you were doing?"

# Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter 25 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Anything and anyone you recognize is the property of JKR. I make no money. Shellsnapelover, my beta, is a godsend, and any remaining problems are my own.

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"I--" Hermione was shocked by the vitriol in Snape's voice. She had been on watch when her ring had burned and had been very grateful that the boys were in the tent, sleeping, so that she could pull Headmaster Black's portrait from her bag unseen. So, he knew about the Ministry, clearly. How much did Voldemort suspect? She touched the locket that rested against her shirt. It felt cold and malevolent to her fingertips. She preferred that it not touch her skin.

It seemed it had been too much to hope for that he would console her tonight. She shivered slightly in the wind. It was only early Autumn, but the night had brought a chill, and Hermione already felt saturated to the bone with cold and dread.

"Have you any idea what kind of danger you put us in today?" he thundered. "What possible reason could you have had for visiting the Ministry?"

"Sir, I can't--"

"I'll tell you what you can't do, Miss Granger. You cannot save everyone. Your job is to save Potter. Potter! Taking him in to the Ministry! The Ministry, which is owned by Voldemort! And do not insult us both by pretending that this was not your idea--there is no way that Potter and Weasley could have snuck into that building without you."

So he believed she'd gone to free the Muggle-borns. "I did make the plan, yes; but sir, you don't understand. We weren't--"

"You weren't what? You weren't thinking? How chillingly obvious. You realize that if you had been captured, I would have had to... Miss Granger, if you had been captured, you would have very likely been killed."

"Would you stop interrupting me? I'm trying to explain," she hissed, drawing the portrait closer to her underneath Harry's invisibility cloak.

Phineas Nigellus Black made a choked sound of protest, but Professor Snape said, "Black! You may complain about Miss Granger's impertinence all you like, *but not until this conversation is finished!*"

Hermione waited for a moment, sure that the black shoe in the lower left corner of the portrait would suddenly withdraw, but he remained. She shifted slightly, and the leaves crunched beneath her. She could feel their moisture seeping through her denims. She took a deep breath. "I know we took a risk. We knew the danger to Harry, to all three of us, if we were captured."

"Miss Granger," he said, and his voice was liquid ice. "I thought you understood that Potter must be kept safe at all costs. He must defeat Voldemort."

"I do understand that! Listen to me. We had to go the Ministry! There was something there we needed--for the plan. For Dumbledore's plan."

There was a long silence, and she began to wonder if he had left. She spoke into the blackness.

"Look--Professor--you know I can't tell you. You know that. But there was something belonging to You-Know-Who in the Ministry. Something we had to get."

"The Dark Lord did not report anything missing," Snape said coldly.

"Thank God. Oh, sir, you can't imagine how that heartens me. It means my... my Geminio Charm worked."

"You duplicated the item?"

"Yes."

"That was... good thinking, Miss Granger."

"Thank you, sir."

"Where are you? Yaxley said he had breached the security of Grimmauld Place."

It was hard to keep the tremor from her voice as she spoke. "He did. He grabbed me as I Apparated, and I couldn't shake him off. I... I took him right to the doorstep, sir. I'm very sorry. I didn't know what to do, so I just grabbed the boys and left... Ron was Splinched in transit. We're all right. Is it--should I--do you need to know where we are?"

"Are you safe? That is, is Potter safe?"

"I've cast the enchantments we discussed."

"I suppose that will have to do."

"Sir--there's something else."

He sighed. "Something else?"

"Yes. While we were in the Ministry, we were separated--that's why we ended up involved in those *trials*." She said the word as if she were swallowing Skele-Gro.

"I see. It's just as well, I suppose. Lord Voldemort believes that you--"

"Yes, I gathered," she said pointedly before she went on. "My records were in the courtroom."

"I told you that the Dark Lord--" he began resignedly.

"Has taken an interest in me. Yes, I know. But sir, *our* records were there."

She listened very carefully to the sound of his voice. It was maddening not to be able to see him, to read the expression behind the words she knew he had to utter. "Indeed?" he said. His voice was steady, but she thought she heard trepidation in it nonetheless.

"Have you heard anything about it?"

"I have not. However, I think it will be necessary for me to make a visit to the Ministry. I do not want--"

"There is no need, sir. I stole them."

"You *stole* them?"

"I couldn't think what else to do! Your position among the Death Eaters is crucial to Harry's success. The whole plan is destroyed if we are exposed. So, I took them. Just our records--I left everything else about... about me."

"What do you plan to do with them?" he asked quietly.

"I--I don't want... that is, I don't know if... Sir, I don't know how to say this properly."

There was silence again, but Hermione fancied that she could see Snape's face with her mind's eye, the pinched lines between his eyebrows, the way his features drew closed when he was preparing to do something he did not wish to do.

"Are you concerned about the state of the bond if the papers are destroyed?"

"If I destroyed them, would we still be married?" she asked, keeping her tone light and straightforward, belying her fears.

"Hermione," he said so softly that she almost didn't hear him. His voice was only slightly more than a breath as he said her name. "Dumbledore wanted us wed to ensure that you would not desert me. You have proven... you have shown me immense loyalty. Even if the marriage were undone, the plan would be intact."

"But I want..." She paused. What she wanted had no place in this discussion. "Sir, I want the records for your trial."

"For my trial?"

"That was my job, remember? I was supposed to create a defense for you, for after. The records--they'll back up our story of Dumbledore's plan. We need them."

"No. We do not need them. There will be no trial, Miss Granger. I won't live long enough to warrant one, and Dumbledore himself did not expect me to. You know very well that this union of ours was for Potter's benefit and not my own. Frankly, I am surprised the records were not destroyed long ago. I would have thought that Moody would have seen to that."

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid that's my fault." Hermione braced herself. Snape was going to be furious with her.

"Pardon?"

"He asked me--just before he died, he asked me if I wanted them destroyed."

"He *asked* you?"

"Yes."

"And you--"

"I told him no. Sir, I'm sorry! I knew right away I had made the wrong decision, and I swear, I was going to tell him I had changed my mind. He just caught me by surprise! And then he died," she said.

"Tell me that you did not go into the Ministry to undo your mistake."

Her *mistake*. "I would never lie to you, sir. We went to get this... this thing of You-Know-Who's. That I ran across our records was only chance."

He was quiet again. She waited.

"And you want to keep them. For the trial."

"Yes."

She took his silence for assent. "You realize that you need to keep moving?"

"I thought one more night here and then we'll move on."

"Fine. If you could let me know where you've been--after you've left, of course--that would be useful information."

"Certainly."

"You said Weasley was Splinched, did you? Were you able to heal him?"

"Yes, sir. I wish I could have done a better job, but I healed him."

"I'm sure you did adequately."

"Thank you. And you, Professor? Are you all right?"

"I am fine, Miss Granger," he said softly. "Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir."

"Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight."

The wind picked up and scattered more leaves onto the forest floor. The sounds of the night, furtive scratchings and plaintive, lonesome calls, seemed louder than ever without the portrait to distract her. She glanced at her watch. It was nearly two in the morning. Her watch ended at four. She looked back at the portrait--it had seemed for a moment... she thought she had seen *movement* in the corner. She leaned toward the portrait--it appeared blank, unless that spot in the bottom left... was maybe a touch darker than the rest?

She heard shuffling, scraping. A chair being pushed back. And then... voices... muffled at first, and she pressed her ear nearly all the way against the canvas. Had Phineas Nigellus stayed? Did he mean for her to hear this?

"...rather more than I had suspected," said a voice. *Dumbledore?*

And then Snape's answer, much more clearly. "I am sure I don't know what on earth you are rambling about."

"You never mentioned to me that you felt you had ascertained the true nature of your marriage to Miss Granger."

"It was hardly a leap of the imagination, Dumbledore. You've made it clear in the past that Potter's success is your only priority."

"And you've shared it with her."

"I didn't have to *share it with her*, as you say. Aren't you the one who likes to insist that the girl is some kind of genius? Besides, it was hardly a secret. Potter needs assistance, and she is there to make sure he receives it. And while you seem to be in a rather transparent mood, I might ask why you did not have the marriage papers destroyed."

"I'm afraid I'm just learning about that this evening, myself. I don't know why Alastor felt the need to consult Miss Granger--"

"Hermione, Albus. You wrecked the girl's life. Call her Hermione. And perhaps he consulted her out of simple kindness! You did not consult her before you whored her out for Harry Potter!"

"I gave her every opportunity to choose--"

"You did not allow her to make an informed decision. She thought she was protecting me."

"And you seem to be taking full advantage of her attentions."

There was a crash, and Hermione released her breath without having realized she was holding it. It sounded as if Snape had broken something. In fury or in shame?

"Exactly what are you implying?"

"I married you to Miss Granger because I believed that you were devoted to Lily Evans' memory."

"Yes, that much was clear, Albus. You banked on my twisted, blackened heart."

"For the girl's own sake, Severus. Girls of her age can be easily swayed by --"

"Girls of her age," Snape growled, and had Dumbledore been more than a portrait, Hermione would have feared for his life. She squeezed her eyes shut briefly at the irony of that thought. "*Girls of her age*. You have sacrificed a teenaged girl, just as you intend--"

"There is a chance she will survive the war," Dumbledore interrupted. "I haven't consigned the girl to death. I simply thought that it would be best if she were not caught up in any *romantic* notions. Hermione is practical; she is motivated by duty, but she--"

"Do not speak of her as if you know her heart, Dumbledore. Hermione is not like *girls of her age*. She is motivated by honor, by light. She is a witch raised in wartime. She does not care for pretty things or--"

"And why are you so sure of that, Severus? Are you one of the ugly things she cares for?"

"You are crossing the line, old man!"

"Let me see your Patronus."

There was a long silence, in which Hermione's head spun with what she was hearing. Snape had been devoted to Lily Evans? Lily Evans was Harry's mum! And why was Dumbledore asking to see Snape's Patronus? She wracked her brains. What was Snape's Patronus? Had she ever seen it? But underneath the surface of her thoughts, there bubbled something warm and thick, something that enveloped her and strengthened her against the cold and the dark.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" His voice burst from the frame strong and clear, and Hermione's eyes shot to the canvas as if she would be able to see his silvery Patronus there. But, of course, there was nothing.

Dumbledore spoke. "Very well. But you said something earlier that concerned me, Severus. Something that concerned me very deeply. You said, 'You realize that if you'd been captured, I would have had to--.' What was the ending of that sentence?"

"I don't know what you are referring to."

"I think you do. And I think we both know what the ending to that sentence would have been. I am warning you, Severus--"

She had to strain to hear Snape's next, as his voice was barely more than a hiss of breath. "I wish you were alive so that I could kill you again. With pleasure, this time."

Dumbledore chuckled, but there was no mirth in it. "Be that as it may. You'll want to think hard about your choices. You are placing your faith in a seventeen year old girl."

"I trust Miss Granger implicitly. As you should, Dumbledore. Need I remind you that it was you who forced us into this infernal marriage?"

"All I ask is that you remember where your loyalties lie. Because the day you put that girl above the plan is the day the wizarding world is lost."

There was another crash. "This discussion is over," Snape said.

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"Indeed," Dumbledore replied, and his voice had returned to the soft, serene tone he favoured. Snape itched to take his wand to the portrait, to slash it to shreds.

"You have nothing further to add?" Phineas Nigellus purred nastily. "Nothing else you'd like to tell Miss Granger? I'm sure the poor girl is in quite a state by now."

Snape turned on his heel to face the portrait of Headmaster Black and took several heavy steps forward.

"Do you mean to tell me that you kept the connection open?" he asked dangerously.

"Of course I did. You did not tell me to close it. And I certainly would not *presume* to interject. Not after the reprimand I received for daring to offer an opinion on what might be appropriate earlier this evening."

Snape did not know which portrait he would like to destroy first. Good God, what had he said? What had she heard? How long would it take to undo it, to regain--?

"Miss Granger," he barked.

He could hear her deep breath. "Yes, sir."

"I apologize for any distress--"

"Professor," she said firmly. "Think nothing of it. You have been pushed to extremes. Please assure ~~former~~ Headmaster Dumbledore that we are both quite aware of where our loyalties lie."

The smirk flew to his lips nearly against his will. Hermione was made of steel. And that she very clearly wanted to attack Dumbledore as greatly as he did himself made him long for her so fiercely that his eyes burned and stung. He closed them quickly. She sounded every inch the lioness. No one had ever...

"I will do so," he said evenly. "Thank you, Miss Granger. I'm going to ask the esteemed Headmaster Black to shut down the connection between his portraits now."

"Of course. I will be in touch as soon as we have safely moved on."

"Very well." He paused and decided she would not be opposed to one last jab at Dumbledore. "Goodnight, Hermione."

He just caught her chuckle. "Goodnight."

"Headmaster Black, if you would be so kind."

When he had ascertained that *all* of Headmaster Black had returned to his portrait in the office, Snape made a show of righting the chair he had kicked over earlier with a deliberate and self-satisfied air. He straightened the papers on his desk, took off his outer robe and hung it on the tree by the door. With his wand, he extinguished all but one of the lamps and walked toward the door to his chambers.

Dumbledore stared at him from the portrait all the while. Snape could feel the old man's eyes upon him, but he refused to speak.

"She is very faithful to you," Dumbledore said finally.

Snape looked up sharply into the man's clear blue eyes, for there was no tone of accusation in Dumbledore's voice as there had been before. He had the fleeting thought that it was really too bad one could not perform Legilimency on a portrait.

Snape turned and left the room without a word. He entered his bedroom and set about removing his robes. It was after three, and he was aching with fatigue, yet his mind would not slow. He thought again of Dumbledore's steady blue eyes. Why did he get the feeling that the old man had known what Phineas Nigellus had been up to? What he meant by his last words?

Snape crawled into bed, feeling the creaking of limbs unbending, limbs that had been held rigid in terror and anger all day *She is very faithful to you*.

He could not imagine where she was. Several times during their discussion, he had thought he'd heard leaves rustling and the hoot of an owl, but that could have been Potter's ostentatious bird. It was impossible to say. Although his blood still sang with terror at the thought that she had been in the Ministry that afternoon, he was reassured that there was some kind of plan in place and that she was successfully guiding her idiot companions through it. Suddenly, he was seized with fury once more. He wanted to rise from his bed and storm back into the office. Dumbledore had no right to belittle her, to insist on equating her with the rest of the silly, hormone-driven fools of her age. No one but Hermione could have gotten Potter and Weasley in and out of the Ministry of Magic unharmed.

He shut his eyes and began to breathe, slowly and deeply, in a facsimile of sleep. It was late, and reliving his discussion with Albus was not going to change the outcome of anything. Snape had long suffered sleepless nights, and he had learned that by pretending to sleep, he could sometimes coax his body into the real thing. He took another deep breath and pictured a dark, black sky.

Slowly, he gave in to the image. Against the sky, he saw the stark, lonely limbs of trees, rapidly parting from their leaves now. As he relaxed first one leg and then the other, he heard the sound of the wind and saw the branches waving their protest. A cloud crossed over the sliver of moon. He unclenched his fists. The stars twinkled on implacably in the sky. He exhaled.

His last thought was of Hermione sitting calmly on the ground among the leaves and waiting. *She is very faithful to you*, his mind said. And he slept.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

*Chapter 26 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. I make no money. Thank you to Shellsnapelover, who betas this story with love and care. Look out, folks, it's the camping chapter.

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In the weeks that followed the discussion through the portrait, Hermione, Harry and Ron, relocated several times, setting up camp in various wooded areas. Harry had become adept at casting the Shielding and Masking Charms around their encampment, but Ron was either less able or unwilling to try. She and Harry had agreed that this was due in large measure to the Horcrux. They wore the heavy silver locket in shifts, trading it off every six hours or so. Whoever was on watch wore it the longest, as none of them liked to sleep with the thing on. It was bad enough awake, but... the dreams. She had been the first to discover them on the night that she had spoken to Snape. After she had shaken Harry awake and thrust him out into the night, she'd fallen onto his bed and slept almost instantly. Perhaps this was because she was strung past the breaking point with nerves and adrenaline. Or perhaps it was because the Horcrux had wanted her to sleep, had wanted to slither into her defenseless mind and find the nasty secrets hidden there.

By the light of day, the dreams did not mean much: tangled images in which she saw the Dark Mark burned into her own left forearm and knew that she had chosen it, had betrayed them all; visions in which Snape lay writhing and tortured before her, while she screamed and Harry and Ron laughed; horrible dreamscapes of barren land and blackened trees; of the castle, crumbled and burning; of locating her parents and opening the door to their home to find them mired in filth and excrement--alive but insane. But in the darkness, in the woods, the dreams pursued her and left her panting, slick with sweat.

She had woken with a gasp and reached out blindly for her wand, shouting, *Lumos!*

Ron sat up in the bed across the room.

"Wha? Izamyturnaready?"

Despite the sight of his whole and normal face, Hermione had almost screamed. As she had tried to explain to Ron what had happened, as she spat the loathsome images out, hoping that they would be conquered by the familiar sound of her voice and the presence of her friend, she had felt--she could swear she had felt--the locket twitch. As if it were laughing. As if it were laughing at her. She ripped the chain from around her neck.

"It's this! It's this fucking horrible thing," she had cried and flung the necklace across the tent. Ron picked it up and slipped it over his own head, crossing the room to sit on the edge of her bed.

"It's all right, Hermione," he said nervously. "It was just a dream."

"No, it was *not* just a dream. We are at war, Ron! We were nearly killed today. And now we are stuck in a tent in the woods, hiding like... like ~~rodents~~."

"Like rodents?" Ron said, raising an eyebrow.

"Rodents hide," she said, a bit sheepishly. "You know, from owls and things?"

Ron began to chuckle, though he tried to disguise it by coughing into his hand.

"I know it seems funny. But I dreamed--Ron," she said and then the tears came, hot and burning, "I dreamed that I was dying. I dreamed that Snape had found us and that he..." She couldn't finish.

"Shhhh," Ron murmured and put his arm around her. The amusement had vanished from his face. "It's okay. You're safe. Snape can't find you here. You're brilliant, remember? You've made it so that no one can find us. It seems horrible now, but dreams fade. They always do."

"It's that Horcrux," she sobbed. "I feel like it's eating me, like it's eating my heart."

Ron picked the locket up between his fingers and grimaced. "It's bloody awful; I'll grant you that. But I'll wear it for the rest of the night, Hermione. Don't worry. Do you want some tea?"

"No. I didn't pack any when we left Grimmauld Place. Go back to sleep. I'll be all right. Like you said, it was just a dream."

"I'll sit up with you a while longer if you like," he said, though he yawned hugely.

"No. I'm sorry to have woken you. We all need to sleep as much as we can." She lay back down to encourage him to do the same.

Hermione had been convinced that she would not sleep anymore that night, and was surprised to wake at eight when Harry came in from the watch. She blinked owlishly at him.

"Thought you'd have a lie-in?" Harry asked her, smiling. It was rare for her to sleep past six.

She smiled back, still rubbing sleep from her eyes. "It's Ron you should talk to--he got to sleep most of the night. I've only had about four hours, I guess."

Ron was sitting, pale and clammy-looking in his bed. His eyes looked deep and hollow, and Hermione wondered if he believed her now. That thing--it chased you while you slept.

"I'd have slept better if Hermione had kept quiet," he said nastily.

"Sorry," she said, looking at him curiously. He had been so kind in the night. Bumbling, but kind.

"Whatever. Just like a girl, crying over dreams." He hadn't moved. He was still sitting there, wrapped tightly in his blanket as if he had been shivering. As if he had, perhaps, been crying himself.

"Give me the Horcrux back," Hermione said, holding out her hand uncertainly as she would to a strange dog.

"No. I don't want hear anything else about the bloody Horcrux. It's just a piece of metal, Hermione."

She glanced at Harry, trying to urge him with her eyes to take the Horcrux.

"It's my turn, mate. Give it here," Harry said.

"Don't know what the big deal is about turns," Ron said, but he handed it over nonetheless.

Harry slipped the necklace over his head with an apologetic look to Hermione, and thus had begun the cycle. Six waking hours on at a time, unless the wearer had become unbearable, which made things difficult, as the person in question became more stubborn and unwilling to give up the Horcrux the worse its influence became. Ron seemed particularly susceptible to its waking effects. Hermione shuddered to think what his dreams must have been like.

Autumn was upon them, and patience had grown as thin as they themselves had. Harry's sweatshirt hung from his thin frame, and though she had little cause to look into a mirror, Hermione knew she had passed slim and ventured into skinny. Worry and strain were carving her away. When she caught her reflection, now, she hardly recognized herself.

The morning of her birthday was chilly and damp. She'd had the evening watch, and so had been sleeping and Horcrux free for nearly seven hours. She was almost cheerful when she woke, swinging her legs out of bed and pulling on her denims.

"Scourgify," she said, aiming her wand at her clothing. It was a good sign, she thought. She hadn't bothered cleaning her clothes in days. She tucked the Vita Secundus into her pocket, twisted her hair into a knot and peered out of the tent flap. Harry and Ron were sitting on the ground with their backs to her, their heads bent together over a piece of parchment.

"Good morning," she said, and both of their faces jerked up. Ron made to fold the parchment. She saw with dismay that he was wearing the necklace. It had been his early morning watch.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Ron said.

Harry glanced at her and rolled his eyes. "The map," he said. "We were checking on Ginny and Lavender."

"Can I see?" she asked, settling herself on Harry's other side.

He spread the map before her, and her fingers smoothed it flat. She traced the familiar corridors of Hogwarts and fancied for a moment that she could see the smooth

stone walls, the suits of armour, the portraits...

"What do you care, Hermione?" Ron said. "It's not like you left someone behind."

"Hogwarts was my home, too, Ron," she said quietly.

Harry patted her surreptitiously under the map. Ron stood abruptly and walked into the tent.

"I'm sorry if I interrupted something," she said to Harry.

"You didn't. You know how he is when he wears that thing. And we're all tired. Here--have a look."

Hermione glanced at the dot that bore Ginny's name. It was moving slowly around the sixth year girls' dormitory. A layer above, Lavender's dot was unmoving in the seventh year girls' room. Parvati's dot was also stationary. *They always slept late on Sundays*, Hermione thought wistfully. *I wonder if my bed is still in there. I wonder if Lavender has guessed where we are. I wonder if they think of us at all.*

"Let me see some other floors," she said, and Harry folded the map again, deepening their view of the castle.

"The Arithmancy corridor," Hermione murmured. "And Charms... Can I see the Great Hall?"

Harry folded the map again.

"I don't like to look at this," he said bitterly. "Snape up there, in Dumbledore's place--bloody traitor." He paused and addressed the map. "You had to kill him to get into that seat, you bastard."

Snape's dot was, in fact, at the head of the high table. To his left was Amycus Carrow; to his right, Professor Sinestra.

Hermione looked at Harry steadily. She took a deep breath. She was feeling strong. Maybe today was the day she had been waiting for. It was her birthday, after all; a year since she had taken her vow of loyalty to Snape. "Don't you think it's odd that he didn't come after us in Grimmauld Place? The Death Eaters knew we were there--they stood outside, looking for the house every day. And Professor Snape was a secret-keeper, same as we were. Why didn't he tell them?"

"Professor Snape?"

"Snape, Professor Snape, whatever. He could have come for us, and he didn't."

"Because he knew the place had been warded against him! He knew that we wouldn't just leave it wide open--"

"But he didn't even try!"

"How do you know? Maybe the jinxes turned him away. Maybe he was afraid of whatever else there might have been! Besides, I'm sure he was too busy setting up his posh new office to think about us."

"Do you really believe that? That he just couldn't be bothered? When he could have brought the great Harry Potter before his 'master'?"

"Hermione, I was kind enough not to say I told you so after *Snape murdered* Dumbledore. But if you insist on dragging all this up again--"

She bit her lip. Not today, after all. "You're right--I'm sorry, Harry. I was just thinking out loud; I wasn't trying to imply--"

Harry's look softened. "It's all right. I shouldn't have snapped at you. I know you feel terrible about Dumbledore."

Hermione looked down and busied herself refolding the map. "I guess we should go back inside."

"And face Ron?" Harry said, a timid half-smile on his lips.

"It hasn't frosted yet," Hermione replied. "Maybe there are still some berries. I'll go out and look. See if you can get that blasted Horcrux off of him, and I'll try to bring back some food."

Hermione Disillusioned herself, crossed out of the circle of her enchantments, and took five large steps forward. She raised her wand and slashed a red X into a tree before her. Without it, she would be unable to find her way back to the boys. Once she was outside their protective circle, even she could not see the tent or hear anything that was going on inside. Hermione was the only one of the three of them who went on these food-finding missions. Ron did not consider anything in the woods worth eating, and it was too dangerous to send Harry out on his own. If she did not come back--well, the two of them could carry on without her. But if Harry went out and never returned... that would simply not be allowed to happen.

She counted her steps as she ventured into the underbrush. Twenty-five steps to the east, where the forest grew denser. She swore lightly as she picked her way through the brambles in search of the year's last blackberries. What remained had been heavily picked over by the birds. Most of the berries that she found had a wizened look about them, but she picked them all the same, and was delighted to find a few raspberries that had been overlooked by the wildlife forty five-steps out. She turned south down the embankment.

Thirty steps to the river. She Accio'd two skinny salmon from the water, wincing as they slapped wetly into her palm. She Stunned the fish and laid them on the ground. Then she bent and conjured a large water skin, filling it to the brim. Gathering the salmon, she turned back toward the forest. Thirty steps north. Forty-five back toward camp.

For a heart-stopping moment, Hermione could not see the tree she had marked. Panic rose hot and sharp at the back of her throat, and she felt her knees tingling with the itch to run pell-mell in the first direction that seemed likely. *Stop, Hermione. Think. You can't be more than forty-five steps in the wrong direction. Go back to the river and try again.* Forty-five steps. Forty-five steps? She considered just starting to scream and hoping that one of the boys would come for her. Forty-five steps stood between her and safety.

Suddenly, she heard Ron's voice in her mind. *Are you a witch or not?* Immediately, her breathing slowed to normal, and she felt brief gratitude for Ron's sarcasm. At least it would aim her home. She set down the fish once more and laid her wand flat in her palm. "*Point Me*," she said clearly. Her wand spun in her hand and came to rest pointing only a few feet from where she stood. The tree had been right in front of her. *Merlin*, she thought. *It's not even breakfast, and I'm already falling to pieces.*

"I'm back," she called and waited for one of the boys to come and help her through the enchantments. In a moment, Ron stuck his arm through. She had learned not to try to bumble back in on her own. Once, she had fallen and smashed into one side of the tent, nearly crushing Harry, who had been sleeping inside. She erased the mark on the tree, took Ron's hand, and crossed back inside the circle.

Ron glanced at the Stupefied fish in her hands and sighed.

"Well, there's no use griping about it," she said as cheerfully as she could. "At least there's enough for all three of us." She ducked into the tent and deposited the fish on the counter of the kitchenette. "Here, you take the water. We can use some for washing and some for drinking."

"Yes, Mum," Ron said, but he already sounded a bit better now that the Horcrux was off him.

Hermione charmed the fish out of their scales and off of their bones and threw them into a pan. She hadn't quite gotten the hang of all the household charms yet--she'd never been allowed to use them at home, and there was no need for them at Hogwarts, but she knew them well enough, and it frustrated her that she seemed to have no knack for cooking. *Why should cooking spells be any different from other spells?* She thought angrily. *I can duel, but I can't cook?* She snapped her wand at the pan to start a fire under it.

She washed the berries in a shallow basin and doled them out onto three plates. She looked back at the pan only when the smell of it hit her. The fish was blackened on one side and seemingly raw on the other. *Damn.* She prodded the fish with her wand, flipping it over and hoping that it was still edible.

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The three of them sat silently for a time, chewing the charred fish.

"So, what's next?" Ron said, finally, and Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. They had this conversation nearly every day. The outcome never changed, and yet it seemed impossible *not* to have it. One of them would raise it, and the others would admit that nothing brilliant had occurred to them in the night. Despite the fact that she had read the Horcrux books upward of twenty times--she had most of *Secrets of the Darkest Arts* by heart--they were no closer to finding more Horcruxes or destroying the one that they had. And she had made neither heads nor tails of the book that Dumbledore had left her. She knew she must be missing some obvious clue, but *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* remained, for the time being, nothing more than a worn old book of children's stories.

This was what they had come to. She wasn't angry with Harry; she knew he was just as frustrated as she and Ron were. If truth were told, the person she was truly angry with was Dumbledore. What had he meant by sending the three of them out into the world with nothing but an old snitch, a Deluminator and a book of nursery stories; with no more plan than to get rid of the Horcruxes? Would it really have been so hard to suggest how to destroy them, to perhaps make some guesses as to where they might be? It seemed to her that the old wizard had been deliberately vague. And when she thought of the way he had spoken to Snape--what Dumbledore had accused him of--bile rose in her throat. She hoped that she would one day get to stand before his portrait and tell the former Headmaster exactly what she thought of him.

The afternoon passed in tedium. Harry passed the Horcrux to her just after noon, and he and Ron settled in for a nap. Hermione gathered her books and the bag and settled in a mouldy smelling armchair in the front room of the tent. She had the vague hope that Snape would contact her today. She knew it was unreasonable--what would he say even if he did? But she couldn't help thinking of him. He had not told her anything about what was going on at Hogwarts, and she worried about his state of mind. The man was as close to unbreakable as anyone she had ever known, but it had to be a strain, living under Dumbledore's watchful eyes, hated by everyone, his life nothing more than one long pantomime, and he the only player.

She thought back over their last conversation. It had seemed hopeful to her at the time, their alliance against Dumbledore, and she hoped that he had drawn strength from it. There had been some unnamable quality to their exchange that had reminded her of their winter lessons--a kind of smirking camaraderie that she had missed. And it had seemed to her, too, that in their formality with one another there was an unspoken mutual promise to guard their relationship from scrutiny and scorn--it been placed in priority alongside their other duties, and in some way that she could barely articulate, its position there had given it an importance that reassured her.

She wished idly that she had Harry's map. It would be nice to see what Snape was up to, even if he was simply sitting in his office. She could press her finger over his little dot as if she were laying her hand on his chest, and no one would be there to see her or to sanctimoniously remind her that Snape had *killed* Dumbledore, a fact of which she was well aware, thanks much.

And while she was on the subject of those who were entirely too sure of their own positions, what on earth had Dumbledore meant by asking Snape about his Patronus? Clearly, it was somehow related to Harry's mum, as Dumbledore had all but said that he'd been convinced that Snape would never love anyone else. Whenever she thought of this strange revelation, her heart sped up and her fingertips tingled. It was not that she'd thought he'd never cared for anyone but her, but--

Her mind worried at the notion of the Patronus, and she remembered a long ago conversation in which Harry had mentioned that Tonks's Patronus had changed... had changed into a wolf... had changed because she loved Lupin. Had Dumbledore been looking for a Patronus that somehow reflected Lily Potter? And if he had... well, he had obviously been satisfied with what he saw. Absentmindedly, she twisted the heavy silver chain around her neck. Did it mean that Snape still loved Lily Potter? Was it possible that all this truly was for Harry--for some weird, twisted devotion he had to a dead woman? Was she just another pawn in this psychological game between Dumbledore and Voldemort? Had Snape used her to protect Harry?

Slowly, she was filled with a deepening sureness that she had been duped, that Snape was simply carrying out whatever duty he had to save Harry. The feeling of burning certainty seemed to travel through her bloodstream, settling in her heart. Hadn't he told her as much? She rifled through his words in her mind. *Potter, you fool! It was all for Potter... You recall, I'm sure, that we married for a reason... Your job is to save Potter.*

Self-hatred coursed, quick and burning, under her skin. Shame. He would never want her--why had she thought he had? She'd somehow misunderstood and had got herself all tangled up. Oh, how he would laugh if he knew. He would laugh, and Dumbledore would say, "I told you, Severus. *Young girls are susceptible to this sort of nonsense...*"

She rose determinedly and turned toward the tent flap... She was leaving. This was all senseless anyway. They had no plan, and she was deeply tired of pretending that they did. She would go to Australia and find her parents. Once she'd lifted the enchantment, she'd snap her wand and forget these conniving wizards and their impossible plans, their unwinnable wars...

But first, she had best take off this disgusting necklace. Let Harry and Ron cope with it if they could; she wanted nothing more to do with the machinations of old men and boys who seemed to think she was something less than human that they could use to achieve their ends...

She fingered the locket and made to lift it over her head, but it had somehow grown quite heavy. She grasped it more firmly and tried to move it. The damned thing seemed to have become stuck to her somehow, and if she wasn't mistaken, it was growing noticeably warmer. She scraped her fingernails under it, but gained no purchase on the metal that felt almost molten now, as if it were trying to burn its way into her body by force.

"Harry!" she screamed. Nothing happened. Nothing happened because they were already gone. They'd snuck out somehow... maybe Disillusioned themselves and crept through the tent right before her, trusting her swotty, know-it-all nose to be pressed into a book as usual, and now they'd left her here alone, alone in the woods, alone to be destroyed by this monstrous thing.

"What's wrong? Hermione!"

Harry was there, but it wasn't Harry at all, it was Voldemort, disguised to look like Harry, and he'd come to claim her at last, to show her exactly what the Dark Lord did to worthless little Mudbloods like her. He was going to burn her and eat her, and it was exactly what she deserved.

The next thing she knew, Harry had wrenched the necklace from her chest and whipped it over her head. "Hermione!"

She was in the same chair that she'd been in when she settled down with her books, but it was long past dark now. The only light in the room came from Harry's wand. The day had drifted past while she'd been lost in the maddening world of the Horcrux. She had been wearing it for almost ten hours. It was impossible to know whether she had slept or simply dreamed--although the roiling, nightmarish quality had left the room, she still remembered her visions clearly.

"What the ruddy hell?" Ron was saying as he, too, emerged from the bedroom.

Hermione was almost unable to speak. "The Horcrux... I don't know, but I might have fallen asleep--"

"Merlin, Hermione. You about scared the life out of me," Ron said dismissively.

"No one wears this for more than three hours at a time," Harry ordered suddenly. He was pale and wide-eyed. "Hermione--when I tried to get it off you--it was sticking. I--I was afraid for a minute that I was going to have to carve it out of your chest. It felt like it weighed a ton, and you... you weren't sleeping. At least, not any kind of sleep I've ever seen."

She shuddered. But already, sensation was creeping back into her limbs. Harry believed her. It was crazy, but Harry believed her.

Ron snatched the necklace from Harry's fist and peered at it in the dim light of his wand. "It seems the same to me," he said and slipped it over his head. "I'm sure you fell asleep, Hermione. We all did. And all the better. It's one less day to spend staring at the walls of this tent."

Neither Harry nor Hermione replied to this.

"I'm hungry," Ron said finally. "Do you think we could get some more fish--"

"*Shut up!*" Harry said suddenly.

"What? You're telling me you're not hungry?" Ron said, all injured innocence.

"*I can hear someone!*"

No one dared to breath as they waited to see if the enchantments would hold. There was a furious shuffling and crunching of leaves outside, and the low babble of voices, but none came closer to the tent, where the three of them sat frozen and waiting.

Hermione rose soundlessly and took her wand from her pocket. She pointed it at her bag and whispered, *Accio Extendable Ears.* She threw one each to Harry and Ron and jammed her own into her ear, creeping toward the entrance to the tent. She slid the flesh colored string under the flap. On their hands and knees, the boys did the same. Pressed shoulder to shoulder, the three of them listened.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

*Chapter 27 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. I make no money. Thank you to Shellsnapeluver, my wonderful beta.

□

This beautiful banner was made for Second Life by my dear friend OpalJade.

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Hermione still felt shaky, but she was strengthened by the sound of friendly voices, known voices. The unbearable sense of isolation she had felt since Moody's death lifted for a moment. There were others like them--others running, hiding in the woods, others *resisting*. At the sound of Dean Thomas's voice, she had to restrain herself from lunging through the tent flap and launching herself at them.

Occasionally, Harry or Ron would whisper something. "Tonks's dad!" or "Dirk Cresswell--works at the Ministry. Dad knows him." But mostly, they listened in stunned silence as the tale of Neville, Ginny and the sword of Gryffindor unfolded.

They would have listened all night, but it began to rain, and the travelers moved on, apparently seeking shelter in a denser part of the forest. Their Extendable Ears had barely been reeled in when Harry demanded to speak to Phineas Nigellus.

"Phineas Nigellus?" Hermione asked, stalling for time. How would she speak to Headmaster Black without involving Snape?

"Yes, Hermione, Phineas Nigellus! He hangs in the Headmaster's office! He'll know what happened to Ginny!"

"Harry, you saw her this morning on the map. You know she's all right."

Harry gave her a look that bordered on loathing, and Ron swung around on his heel to face her. "She's my sister," he spat, and Hermione quailed.

"I--I didn't mean that the way it sounded," she protested. "I just thought that--"

"Get the portrait, Hermione."

Her bag was still on the chair where she had left it. She reached in and pulled the portrait of Headmaster Black from its depths.

"If he comes here," she said, "he'll know where we are; he'll be able to tell Snape!"

Harry hesitated for only a moment. "We'll blindfold him."

"What?"

"Cover his eyes with your hand, Hermione; I don't care. But I want to see him."

Hermione raised her wand, reluctantly. "Maybe if you call him, Harry? He's a Slytherin, after all, and I'm just a Mudblood. But you're famous; he'll know you. And you've met him before, haven't you?"

"Yeah, okay," Harry said. "Erm... Phineas Nigellus?"

"Headmaster Black," Hermione hissed. "And say 'please!'"

"Headmaster Black," Harry said. "It's Harry Potter. I was wondering if you could please come here? There are some things I'd like to ask you about."

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Snape was sitting in his office, reading, a healthy fire roaring in the grate. Dumbledore was pretending to sleep, and Snape was enjoying the solitude. He turned a page absently. He was not really taking in the words so much as listening to the rain lashing the castle and the crackle and hiss of the fire. When Phineas Nigellus broke the silence, he nearly jumped.

"Headmaster, Harry Potter is calling me."

"Harry Potter?" Snape asked incredulously.

"Indeed. Shall I go to him?"

Snape hesitated. He had no doubt but that Potter still believed him guilty of murdering Dumbledore in cold blood. But was it possible that he had somehow discovered--Merlin knew, he hoped that Hermione had not revealed--their marriage? Was Hermione with Potter? Would this be a conversation that could be held in front of Dumbledore? He glanced at the former Headmaster's portrait. Dumbledore was sitting straight up now, hands on his knees, looking alert and perhaps a bit... excited?

"Please do," Snape said. "But bear in mind that you are under the Headmaster's Oath."

Black huffed. "I do not need reminding of my word, Professor Snape. Would you like an open connection or simply a report?"

Snape paused again, considering.

"A report, if you would, please," Dumbledore said. Snape turned and glared at him, but gave a curt nod when Black looked to him for confirmation.

"Very well," Phineas Nigellus said.

When Black had disappeared from his portrait, Snape rounded on Dumbledore. "After everything, you are still reluctant to tell me your secrets?"

"Hermione is aware of the need to be discreet in sharing information," Dumbledore said calmly. "However, Harry is, at the best of times, hotheaded. It's for your own safety, Severus. After all, the more you know, the more you have to hide."

"My own safety," he sneered and gave Dumbledore a look that was meant to remind him of the many times that he had returned to the castle barely alive, of the hours he had spent recuperating from beatings so severe that the sight of his own bare skin now disgusted him.

"I do not wish to argue, Severus. There are worse things than physical pain, as we both know, and I dare say there are secrets in your mind you would die to keep from Lord Voldemort. So let us not add anything else to them tonight."

Snape glowered, but said nothing.

Black returned remarkably quickly.

"How is Harry?" Dumbledore asked before Snape could open his mouth.

"The Potter brat is as disrespectful as he has always been," Phineas Nigellus said. "I have never understood your insistence that there is something special about the child, Albus. He was mostly concerned about the fate of the Weasley girl after she tried to steal the sword of Gryffindor. It was all terribly childish."

"The sword of Gryffindor?" Snape said sharply. "How did he--?"

"Yes, I rather thought you would be interested in that. It seems your little mu--that is, Miss Granger, is on to you. She asked several pointed questions about its location."

Dumbledore glared at Snape. "What have you told her?"

"You have been here each and every time I have spoken to Miss Granger," Snape said dangerously. "You know full well that I have not even mentioned the sword of Gryffindor. Perhaps if you *explained* what their interest in it might be, I could be of some service."

"I left the sword of Gryffindor to Harry in my will," Dumbledore said. "He will need it, as you know. And I have already told you that your job is to keep it for him until the time is right."

Snape made a sound like a cross between a chuckle and a sigh. "You cannot bequeath the sword of Gryffindor, Albus. Surely, you knew that. It is not yours to give."

"Quite right. However, I wished to suggest to Harry that he might need it."

"And you felt I was not up to such a task?"

"Severus, I want him to come to these discoveries at a pace that --"

"Shall I go?" Phineas Nigellus interrupted. "Neither of you seem to be very interested in my report."

Snape longed to snap at the portrait, but he refrained. The last time he had done so, the results had very nearly been disastrous. "Forgive me, Headmaster Black. Do go on."

"The Granger girl asked whether the sword had been removed from Hogwarts to be cleaned. Though I corrected her foolish Muggle-born nonsense about cleaning goblins' silver, I did get the impression that she knew a sword had left the office."

Dumbledore's painted face paled.

"I see," Snape said, pressing further, wanting to know what had Albus in such distress. "Did she say anything else?"

"She asked when I had last seen the sword of Gryffindor taken out of its case."

"And what did you tell her?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

"I told her that the last thing I could tell her about the sword of Gryffindor was that I had seen you use it to break a ring." Black smiled.

"You are bound to keep the secrets of this office, Phineas," Dumbledore roared.

"And so I did," Black said stiffly. "I told her nothing about what Headmaster Snape had done with the sword. You are no longer the Headmaster; I was not obligated to keep your secret."

Snape shut his eyes briefly, unsure as to whether he was delighted or stricken by this latest development. His mind whirred over the possibilities, holding them up next to

each other like puzzle pieces. Dumbledore had used the sword--ah, yes, the ring, the curse--that night! A cursed ring, powerful enough to kill Dumbledore, stabbed by the sword, just as Potter had done to the diary some years back... Why? Was it some enchantment that could only be broken by something of Gryffindor's?

He changed tacks. Something Hermione had gone to the Ministry to retrieve... Something Voldemort didn't know he was missing... The sword of Gryffindor. He thought back further. Something the Dark Lord was hiding? He remembered the night that he had returned from Voldemort and found Hermione asleep in his chambers... Voldemort had asked Bellatrix to keep something safe for him in her vault at Gringotts. He had not thought much of it at the time, though he had mentioned it to Dumbledore. Was the Dark Lord hiding weapons? Treasures? How did the sword of Gryffindor fit in?

"I can see you thinking," Dumbledore said. "Stop now, before it is too late."

Too late. Secrets. Hiding. Suddenly, his mind landed on the part of his plan he had to keep from Hermione, the part he never cared to think about. The part that kept him, he knew, from giving himself to her entirely, for when she realized what he had been keeping from her--

*Tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the Killing Curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Voldemort's soul was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself onto the only living soul left in that collapsing building. Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Harry, and it is that which gives him the power of speech with snakes, and a connection with Lord Voldemort's mind that he has never understood. And while that fragment of soul, unmissed by Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die.*

That night, through his horror, he had thought, *A Horcrux. Dumbledore does not realize it, but he is talking about a Horcrux.* But it seemed he had underestimated Dumbledore's knowledge of the Darkest arts.

Hermione, God help her, was hunting Horcruxes.

He looked up at Dumbledore, his face perfectly blank. He thought he would keep this revelation to himself for the time being. "Very well. But if you needed me to deliver the sword of Gryffindor, why have you not asked me to do so?"

"Because the time is not yet right! I sent Miss Granger along to slow Harry down--he needs time to learn about his quest before he does something rash!"

Dumbledore's words struck something in him, something he had never dared to look at face on. If he knew the whole plan, he would no longer be bound by Dumbledore's orders, for he would no longer be afraid that he would be destroying an intricate and unknown maneuver. He could weigh his orders against his own mind. He could choose.

The world had changed. Snape stood in the same place he had been a moment before: the very place he had been when Dumbledore had told him what Harry must do; the place he had stood when he had been all but ordered to marry Hermione; the place, in fact, where he had done it. But everything had changed. For once, in his entire, pitiable existence, he knew the whole plan and could see it from each angle. He knew exactly who he belonged to and why. He was almost dizzy with thoughts; they stabbed at him from all directions, but he could see now, see it all, and he felt like someone who had been set free. He could choose. He looked at Albus's portrait almost kindly.

"For all your wisdom, Dumbledore, there is one thing you have never understood. Humans are not chess pieces, no matter how well you think you understand them. They will never do exactly what you think they should."

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Hermione's heart was dancing a furious jig in her chest. The sword of Gryffindor! If she knew Phineas Nigellus, he had been utterly literal with them. The sword of Gryffindor had not left the Headmaster's office since Dumbledore had used it! That meant that Snape still had it--mostly likely he had sent the fake out on purpose to satisfy Voldemort! And if Snape still had it, then she could get it, and they would be on their way. All she had to do was stall Harry, who was staring at her rapturously.

"The ring was a Horcrux, Hermione! He used the sword of Gryffindor to destroy it!"

"I know! *Goblin-made blades imbibe only that which strengthens them! Harry, that sword's impregnated with basilisk venom!*"

"But where is it? Dumbledore must have known the Ministry would never let me have it... so he had a copy of it made...and he left the real one--where?"

"Think!" whispered Hermione. "Think! Where would he have left it?"

"Not at Hogwarts," said Harry, resuming his pacing.

"Somewhere in Hogsmeade?" suggested Hermione. If she could get them close enough to Hogwarts, perhaps Snape could deliver it to her.

"Ron, what do you think?" Harry asked, turning to Ron. Hermione did not glance at Ron in that moment. She was still gazing at Harry, so happy to see the spark return to his eyes; he practically shone with energy.

"Oh, remembered me, have you?" Ron said. Hermione looked over sharply. His face--there was something wrong with his face.

"What? What's the problem?" asked Harry.

"Problem? There's no problem. Not according to you, anyway."

"Well, you've obviously got a problem," said Harry. "Spit it out, will you?"

Ron charged to his feet, looking murderous.

"All right, I'll spit it out. Don't expect me to skip up and down the tent because there's some other damn thing we've got to find. Just add it to the list of stuff you don't know."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"We thought Dumbledore had told you what to do, we thought you had a real plan!"

"I see," Harry said. "Were you imagining a life of high adventure? Did you fancy yourself some kind of spy? Did you think we'd be ducking in and out of the Ministry daily, Death Eaters on our tail, blazing through the woods on broomsticks, dueling Dark wizards?"

Ron spluttered.

"So sorry to disappoint," Harry said icily.

"I thought you cared about my sister," Ron said suddenly.

"Ginny? What the fuck does this have to do with Ginny?"

"Just seems like you're not terribly fussed about what happens to my family. Ginny's taking on Snape because of you--"

"He only sent her to work with Hagrid!"

"Yeah, I get it, you don't care!"

Harry looked at Ron with a kind of hatred she had never seen in his face before, not even when he talked about Snape. "Leave Ginny out of this."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Hermione clutched her wand. She would hex them before she let them duel.

"Yeah? I should just forget about her? Like you have? Maybe I should just forget the rest of my family, too. *It's all right for you two, isn't it, with your parents safely out of the way--*"

"My parents are dead!" Harry bellowed.

"And mine could be going the same way!" yelled Ron.

"Then GO!" roared Harry. "Go back to them, pretend you've got over your spattergroit, and Mummy'll be able to feed you up and--"

Ron touched his wand where it stuck out of his pocket, and Harry made to retrieve his as well. Hermione raised her own wand in warning.

"Yeah, I think I will."

Harry turned away from Ron. "Leave the Horcrux," he said over his shoulder.

Ron threw it to the ground. "You coming?" he asked Hermione.

She looked at him for a long time. Where was Ron? Was he coming back or had the Horcrux taken him for good? "No, Ron. I'm staying with Harry. We have a job to do--we promised."

"Yeah, well, have fun with that," Ron said, and he had exited the enchantments before she could even cross the room. She ran after him, but hesitated at the border. If she crossed out, too, would Harry come and let her back in?

"Harry, please--hold out your hand so I can look for him!"

"Leave it, Hermione. He's gone."

Who were these people she was living with? Why were they so willing to let each other go? This tent, the three of them--these things were all she had, and now they had been reduced by one. She felt too stunned to cry, to stunned to do anything. Voldemort was winning. He was miles away, God alone knew where, but he was winning anyway. He was tearing them apart.

Harry picked up the Horcrux where it lay on the floor of the tent. "I'll take the watch," he said and stormed out of the tent flap.

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Snape had been sitting at his desk for nearly an hour pondering his situation, flipping idly through a sheaf of detention requests. If Hermione was after Horcruxes--well, they need to confer at the very least. How many were there? Were there any he could get for her, any places he could go that she could not? Had she already guessed about Potter? Could he hold on until Dumbledore ordered him to deliver the sword of Gryffindor, or should he flout the old man entirely? To have options was nearly dizzying, and he longed to make lists and sort things out logically, though he knew that to do so, to leave any trace of his thoughts, could send the whole plan up in flames.

"Miss Granger is crying into my frame," Phineas Nigellus said inscrutably from the wall. Snape glanced quickly at Black; then, his eyes flitted to Dumbledore's portrait. The man was absent. Absent!

"Is she alone?"

"I have heard nothing but her blubbing for the last twenty minutes."

Quickly, Snape considered. He might have only seconds--did he dare to use the ring to check first?

"But she has said your name several times." By Black's tone and lifted eyebrow, Snape knew exactly which of his names she had used. So, she was alone.

"If you would be so kind as to open the connection, Headmaster Black, I would be in your debt. I'm terribly sorry to trouble you again so soon."

"Not at all, Headmaster Snape," Black said in an oily voice.

"Bearing in mind, of course, that nothing that is said by myself or Miss Granger should be reported to Dumbledore or anyone else."

"Naturally," Black said, but Snape thought he caught a hint of disappointment in the man's eyes. His leg disappeared from the frame.

He heard her hitching breath. "...if I could just talk to you... I know that's silly, but I need--"

Snape's heart clenched. "Hermione?"

"Professor? I'm sorry--Oh, God, I didn't mean to summon you."

"No--Hermione. Pay attention. We may not have much time. Albus is gone from his portrait."

She went instantly silent.

"I have become aware of your plan."

"Does Vol--"

"NO!" Snape bellowed. "Do not say his name. There is a Taboo on the word. He will find you if you say it. Do whatever you can to impress on Potter that you *must not use it*."

She did not skip a beat. "Does He-Who--"

"No. I discovered it on my own. Dumbledore is not yet aware that I know."

"But you have the sword."

"I do. I think that he will send me with it before long. Provided it does not take too long, I think we should wait to confer until then."

"All right. But, Sever--sir--"

"Hermione. I--I apologize for being so harsh with you about the Ministry. You have done very well. The task you have been set--"

"Ron left us today," she blurted.

Snape shoved his plans to rip the Weasley child limb from limb to the back of his mind. There was no time. Albus could return at any moment.

"I see. Are you all right?"

"I--"

Snape's eyes danced between the portraits of Dumbledore and Black. Was that--?

"Hermione," he said. "I must go. Be strong. I *will* come." He gestured sharply at Phineas Nigellus who pulled his leg back into the frame.

"Thank you," Snape whispered.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

*Chapter 28 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: As always, all fully italicized text and anything else you recognize belongs to JKR. I make no money. Thank you to Shellsnapelover, the most wonderful beta anyone could ask for.

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She agreed to go to Godric's Hollow out of simple kindness to Harry. The light she had seen in his eyes on the night they had spoken to Phineas Nigellus--she could not bear to think of it as the night Ron had left them--was more than gone; Harry looked empty, hollow. She had been fortified that night by her few words with Snape, but Harry'd had nothing to buoy him. And while Hermione was frustrated by having to wait so long for Snape to materialize with the sword of Gryffindor, there was something left ahead of her, something to wait for. It held her fear at bay and made the days seem shorter. She thought that visiting his parents' home might restore some of Harry's fight.

And it was almost Christmas. How clearly she remembered the Christmas past. She'd thought of it almost daily as she charmed the snow from the ground to hunt for mushrooms. Though now that she understood the Taboo, she felt freer to occasionally enter a Muggle grocery store for provisions, they still got much of what they needed from the woods. It simply felt too dangerous to leave Harry alone without the Invisibility Cloak, and she was loathe to take him into the world, even the Muggle one.

But she relented, as his face was so pale and so needy by their wand light. They had been sitting cross-legged on the floor of the tent, eating spaghetti out of a single pot passed between them, too hungry to wait to dish it out. It was warm in the tent that night; either the weather had become forgiving enough to allow their Warming Charms to be felt, or it was the food, but she felt almost drowsy with heat. It was the strange thing about being that cold, that chilled to the marrow: sometimes she fell into sleep as if she were being pulled, as if her body was demanding the only cure it knew how to provide, and then, the moment it warmed even slightly, she was ready to sleep all over again.

He had asked her while her mouth was full of spaghetti, perhaps to keep her from protesting until he had finished his case.

"Okay," she said.

"*Did you hear me right?*" he asked.

"*Of course I did. You want to go to Godric's Hollow. I agree, I think we should.*"

"But," Harry sputtered. "But--why?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Because we're looking for Horcruxes, Harry. You said yourself that You-Know-Who liked to hide his Horcruxes in places that meant something to him--what could mean more than hiding a bit of his immortality in the place where he proved he could not die?"

"Oh... er... yeah. I hadn't thought of it that way."

She smiled at him in the glow of the wand light. "And I know you want to see your Mum and Dad. I want that for you, too."

Something knitted itself up between them, then, something that had been frayed and strained since Ron had left them. She looked at him with her old affection, and even though she wore the Horcrux, for a moment she felt immune to its effects. Harry looked away, but he thrust the pot of spaghetti at her.

"You take the rest of this, Hermione. You look thin." His voice quavered.

"No thinner than you are. Stay with me and finish it."

Harry moved to sit beside her, and they both stabbed eagerly at the last strands of spaghetti. When Harry leaned his head back against the cabinet and fell asleep, she let him stay there for a while. It was warm enough, and she liked the company. She examined Harry's face for a moment while he slept. She hoped that the slackness of his features was not just sleep but *rest*; she hoped he was drawing comfort from their latest plan.

Finally, she rose and levitated him into his bunk. It was time to sit the first watch. At least she would have plenty of time to plan.

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They went Polyjuiced as Muggles, and it was odd to be looked at again, to walk down a normal street with Harry, whose cold hand was tucked into hers, and to feel strangers' eyes on them, even only in passing. Truth be told, it frightened her a little. She felt naked and vulnerable, even though it was not her own skin she wore.

But by the time they reached the statue bearing the images of the Potters as they had been seventeen years before, Hermione had forgotten to be afraid. Aside from the voices they'd heard of those on the run, this was the first sign of a magical world beyond their tent that she had seen since Tottenham Court Road, and she felt physically choked at the sight of it. There were times in the woods, late at night, that it seemed that they could simply go on forever, the two of them in the tent. They would pretend at planning, the war would remain at a deadly impasse, and everyone else would go on living these encumbered half-lives until they forgot there had ever been anything else. To see Harry's parents, so young and strong, reminded her of what had been lost and what they stood to gain. She gazed at the stone representation of Lily Potter. This would be how Snape remembered her, and she felt a tiny tug of pain at the fact that Lily's hair was tipped in snow. What had taken place between them so many years before? Harry had told her once that Snape had betrayed his mum. Was that so? And if it was, why did Dumbledore feel he would be forever loyal to her? She might have stood there all night if Harry hadn't tugged her away.

"C'mon," Harry said, and her eyes darted to his face. He seemed pleased, but somehow haunted, by what he had seen. Was it that he was there, on the statue as well, that this was the only time he'd truly seen himself with his family? Or was it that it spooked him to see himself cast in stone? She asked none of these questions, but submitted to the tug of his hand, pulling her across the street to a little cemetery blanketed in snow.

"They'll be in here somewhere," he whispered. "Help me find them."

They could not use magic out in public for fear of being discovered, so Hermione trudged through the rows, pausing at each stone to smear the snow away with her mitten. Her breath caught as she uncovered a P--but no, that was Peeverell, not Potter. But below the name there was a symbol that caught her eye, and she scraped more of the ice away with the heel of her hand.

"Harry!" she whispered sharply.

"Did you find them?"

"No, but come here."

Harry came over rather reluctantly, and Hermione wished she could cast Lumos to show him what she'd found.

"This symbol here--it's in my book!"

"What, your Runes book? Well, you can look it up when we get back. Hermione, I want to find--"

"No! Not the Runes book--*my* book! The book Dumbledore gave me."

"Really? Wait, let me see." Harry said, leaning closer. "Hang on--I've seen that before. On Luna's dad--at the wedding, you know. Krum said--"

"Krum?"

"Yes! Krum said it was Grindelwald's mark."

*Grindelwald's mark?* And Harry had seen it before? Why hadn't he said something? She had suggested looking for a Horcrux here to placate Harry, to make him feel as if she weren't coming out of worry or pity. But perhaps they *were* supposed to come to Godric's Hollow, after all--perhaps she'd simply missed a clue, and Dumbledore had been aiming them here from the beginning.

"Hermione? Could we--"

"Yes, sorry. I'm just thinking. Maybe Dumbledore has been trying to tell us to come here? Though I don't know why he would have thought I'd know about this mark. I'll have to--" *'I'll have to ask Snape,'* had been on the tip of her tongue, and she swallowed it sharply. "I'll have to do some research. But we may be onto something, Harry!"

Harry looked torn, and she realized that, right now, finding his family was at the forefront of his mind. So she swallowed her excitement and took his hand once more. "Come on. We'll find them."

Together they proceeded through the graveyard, stooping at each stone to brush away the snow. Harry moved quickly, barely glancing at each marker before tugging her along to the next.

"*Harry, they're here... right here,*" she said quietly, calling him back to her.

Harry turned toward her and nearly ran, though he was only a few steps away. She stepped back to allow him closer, and he fell to his knees, seemingly intent upon clearing every flake of snow from the words on the stone.

Hermione watched as if frozen as Harry leaned forward and rested his forehead against his father's headstone. This felt much too private to witness, and yet there was no place for her to go.

"Dad, I'm scared," Harry whispered. Hermione's face began to crumple. She could feel the beginnings of hot tears stinging her eyes.

"I'm trying, but I don't know what to do next. I don't know where to go."

Her tears spilled over and burned her icy cheeks. Hermione turned away.

"Help me," Harry whispered. "Help me, please."

Finally, she realized Harry was speaking to her. He had raised his head and was looking up at her beseechingly.

"I didn't bring anything. I didn't bring them *anything!*"

The desperation in his voice overrode her better judgment. She pulled her wand from her coat pocket and swirled it in the air. A wreath of Christmas roses materialized there, and Harry caught it and lowered it to his mother's grave. Then he stood, and Hermione opened her arms. "Thank you," he said as he stepped into her embrace.

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The castle stood oddly empty. There had been no need to keep the house tables in the Great Hall, nor even to extend the high table to accommodate the few remaining students, for there were no students at Hogwarts this Christmas, none at all. This fact ate at Snape and pursued him through the empty halls. Where on earth did these parents think their children could be safer than at Hogwarts with a Death Eater for a Headmaster? Did they suppose their flimsy charms would protect their children at home? It was infuriating.

He had no idea what to do with himself, as he was hardly looking forward to being alone with the staff for the holidays. He could not imagine how he would manage to swallow anything at the Christmas meal that surely would be shrouded in hostile silence. It was hard enough to eat when surrounded by the chatter of the students and the other staff. Minerva and the others had taken to whispering and giggling, to shooting pointed looks in his direction before bursting into gales of laughter. Snape had

withstood it, his expression never changing. He made no move to retaliate or even to acknowledge their behavior, for to do so would have been to admit that it pained him. It felt like being in school again himself--subject to taunting and scorn no matter where he went. It felt like being *Snivellus* again.

So when Malfoy's invitation came, he accepted it at once, even though it would mean spending the holiday with a family he despised and the Dark Lord himself. At least, there, he would be able to speak, to move about without catching someone's mockery of him from the corner of his eye. No Death Eater would dare to mock him.

However, once he arrived, he realized his error. It was clear that the invitation had been made at the Dark Lord's insistence. Lucius seemed to resent his presence, as he was, he supposed, a constant reminder of everything Lucius had lost. Wandless and petulant, Lucius skulked about the Manor in a foul temper, finding reason to snipe at Snape for anything he did or said. Narcissa and Draco were no better, though he assumed that he had earned their ire by doing exactly as Narcissa had requested, by saving Draco from certain death. Narcissa detested being beholden to anyone, and Draco was certain that Snape had interfered unnecessarily.

The Manor was decorated lavishly. Sprigs of holly adorned every flat surface, and four magnificent trees dominated the ballroom. Mistletoe bloomed from every ceiling, and the house was constantly filled with the smells of the house-elves' cooking. Yet, it all felt empty, pointlessly joyful, as the Manor was far too large for the five of them, and they bounced through the house like marbles, crashing together occasionally and then veering off again. The rooms seemed to ring with silence. Apparently, even the Death Eaters all had families with whom to share the holidays.

The afternoon of Christmas Eve proved to be doubly troublesome. Narcissa had ordered them all to dress for a traditional Christmas dinner and then flounced away to attend to God alone knew what, leaving Voldemort, Lucius and himself alone in the parlor. The Dark Lord seemed to savor the tension between Snape and Malfoy and made no efforts to alleviate the situation.

"Severus, it pleases me that you have joined us for the holidays."

"Thank you, my Lord. And thank you to Lucius, who is ever the gracious host."

Lucius snorted. "I live to serve the Dark Lord," he said, making it plain that he had not wanted to issue the invitation.

"Indeed," Snape said. "You have made many... sacrifices." He allowed his hand to brush over the front of his robes, where Lucius knew his wand to be hidden.

The Dark Lord's eyes danced with hideous amusement. "It seemed only fitting that I share the season with my most trusted servant," he said, letting his eyes linger on Snape so that there could be no question of whom he meant. "I have plans that, I believe, are about to come to fruition. It was my wish that you share in my triumph."

Snape did not ask questions. He had found it more prudent in the past to allow the Dark Lord to take whatever meandering path he desired in reaching his point. Questioning led only to outbursts of temper and, occasionally, punishment. "I am honored to share your victories, my Lord."

"Yes. Yes," Voldemort purred. "You have done a fine job with Hogwarts, Severus. The Carrows report to me that you oversee everything from curriculum to... correction with a heavy hand, and that there has been excellent student retention despite the changes. You have sold my vision to the parents, it seems. I am very pleased."

"My Lord," Snape bowed his head in the Dark Lord's direction.

Lucius sniffed.

"Lucius, you may leave us."

"It might interest you to know that Draco receives word from Hogwarts," Lucius said. "Miss Parkinson, after all, is still in school. She reports that the Gryffindors are in a state of barely contained mutiny. She says your Headmaster is ridiculed."

"That is to be expected from the Gryffindors--most of them are from diluted families; the others are notorious blood traitors. However, as I have had no word *of* mutiny, as you say, I presume that Severus is handling them with his usual grace."

Lucius strode from the room with the air of a man who would very much like to slam a door.

"I believe Potter will return to Godric's Hollow before the new year," Voldemort said, apropos of nothing.

Snape nodded, his eyes blank and flat. "Have you received intelligence to that effect?"

"Your news that the child and his friends had gone on the run since the *unfortunate* incident at the Ministry gave me pause. I admit, I thought of sending you to hunt them down."

"It would have been my pleasure."

Voldemort chuckled. "Yes, I imagine so. Your continued contact with the Mudblood has been most useful. I must say that I am impressed, Severus. You have fooled her most thoroughly."

"It is not difficult to outwit children."

"To be sure. However, she is unusually shrewd for a Gryffindor."

"I am humbled by your praise, my Lord, but I must refuse it. She is but a silly girl."

"Let us not argue this point. I simply mean to say that it seemed to me unwise to be wasting your talents by sending you to pursue children through the woods. And I felt it would be prudent to keep your connection to the girl intact a bit longer. How I will enjoy her face when we have captured her, when she sees you at my side."

Snape managed a leering smile. "I look forward to that day, as well, my Lord."

"Yes," he said sibilantly. "And now, I believe, it draws nearer. Rather than chase Potter, I thought, why not let the child come to me? For I know his foolish heart. He will want to return to his parent's home. He will believe there is some strength or unknown magic to be found there."

That did seem remarkably like Potter. Snape stood and crossed the room to fetch some water. He did not wish to be looking into the Dark Lord's eyes.

"You have the measure of Potter exactly, my Lord," he said.

"Indeed. So, I sent Nagini to Godric's Hollow. She has been waiting there for any sign of him."

"And you have had word?"

"Not as yet. However--Potter has been drifting deeper into depression throughout the season. I have felt the despair radiating off the child in waves. Yet, suddenly, he is hopeful. There is a lightness to his mind. I believe he is gaining strength from his plan to visit his parents' home. After all, what more appropriate time could there be than Christmas?" The Dark Lord chuckled happily. It was a chilling sound.

"The connection between your minds remains strong, then?"

"I daresay it is stronger than ever."

"Excellent, my Lord."

"Quite. I believe we will have news soon. Forgive me for subjecting you to Lucius's childish jealousy. I simply thought you would find amusement in taking the girl."

"I would have been pleased to spend the holiday with you, even without this good news."

The Dark Lord smiled horribly. "Thank you, Severus. And now, I think we must bend to our Hostess's wishes and dress for dinner. Perhaps it will be a celebratory one."

"Until then," Snape said and raised his glass in Voldemort's direction. The Dark Lord rose and glided from the room.

Snape returned to his chamber hastily. Evening was descending upon the Manor. Where was she? Did he dare contact her from here? Last he had spoken to her, nothing had seemed out of the ordinary. She had not mentioned any plans to visit Godric's Hollow, but why would she? They had agreed that she would only tell him where she had been once she had safely gone.

Was it a trap? Did the Dark Lord continue to suspect him of feelings for the girl? Were they watching him, waiting for some action on his part?

Snape chastised himself as he dressed. The Dark Lord's plans had hardly been well-laid over the last few months. Though his description of Potter's...*emotional needs* sounded chillingly accurate, there was no reason to suppose that he and Hermione would be spending Christmas in Godric's Hollow. Surely, he was being bated. The best thing to do was to go on as if nothing in the world had changed. Even if the Dark Lord's suppositions were correct, and they were planning to go to the Potters' old home, the likelihood that it would be tonight was miniscule. He would simply be called back to Hogwarts urgently as soon as he could do so without angering the Dark Lord. From there, he would warn Hermione against the village.

He straightened his waistcoat and aimed his wand at his shoes to tie them. The longer he was able to remain here, the more information he might receive of Voldemort's plans. Perhaps he had hinted about the Horcruxes in the past, and Snape had simply not caught his meaning. The Dark Lord was apt to gloat, as he had done that afternoon. He found it difficult not to share the evidence of his magical superiority with his followers. Yes, perhaps this trip had been for the best.

He would warn her from Hogwarts. It would be all right.

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Hermione felt too beaten by all she had seen in the graveyard to take in the Potters' home. It stood exactly as she had pictured it when she had been just a child, sitting in her sunny bedroom, determined to learn all she could about the wizarding world before she joined it at Hogwarts... The right half of the second floor was blasted away; even the door stood open, as if it could not be closed after *he* had opened it... Back then, Harry Potter had been a name in a book, and now she watched an all too real, all too human Harry Potter as he clung to the iron gate outside his parents' house. This was too much. She simply could not bear this; she wanted to take Harry and get out, go home, go anywhere, back to the tent, but away from all this pain.

But Harry was elated. He was leaning over a sign that had emerged through the brambles. "Look, Hermione, look! They haven't forgotten us!"

She joined him in gazing at the magical marker.

*Good luck, Harry, wherever you are.*

*If you read this, Harry, we're all behind you!*

She could not say why it did not touch her heart, why she felt consumed with dread. She glanced up and saw a strange, shapeless mass of a person *hobbling up the lane toward them, silhouetted by the bright lights in the distant square.*

No, she thought. *No.* The sight of the woman, for it seemed clear now that it was a woman, made her want to scream. Whoever that was, she knew that Hermione and Harry weren't Muggles, that they stood reverently in front of James and Lily Potter's home in the midst of a war. This could not be good. She threw the Invisibility Cloak over them and breathed, "Move away slowly. When I squeeze your hand, we'll run. Then we'll Apparate out of here."

"No," Harry said, oblivious to her shushing. "That's Bathilda Bagshot, I'm sure of it. We should go to her, Hermione. Maybe she has the sword..."

"She doesn't have the sword, Harry; we need to go!"

"But she knew Dumbledore!"

"Harry!"

He had thrown off the Invisibility Cloak and was approaching the unfamiliar witch. Hermione followed warily. Why had this woman come out, tonight of all nights? Why did she stand there, silent and unmoving as Harry came toward her?

*"Are you Bathilda?"*

Hermione shook her head in frustration, though the witch nodded and turned, hobbling back the way she had come. This was not right. She could not explain it, but the way the woman moved... Hermione wanted to scream as they followed her up the walk. She wanted to grab Harry and forcibly remove him.

When the old witch opened the door and the smell reached her, she took Harry's elbow. "Please, Harry. Please let's go. I--"

"No! We have to get what we came for, Hermione."

When the woman indicated with a gesture that she wanted to see Harry alone, Hermione knew for sure. As Harry ascended the steps, she pulled out her wand and aimed it at her ring.

*Godric's Hollow? Afraid.*

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He sat on Narcissa's right, trying maintain an air of dignity as a house-elf spooned creamed peas onto his plate. "Everything looks lovely, Narcissa," he said.

"Thank you, Severus," she replied neutrally.

"Again, I must thank you for welcoming me so generously into your home for the holidays. I am in your debt."

She seemed to stiffen slightly at the mention of debt.

"Not at all. It simply pained me to think of you *allalone* for the holidays," she said.

Snape swallowed a smirk. *Well played*, he thought. Perhaps the wine was going to his head. He reached for his water glass.

"Draco," he began. "How are you finding life outside of school?"

Draco shifted in his seat beside Lord Voldemort. Snape wondered what the poor boy did with his days. No matter how "pleased" the Dark Lord claimed to be with him, it was clear Draco had been given no more assignments. Perhaps he waited on Voldemort, Snape thought nastily.

"Enjoyable," Draco said, the ghost of his old haughty smile on his lips. "It is pleasant not to be surrounded by inferiors."

"A luxury, indeed," Snape agreed.

"Our Lord has great plans for Draco," Lucius said. "When the war is over, Draco will join the Ministry, as senior undersecretary to the Head of the Muggle-Born Registration Commission."

"Presuming there are any Muggle-borns left to register," Snape said, and the Dark Lord guffawed. Lucius tittered politely.

"It is a prominent position," Lucius said. "Perhaps, one day--"

"Ah, do you aspire to Thicknesse's job?"

But he did not hear Draco's answer, as pain suddenly radiated from his left hand. *The ring. Fuck.*

He made as if to reach for his goblet, but knocked it over, sending the ruby red elfin wine over his hands and plate.

"Forgive my clumsiness, Narcissa. I apologize," he said, rising.

"Sit, Severus," she snapped. "The house-elves will attend to it."

"Of course," he said. "I'll just retire for a moment to wash my hands."

"But surely, you can--" Narcissa began, but he was already striding from the room. Once he was safely in the loo, he slipped the ring from his finger and read *Godric's Hollow? Afraid.*

No curses leaped to his mind. No frantic denials. There was nothing there but fear and deathly silence. He raised his wand.

*Trap. Get out NOW.*

This would be delicate, perhaps impossible. The part of his mind that wanted to begin instantly chastising and berating him for his reluctance to contact her from the Manor sprung to life. No. No time for that now. Later. If she survived, there would be plenty of time for that later. If not--

He would return to the dining room. If Voldemort seemed animated, he would know that his warning had come too late. Otherwise, perhaps there was still a chance. He took care not to run. He must appear calm, only as flustered as a man who has just spilled wine on his hostess's linens.

Too late. *Too late.* The Dark Lord's eyes were flashing. "It seems the time is coming, Severus," he said as Snape reentered the room. "Nagini is excited. She grows... hungry."

Snape's stomach clenched as he drew his lips into a smile. "A very happy Christmas, indeed," he said.

Voldemort rose, hissing, from his seat. "She calls! She has the boy. She bids me come." The serpentine wizard raised his wand and slashed at the dining room wall, which opened obligingly into the night. He strode toward the opening and, in a hazy swirl of midnight robes, flew away.

Snape glanced at Lucius, whose face was pale and shocked. "The wall--" he began.

"I am sure you will be compensated," Snape said as he, too, departed the dining room into the garden.

The night was black and heavy with cold. Snape ran forward, turning as he went, and disappeared.

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She was already running for the stairs as she shoved the ring back onto her finger. The stairwell was pitch black, and she stuck her hands out to the sides to feel her way. She nearly screamed as her fingertips grazed the wall. It was wet, sticky with some unknown substance. She recoiled and lit her wand. *What was that?* No matter--she had to find Harry. There were several doors at the top of the steps, but as she reached the landing, she heard a terrible hissing. *Parseltongue*, she thought and followed the sound and the smell into a tiny bedroom. She thrust her wand out before her in time to see the lumpy form of Bathilda Bagshot crumpling and melting away, leaving the giant body of a snake in its wake.

She raised her hand to her mouth. Harry had his back turned. Had he been bewitched? Why didn't he see?

"Harry!" she screamed and whipped her wand through the air. "*Stupefy! Stupefy!*"

Red light shot from her wand, but the snake dodged it easily, rearing its head back to strike.

Harry turned slowly, too slowly, and the snake plunged. Hermione saw its fangs graze his arm as it began to wrap and coil around him.

There was more hissing, and Hermione frantically shot spell after spell at the snake. "*Stupefy! Sectumsempra! Relashio!*"

Relashio seemed to have done it. The snake began to release its grip on Harry, but he was wandless--where was his wand? Her eyes scanned the floor. Had the snake taken it somehow?

"*Levicorpus!*" she shouted, but that had been a mistake, as now the snake was flailing through the air, its enormous body crashing into the walls, sending plaster flying. Its tail whipped just above her head.

"Hermione!"

She ducked and ran toward Harry, and he reached blindly for her hand. Splintered glass was peppering her face, and now the snake was falling, hissing wildly. Harry was dragging her backward, but no, no, that could not be right, the snake would corner them. She tugged him toward the window.

"He's coming!" Harry was babbling. "He's coming; he's on the way; we can't go back out there!"

"Harry, we have to get out of here! Come on," she yelled and wrenched him with all her strength toward the window.

"*Confringo!*" She screamed and the walls began to collapse around them. As the glass shattered, she stepped onto the sill, pulling Harry behind her, heedless of the jagged edges that slashed at her feet, and dove, without hesitating, into the night.

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Snape had Apparated directly into the center of the street. In front of him was the statue of Lily and James, a statue he had stood before on many a dark, deserted night like this one, looking at the evidence of what he had done. But now there was no time to think of what he had once loved and destroyed, for now his only goal was to reach Hermione in time, to stop it from happening again. It seemed the street was weighing him down. Hadn't he once taken it at a run in exactly this way? How could it all be happening again, when this time he should have had the power to stop it?

He heard the twin screams from an upstairs window as he ran, and he nearly fell to the ground, it was so like before--

*Hermione--*

Voldemort's scream of rage and defeat echoed down the empty street. He did not dare to hope, but plunged ahead.

He reached the house just in time to see two Muggles diving into space, a frumpy little woman clutching a bald-headed man, twisting and screaming as they fell. He raised his wand, hoping to break their fall, but they were gone.

They were gone. He clutched his wand so tightly in his fist that a dim part of his mind insisted it would break if he did not release it. He saw Voldemort's sickly white hands reaching out of the window.

"I am sorry, my Lord," he called dully. "They were Apparating just as I arrived."

"*Crucio!*" Voldemort bellowed, and Snape sank gratefully into the snow. This was how it was supposed to have happened. She had escaped, and he would be punished.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

*Chapter 29 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Sorry for this lengthy author's note. First off, the usual: Any fully italicized text, as well as anything else you recognize, belongs to JKR. I make no money. Secondly, I borrowed the title of the wonderful story *As Sharp as Sunlight* by Amanuensis (found on RS.org) in the text of this chapter. Thirdly, to those keeping an eye on canon as they read, I'm not breaking Harry's wand. He's got enough on his mind. And last, but certainly not least, I owe enormous debts of gratitude to RedOrchid, who talked me through this chapter every step of the way; OpalJade, who alpha and beta read this chapter when I was too afraid to send it to anyone; and always, always to Shellsnapelover, without whom there would be no story.

Ok, one last thing. OpalJade has drawn an amazing illustration for this chapter. See it here: <http://opaljadde.deviantart.com/art/Working-Together-84217017>

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He woke for the second time outside Hogwarts. The first time, he had woken in the snow, and after he had processed the seemingly impossible fact that the Dark Lord had left him there--left him! If he had remained unconscious all night, he most likely would have died of exposure, and then who would run the bastard's school?--he had managed to Apparate to a point outside the Hogwarts gates. He had leaned there against the heavy wrought iron for what had felt like hours, trying to regain enough strength to stand and walk into the school. The wind had torn at his bloodied face. Voldemort had not had the whip, so he had been reduced to Cutting Curses.

It could have been worse. He could have used Sectumsempra. At least these wounds had begun to clot.

As he sat there, trying to create a shield between his face and the air with his robes, he thought. Why Albus had not foreseen this was baffling. As Potter and Hermione grew more desperate, as time passed, and their options dwindled, they would become more reckless. This seemed true to him at the most basic level, and he could not imagine why Dumbledore had not considered it. He would not wait any longer to deliver the sword of Gryffindor. They needed it now; they needed to do something productive to clear their minds and set them back upon a steady course. He did not consider how badly he needed to see Hermione, to touch her skin and know that she was safe. He had seen her fly through the air, had seen her disappear, but it was not the same--not the same as feeling her, alive and whole beneath his hands. As soon as he was well enough to travel, he was taking that sword to her. He would see his wife before the new year.

The thought gave him strength, and he managed to rise to his feet. Though he moved slowly, and the wind seemed to deny his every step, he made his way to the castle.

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Hermione had been trying to reach Snape through the portrait, but Phineas Nigellus would only say that the Headmaster was out and had been for several days. She was afraid to try the ring again, as she had no idea where he had been when he received her message or what it had cost him to reply. Why hadn't she heard from him? Between Harry's condition and Snape's silence, Hermione was in a state of barely suppressed panic.

They had Apparated into a wooded area in the south of Wales. Harry's body had hit the ground with a horrible thump, and Hermione saw that he was not awake. Not asleep, but not awake. He babbled incoherently, sometimes screaming and sometimes laughing. She thought immediately of what he had said to her on her birthday. *You weren't sleeping. At least, not any kind of sleep I've ever seen.*

She had cast the Muffliato Charm and run in a tight circle around him, just large enough to get the tent in, casting their protective charms. Then she fell to her knees beside him and tore his coat open. She tugged at the Horcrux, which had burned right through Harry's shirt into the skin beneath. The blue cotton was singed and frayed around the locket. She tried to pry it from Harry's chest, but it would not budge. The thing seemed to be pulsing with a kind of unspeakable heartbeat, which was growing in rhythm ever closer to Harry's own. "*Accio Horcrux!*" she said, but the thing did not move toward her hand. She tried an Unsticking Charm, but to no avail. Finally, she raised her wand and aimed it at Harry's chest. "*Diffindo!*" she whispered, not daring to go too deep. Using her wand, she severed the locket from Harry's skin and threw it aside. She grabbed her bag from inside her coat and Summoned the Dittany from its depths. She poured a drop onto the angry hole in Harry's chest, watching carefully as it steamed and spit... and healed. She used her wand to cut away his sleeve. She thought she had seen Nagini's fangs graze too close...

There were scratches--two of them, long and red. But they had barely broken the skin. She touched the Vita Secundus where it rested in the pocket of her denims. Not yet.

Not until Snape told her that there was no other choice. She smeared a few drops of Dittany over the scratches and watched as they healed. If he did not emerge from this nightmare state, if it worsened... well, then perhaps. But not yet.

Once she was satisfied that Harry was safe and healed to the best of her ability, she removed the tent from her bag and laid it on the forest floor. She aimed her wand at it, and it sprung open, tent posts driving themselves into the ground. She levitated Harry inside and placed him in his bed, pulling the blankets up over him by hand. He whimpered and struggled against her touch, but she persevered.

"Harry," she called. "Harry!"

"No," he muttered. "*Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!*"

"*Harry, it's all right, you're all right!*"

But still, he did not stir. It was then that she pulled out the portrait and called for Snape, and Phineas Nigellus had given her his enigmatic answer. Where was Snape? Where was help?

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Snape collapsed through his office door and crawled to the desk, pulling himself up onto his knees. "Black," he whispered. "Have you heard from her?"

"I have," Phineas Nigellus said.

"And?" Snape could not keep the impatience from his voice. Once he knew, he could begin to heal himself.

"She has been calling for you on the hour all night. I have grown weary of her pleading. I am a Headmaster, Snape, not an owl."

"Forgive..." Snape struggled into his desk chair. "Forgive me. There was an incident. Would you please contact her?"

"You will need medical attention before you can begin speaking to anyone," Dumbledore said sharply. "Attend to your wounds immediately, Severus. You are in no condition to be walking about."

"Dobby!" Snape called, and the house-elf *cracked* into his office. "Potions... please. My stores. Blood Replenishing Potion, Dittany... quickly."

The world seemed to be swirling in and out of focus. Hadn't this all happened before? Dobby had been sent for potions. Soon he would attend to the Headmaster's hand. Then, there would be something about Hermione...

He opened his eyes to see Dobby dancing nervously from foot to foot. "I is bringing the potions, Headmaster."

When Snape reached out for the bottles, Dobby recoiled. Ah, yes. He was starting to remember where he was.

"Thank you," Snape whispered and tipped the phial of Blood Replenisher down his throat. His head began to clear.

"I'm going to sit here for a moment longer, Dobby, and then I'm going to go into the bathroom to attend to my wounds. If you would be so kind as to bring me some soup from the kitchens?"

Dobby hesitated, but Dumbledore spoke up. "Headmaster Snape asked for soup, Dobby. I also think a bit of tea?"

"Yes, sir," Dobby said and was gone again.

Snape stood slowly and inched his way to the bathroom. He grasped the edges of the porcelain sink to brace himself and looked into the mirror. His face was a mess, but it was nothing Dittany wouldn't take care of. And he had never been in the running for any beauty contests anyway. He used his wand to ease droplets of the Dittany from the bottle and smear them over the jagged gashes on his face. Instantly, the skin began to knit together, even in the places where it looked desiccated and frayed by the harsh winds. He rolled up his sleeves and touched the viscous liquid to his arms and hands. Better. Much better. There was a single large slash across his chest; it had gone right through his heavy damask robes. He carefully peeled the fabric away and sealed the wound with his wand. He did not want to overdo the Dittany, and he would not mind a scar of this size so long as his clothes covered it. A tiny portion of his mind spoke up to insist he deserved it.

He should have asked for pain reliever. The residual blooming headache of the Cruciatus was beginning, and his chest still ached. But perhaps the food and rest would be enough. He did not want to ask anything more of house-elves more apt to take orders from a portrait than a living Headmaster.

When he returned to the office, he settled once more at his desk, dropping his head into his hands and trying to rub away the pressure.

"Perhaps you would like to tell me what has happened?"

"Perhaps *you* would like to tell me what business they had in Godric's Hollow?"

"Godric's Hollow?" Dumbledore said quickly. "I certainly did not--that is, I did not expect them there until Spring."

"Then the Dark Lord is beginning to understand Potter better than you do, old man, *for* he expected them there. He was waiting."

"But you were able to--"

"Dumbledore," Snape said gravely. "They were nearly caught tonight. If Miss Granger had not had misgivings and contacted me, they surely would have been caught. Voldemort's connection to Potter remains strong. He is beginning to understand the boy, and God help us if he becomes even more adept at doing so. I am taking them the sword of Gryffindor."

"Severus, be reasonable. You've had a shock, it seems, and your wounds have been extensive. Eat. Then we will discuss what comes next."

"I will not hear argument, Albus. They need purpose and direction. They need to feel that help is coming from somewhere, that there are answers to be had, or they will act ever more foolishly in their desperation. I am going. As soon as I am well enough to travel, I am going."

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She lay in bed, listening to the sounds of the night. Sleep would not come. It was dark, and it was quiet, but her mind would not calm, would not cease its wandering over the familiar questions that had no answers. How would they find the remaining Horcruxes? Why hadn't she heard from Snape? Headmaster Black had contacted her in the early morning hours after they had escaped from Voldemort and told her that Snape had arrived at Hogwarts, but she had heard nothing in the days since then. She rolled over on her bunk and tried to focus her attention on the sound of Harry outside, shifting occasionally, breathing, turning pages. That was real. That was Harry. She needed to sleep.

Since the nightmare of Godric's Hollow, she had taken to opening the bag and rummaging around in it whenever she told Harry where they were setting up camp. It made her skin prickle to realize that the whole thing could have been avoided had she and Snape been comparing notes, and she did not intend to keep their location from him anymore, even if it did seem highly unlikely that the Death Eaters were planning a trap in the Forest of Dean. And there was a tiny, unspoken wish behind it, that if he knew

where she was, he would come.

When would he come? They needed that sword, she knew. Harry had not been the same since he had woken from his delirium. From his words, she gathered that he had spent the hours drifting between Voldemort's mind and his own. She wondered how much the Horcrux had had to do with it, how close it had come to possessing him entirely. Since that night, they had never worn the thing for more than two hours at a time. Sometimes, without asking one another, they would hang it from the end of one of the bunks, where it seemed to watch them like a large, malevolent eye. The thing was getting stronger. When she looked at it, the word 'feeding' sprang to her mind. He would not discuss it, nor would he speak with her about what had happened in Bathilda Bagshot's house. Whether that was because he was ashamed that he had led them into a trap, or because they had not gained anything of use in Godric's Hollow, she did not know, but he was silent and moody and snapped at her when she tried to plan. He often took the first watch of the night and told her to go inside and sleep, and more often than not, he stayed out long past his watch, waking her as the sun came up. He was beginning to look pale and bruised. Perhaps he feared sleep. They needed that sword.

Hermione heard an odd rustling outside the tent. It sounded as if Harry had just stood up. Perhaps tonight he would give in to sleep and ask her to take the watch. It was just as well--it hadn't looked as if she would be sleeping that night anyway, and she hoped that some rest would improve his temper. But the crunching footsteps she heard were moving slowly away from the tent, not toward it. Was he leaving her? Where was he going? How many steps until she was invisible to him, and he could not find his way back if he tried?

She swung her legs out of the bed and stepped into her shoes. The night was frigid, and she ran toward the tent flap with her arms wrapped tightly around her torso. She ducked out of the tent onto the small patch of ground that remained inside of the enchantments, looking frantically around. She opened her mouth to begin screaming for him, though that would do no good if he had truly left. He would not hear her no matter how loudly she called. She remembered that he had the Horcrux--he'd had it, on and off, since dinner. Was it possible that the thing had tricked him, had made him think--

When her ring burned, a startled squeal escaped from her mouth. Perhaps there was a trap in the Forest of Dean--now Harry had been lured away, and Snape was warning her too late--

She slid the ring from her finger and read the message in the moonlight.

*Drop your wards.*

She stared inside the circlet, her heart racing. *Drop your wards.* Had he, was he-- Did she dare obey?

It was Snape. It had to be. No one else could work the ring; no one else even knew the ring was there. Her hand fell to her pocket where her wand stuck out. She grasped it and swung it in a high arc over her head. Golden light spilled from its tip as the enchantments melted away and left her standing there, exposed, a small, thin girl next to a flimsy looking tent in the middle of the woods.

She looked out at the edge of the clearing, where the trees grew denser. The snow was thinner on the ground there--it rested mostly in a thick canopy in the tree tops. Darkness seemed to radiate from the ground. She could not see, could not make out--

But there he was, emerging from the shadow of the trees, his black cloak swirling in the wind. Had he always been so tall? For a moment her heart seized in her chest. Had she forgotten his face so easily, the way he moved with such liquid authority? He walked toward her slowly as if afraid that she would bolt, but she was frozen in place despite the icy wind that bit through the weave of her jumper and stung her skin below. She could not look away.

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She stood there, beside the tent, unmoving. She was thin, so much thinner and harder than he had remembered, and her hair was longer and somehow dry looking. The wind swept it from her face, and the moonlight behind her illuminated the frayed tips, making her look as if she was surrounded by a nimbus of light. Her arms hung at her sides now, and her wand was held loosely in one fist. She did not raise it or aim it at him, but waited, just as he had remembered; she waited for him to come to her.

He came to the edge of where her enchantments had been, where he had seen the golden light pulse and fade. There he stopped and took her in, this calm warrior--her thin jumper, the dirty denims, and the way she stared at him as if she could never stop looking. When was the last time someone had looked at him? He felt a hard knot of muscle between his eyebrows release, though he had not been aware that it had been pinched. Her face was so open--he searched it for any trace of hatred or mistrust and found nothing there but her wide brown eyes and her lips, slightly parted, the corners hinting at something that was not a smile but a *welcome*.

She did not speak, but he did not blame her, for suddenly he could think of no words but her name.

Slowly, she raised one of her hands, offering it to him, as if to help him inside the circle.

"You should..." he croaked, "you should ask a question."

She nodded gravely. "What did you take from my parents' luggage?"

"Your picture," he whispered and took a step forward, but she shook her head.

"Now ask me."

What could he ask? Something welled up inside him and threatened to choke him. He suddenly felt afraid that he might die before he got the chance to touch her.

"What is your surname?" he asked.

She did not answer, but slipped suddenly inside his cloak, her arms threading around him, her face pressed against his chest. He leaned down over her, to protect her from the wind and to embrace her more completely, his arms pinning her to him, one hand burying itself in her hair. "Snape," she whispered. "Snape." And he did not know whether it was an answer or a greeting or just a sound her heart was making, but he did not care in the slightest. She knew him. She knew.

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He was nudging her toward the tent, and she knew that they needed to go there to get out of the cold and the open, but to do so would be to let go, and she could not let go. She shook her head from side to side where it was pressed against the heavy, black wool of his robes.

"Yes," he whispered. "Inside."

Finally, she broke away from him and ducked inside the tent, looking over her shoulder every few seconds to make sure he was following, that he was still there. When she rose, he was right behind her, and she lit her wand in the dimness.

"You came."

"Did you think that I--?" There was something about his face that was different. There were new scars, yes, faint new lines among the familiar ones, but that was not it. The quirk of his lips was the same, the planes and hollows of his cheeks, the curve of his nose... but something was different. He looked like someone who had been in pain for so long that he no longer knew how to relax his face--that somehow *endurance* had burned its way into his features. She reached up and touched him hesitantly.

"Stop. I knew you would come."

She rose onto her toes as he leaned down toward her. Her eyes sought his and held them firmly as his lips crashed down onto hers. She grasped his shoulders, and his arms tightened around her as their kiss deepened. She was breathing him--the sharp, familiar smell of his skin, his hair as it brushed her face; She was light-headed and spinning with him. She had waited, yes, but she had not known what she was waiting for. For planning and working were forgotten. She had waited for *him*.

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Pain. Pain was what he felt when he touched her; sweet pain that began where his fingertips delved beneath the neck of her jumper to the skin below, pain that seared a path from his lips down deep into his chest where it burned and crushed his heart. Why was there no charm to stop time or kill him here and now? This was a feeling too large for him, and now that he had known it, he could not un-know it, not deny it, not do anything but yield, and he did not know how to yield--

Her fingers were unclasping his cloak, and he heard it hit the ground with someone else's ears. All he knew was the brush of her warm and slightly chapped lips over his, and the texture of her tongue as it probed his mouth. He drew her in closer, trying to anchor himself against her, but she was stepping back to begin unfastening his robes.

He should protest, he knew. He should protest, but he could not. It was not desire that stopped him, though he had no word for it but desire. It was something more primal than desire, something too potent to be described. He simply knew that he must give in to it. So he took the hem of her jumper and eased it up over her waist, over her arms--and she ducked out of it, her skin so pale and smooth. He reached for her, bent his face and rubbed it against that skin, trailing his lips over the collarbones that stood out so sharply in the wand light.

She brought her hands up between them and went to work on his buttons, but it was too much, too far away, and so he locked his mouth to hers and yanked his shirt out of his trousers, undoing the buttons from the bottom up until their hands met in the middle. She shoved the shirt back over his shoulders, and he made a kind of wild, flapping motion as he threw it to the ground. When the skin of her breasts pressed up against his bare chest, he uttered a guttural sound of gratitude.

She pulled back and stared at his chest, raising her fingers to trace the angry pink of the new scar there. She pressed her hand flat against it. She opened her mouth to speak and then seemed to think better of it and simply rested her forehead against her hand where it covered his heart. Then he nudged her, and she turned and moved toward the bed, unfastening her denims as she went and stepping out of them. He followed her, almost blind with an ache he had never known. He removed his trousers, and she motioned him to sit. She shoved the bedding aside, and it released a scent he knew intimately--the smell of *her*, but also the pungent aroma of fear and sweat and tears and waiting, and he helped her push it away as she climbed astride him. As she sank down onto him, she let out a long, deep sigh that seemed to come from some secret place inside her, a sigh that sounded to his ears like relief. He shifted beneath her slightly, rolling his hips and seating himself fully within her.

"Hermione," he whispered.

"Yes." It was not a question but an answer, and he buried his face in the soft skin of her neck, nuzzling and nipping her, his hands coming to rest on her hips, guiding her motion. They were barely moving, barely rocking together. Her thighs clenched in time with the gentle press of his hands.

"Look at me."

One hand rose to her lower back, and he began to ease her forward and then back, creating a swirling rhythm between them. Color bloomed over her skin, traveling up from her breasts up into her hairline. She leaned back slightly against his hand, and her eyes locked in on his. Without meaning to, he began to slip into her mind, and felt the odd tingling sensation of her presence in his own. He tasted the heavy, thick layers of her arousal and found beneath it something else, something that made him gasp. He tore his eyes from hers and grasped her firmly in his arms, pulling out of her and rolling her onto the bed.

"Severus?"

He loomed above her, kneeling between her legs. He looked at her thin, heart-shaped face, the sprawl of her curls across the pillow, her questioning eyes, memorizing her. In a moment, he would plunge; in a moment, what was true would be true, undeniable, and he would seek and find her there with him. They would climb together and then it would be over. But for this second, this moment before, as they hung here on the precipice, he would know that he had looked into her mind, and she had stared back into his, and they were truly naked now.

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He looked at her like someone who had been struck dumb with wonder, who had waved his wand for the first time and seen an elephant erupt from it into the parlor. In his mind, she had seen what she had known, what she had guarded with inattention and neglect, what she had treasured by keeping it in dark and secret places. She was glad; her face hurt with gladness, but it was dangerous, too. This thing between them was as sharp as sunlight; it had an edge that could cut, and she knew they would have to be very careful now. But here in the dark of the tent, alone, they could ride it like a wave. They could drink at the well of it and be sated.

She urged him toward her, took his hips into her hands and lowered them to hers. He rested his forehead against hers and shut his eyes as he sank into her. Her arms slid up under his and clutched his back, and he caged her shoulders with his hands as he began to thrust more deeply.

"I want--" he murmured, "I want... all the way in."

A shock of pure desire surged through her, and she arched to meet him, to bring him completely inside her. Her knees doubled up at her shoulders, and he used the weight of his chest to brace them and shifted his hips back and forth, edging, plunging, fighting his way in. When he rested fully against her, he rocked, pulsing his pelvic bone against her clit until her hands scabbled for purchase against his arms, and she threw her head back and let the sensation arc from his skin to hers, the sweet friction that seemed to come from everywhere, and Hermione closed her eyes and gave herself to her husband and took him in return.

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He had thought he would feel diminished now that she had taken the last of his secrets, but instead he felt deeply quiet. He was curled around her, his chest pressed against her back, their legs entwined, the tops of his feet pressed against the soles of hers. For a few moments, he was able to look around the tent as he had been unable to before, when his need for her had been too strong to allow him to perceive anything but her familiar, longed-for presence. So, this was where she spent her days. That was the chair she sat in when she spoke to him; these were the walls that bore the changing shadows of the endless hours. He was grateful to see them, to know them, so that when he returned, he could picture her here. He reached up and fingered her hair and brought a chunk of it to his face.

When she spoke he could feel the rumble of her voice in his skin.

"How long do we have?"

He sighed into her hair. Where had this woman come from, this woman who did not beg for impossible things, nor complain of the few they had?

"An hour more at most. The sword of Gryffindor must be taken under conditions of valor, as I'm sure you know. I buried it in an icy lake. My Patronus is guiding Potter to the spot."

"Your Patronus! Brilliant!" she said, and he could hear the smile on her lips.

"My Patronus," he agreed. "I--I am aware of what you heard about my Patronus, Hermione, and--"

She pressed back against him firmly. "There will come a time when I will want to hear all you are willing to tell me about your life before we married, but we have limited time now, and I think we should talk about the Horcruxes."

His arms tightened around her briefly before he released her. He felt almost light-headed with the magnitude of what he had been given. He had joined his life, however briefly, to a woman he could trust, a woman whose priorities matched his own. "I assume you have notes?" he said, quirked an eyebrow at her as she rose and began to

dress.

She smiled at him. "Naturally."

He rose and began replacing his own robes as she dragged her handbag across the floor. She lit a lamp with her wand and conjured a table beside the bed. From the depths of her bag she pulled a sheaf of parchment and several books, which she spread before them.

He sat beside her, his thigh resting against hers. "I take it you've worked out that the sword will destroy the Horcruxes?"

"Yes," she said. "Because of the basilisk venom the blade contains. I haven't the slightest idea why Dumbledore failed to reveal that to Harry before we set out."

Snape glowered. "Dumbledore seems to think that Potter should be given time to work these things out on his own."

She shook her head, and he thought he saw anger in her eyes. "Does he know that you're here?"

"He does. I cannot say that he was in favor of it, but as he is made of naught but canvas and pigment, he could not stop me."

"How much does he know?"

"As yet, he does not know that I have determined the nature of your mission. I simply told him that I felt Potter would begin to behave in ever more foolhardy ways if he were not given the sword, given something to go on."

"And about..."

"About what?"

"About us?"

"Ah. Well, you heard him the other night. He suspects."

"I'm sorry. Is he terribly angry?"

"He is enigmatic as always. I sometimes think he is waiting to see how the war plays out, so that he can take credit for the good and deny any knowledge of the bad."

Hermione turned to look at him, and he saw that she was measuring his meaning, deciding which category he thought their situation fell under. He leaned against her slightly.

She turned back to her work and unrolled a bit of parchment, running her hand down the list of bulleted points there. Snape pulled the parchment until it sat between them and leaned in more closely to examine it. He felt, as he looked, an odd and fleeting sense of loss. It would have... it would have been nice to work with someone. Someone bright. Someone organized. He could not see himself sitting down to a meal she had prepared, but he could see this, the way she would make notes in the margins of his work, the way she would dice while he stirred. But that was not worth thinking about.

"Tell me everything. When did you learn about the Horcruxes?"

"Dumbledore began to tell Harry about the Horcruxes last year, around the time that we were married. He believed that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had split his soul six times, leaving the seventh piece inside his body. At that time, two of the Horcruxes had already been destroyed: the ring and the diary."

Snape nodded at her, and she continued. "Dumbledore said that the Dark Lord," she winced as she uttered those words, and he nodded again, "liked to choose items that had particular value to him, to his way of thinking. He suggested that Harry look for things that belonged to the four founders of Hogwarts."

"I see," he said. "And do you know what the remaining Horcruxes are?"

"Not all of them," she said, "which is what has been slowing us down. We know that the ring belonged to Slytherin, and we have a locket that was also Slytherin's. That was what we went to the Ministry to retrieve. Dumbledore also believed that the snake, Nagini, is a Horcrux. But that leaves two more that we don't know."

The snake, Nagini. Suddenly, the rest clicked into place in his mind. *There will come a time--after my death... There will come a time when Lord Voldemort will seem to fear for the life of his snake... When Lord Voldemort stops sending that snake forth to do his bidding, but keeps it safe beside him under magical protection, then, I think, it will be safe to tell Harry.*

"What?" she asked. "You know something." How was it possible she had learned his face so well? No twitch of his muscles should have betrayed him, and yet, she knew. He would not lie to her.

"Hermione, I do not know how to tell you this. I have not wanted to tell it."

"Tell me."

"Potter is a Horcrux." Inwardly, he chastised himself. Must he always be so blunt?

"But--how can that be?" she said, her voice rising slightly in pitch. "Dumbledore said there were six, that Vo--He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named wanted a seven part soul!"

He tried again more gently. "Before your sixth year... before your birthday, when Dumbledore returned to the school with the cursed hand, he told me the reason that he had wanted me to brew the Vita Secundus."

"Harry," she said, uncomprehending. "For Harry."

"For Potter, yes. Because he believes that Potter will have to go to the Dark Lord willingly, will have to be killed by his hand, or the Dark Lord cannot die."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't understand."

"The scar, the connection between their minds, the Parseltongue... it is the bit of Lord Voldemort in Potter that creates those things. Dumbledore did not tell me about the other Horcruxes. I am sure that he feared it would be discovered in my mind before you were able to find and destroy them. He cautioned me that Potter must not know, must not be told until the last moment."

"And he meant for you to tell him?"

"Yes. He told me that when the Dark Lord begins to fear for Nagini, it will be time to tell Harry. He believes that Potter must die by the hand of the Dark Lord and no other. That was the reason for the Vita--he must live long enough to face him."

"And be killed." Her face was waxy and immobile.

"I know you will not believe me when I tell you that I was--I am--equally horrified. I do not have much in the way of comfort to offer you, but there is this: you have proven to be a skilled and resourceful partner to Potter. If he reaches the Dark Lord without the use of the Vita, you will still have it; the life it contains will still be available. You can

administer it then."

"And if not? Who will kill him if Harry is dead?" she said, her voice flat and affectless.

"Whichever of us is left alive to do it."

She sat so silently that he began to be afraid. Her color was rising.

"I apologize for not telling you sooner."

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus. When would you have told me? You didn't know what we were doing. Merlin's fucking balls! The things he asks of you. When this is over I am going to hit that portrait with the strongest Reductor Curse in me."

Snape snorted. "That would be quite a curse." He knew that in turning on Dumbledore, she was coping in the best way that she knew how; this news must have stolen much of the hope she had left, and he was deeply sorry to have had to tell her. But it seemed now that the only way forward was together. There was so much to hide already. He could no longer dissemble with her, and the thought of sending her out to do Dumbledore's work without explanation, as if she were some sort of drone, was abhorrent to him.

"But you see... yes? You see why the others have to be done first? Why he cannot know?"

"Of course, I see. And it is all the more urgent that we get it done quickly. I must keep Harry safe until then."

"Exactly. Now, do you remember when I was summoned last Christmas?" Snape asked.

"Yes."

"I learned that night that the Dark Lord had hidden something in Bellatrix Lestrange's vault at Gringotts."

"Oh!" Hermione said, taking up a quill and beginning to write, but Snape stopped her hand with his.

"How will you explain--?"

She blushed slightly. "Oh, yes. You're right. But that is very helpful."

"I will try to discover what it is and if there is any way I can get it for you myself."

"No," she said. "Don't."

"What? Why not?"

She traced her finger across his chest, indicating the scar. "You have enough jobs; this one is mine. I won't have you risking your position over this. I can do it."

"Over this, you say, as if it is a triviality! Hermione, the war depends upon--"

"Do you think I don't know what I've been doing? I know what those Horcruxes are."

Her tone gave him pause. There was so much about the months she had spent on the run that he did not know, so much that he did not have time to ask. *What* she know of the power of that Horcrux? What had it already cost her? So many times, she'd risked her life, her sanity, for this. Suddenly, he wanted to kiss her again, to claim this witch, his partner, with his mouth, but there was no time for that, and so, he tried with words. "I have every faith in you," he said.

She nodded and smiled a bit ruefully. "If you found out what it was--without endangering yourself, of course--I would be glad for that information."

The corners of his lips turned up in return. "Of course."

"There is one last thing," she said, riffling through her parchment once more. "Do you recognize this symbol?"

She pointed to a crude symbol that she had drawn on the page. *It looked like a triangular eye, its pupil crossed with a vertical line.*

"I do not. What is it?"

"I don't know. Dumbledore left me this book in his will," she said, holding up *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. "This symbol was in it, drawn above one of the stories. I saw it on a tombstone in Godric's Hollow. Peverell was the name on the stone. It didn't feel like a coincidence. Harry mentioned that it might be Grindelwald's mark?"

*Grindelwald's Mark? What in Merlin's name?* How Dumbledore expected her to unravel all of this without help or outside sources was utterly beyond him. "It is not a coincidence, to be sure, though I do not know the mark or what it means. But the Dark Lord has spoken often of Grindelwald in the last several months. At one point, I believe he mentioned wanting to pay him a visit in Nurmengard."

"Harry said that Xenophilius Lovegood was wearing the symbol on a chain around his neck at Bill and Fleur's wedding."

Snape shook his head and gazed skyward for a moment. "I cannot believe that I am about to suggest it, but perhaps you should go and see the bizarre Mr Lovegood. You know his daughter, I believe?"

"Luna, yes."

"My only warning is that he has been awfully staunch in his defense of Potter. But I have heard no rumblings about him from the Death Eaters as yet. And Dumbledore did put faith in the oddest souls," he said sardonically. "It might be worth your time."

"I'll raise it with Harry."

"Good. I will see what I can discover on my end."

They sat in silence for a moment, side by side in the lamplight, and her hand crept into his, and her fingers nested with his own.

"Dumbledore is a fool, and he wastes your talents," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Still, I don't like the danger it puts you in to know all this."

"The danger is no more and no less than it was before. As Dumbledore pointed out to me recently, there were already secrets I would have died to protect. I would rather keep yours."

She closed her eyes and squeezed his hand. He looked at her for a long time, memorizing her in case he should not see her again: the way her lips turned up slightly, even in repose; the sooty fringe of her eyelashes against her skin. This was one thing that could never be taken from him. No one else would ever see her in this exact moment.

"Hermione, I think I should--"

"Yes, I know," she said quietly. "Will I see you again? Before the end, I mean?"

"I don't know," he answered. He wished he had the strength to lie to her. He wondered if she knew what she meant by 'the end.'

"Severus," she said, and he knew she was about to thank him. That would not be allowed.

"No," he whispered. And he slipped an arm around her and drew her in. And leaning down and taking her face in his other hand, he kissed her as thoroughly as he was able; he pressed their secrets into her mouth.

When he could release her, he looked into her eyes and whispered, "Do you remember when I told you not to repeat our plans back to me? That things said aloud are harder to hide?"

She bit her lip and nodded. Her eyes were looking dangerously bright.

"Good," he said. "I will be in touch." He rose. If he did not leave now, he would not be able to leave.

"Be safe," she said. "Above all things, stay safe." And she turned away as he began to spin, as if she could not bear to watch him go.

## Chapter Thirty

*Chapter 30 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. I make no money. Thanks and hugs to my incredible beta, Shellsnapelover.

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She sat for a moment, completely immobilized. He had gone. Which was right, of course. But suddenly she felt a violent sort of hatred for the tent, for its familiar walls and smells. She hated the pink glow of the canvas as the sun rose through it; she hated that horrifically ugly chair with its musty velvet upholstery and idiotic lace doily. She hated the place where he had sat beside her, as he was no longer in it. For a moment, the cramped, uncomfortable space that she'd been sharing with Harry for so long had felt like home, and now that it was back to being itself, she hated it for what it could not be.

With regret, she vanished the table, packed her notes away and lay down in her bed, which now smelled of him in a way that she found maddening instead of comforting. She pressed her face into her pillow and breathed the scent of his hair and felt like hitting something.

When she heard crunching footsteps in the distance, she sat up and took a last look around the room to make sure that no evidence of Snape's visit had been left forgotten. Harry would come with the sword, she realized. They would be smashing the Horcrux tonight. But as she rose and started toward the tent flap, she heard a second set of footsteps. A second voice, quiet, but cheerful, and Harry was leading it right to the tent.

Ron. It was Ron. She'd left the wards down so that Harry could find his way back, and now Ron had found them as well. She had the sudden urge to replace the enchantments immediately, to make them see how it felt to be outside them, alone and afraid of never getting back.

"Hey, why can I see the tent?" Ron said as he and Harry stepped into the clearing.

"Dunno," Harry said. Then, he yelled, "Hermione?"

She exited the tent flap and stood there in front of it, hands on her hips. "Come back, have you?" she asked icily.

"Hermione! We've got the sword! And we smashed--"

"Couldn't have told me where you were going? Didn't think how I'd feel waking up and finding you gone?" There was a part of her that knew she was saying these things because it was what they would expect her to say. For all they knew, she'd been lying here, sleepless for hours, wondering where Harry had gone. But there was another part that was so tired, so angry, so goddamn lonely for him already, and it just shot out of her like some poison she had to be rid of.

"Oh, erm. Sorry about that. And, um, Ron's back, as you can see."

"Yes, I've noticed. So you saw Ron and just went running off into the woods?"

"No, Hermione, there was this Patronus--it just came from nowhere! And I knew, somehow, that I should follow it. So, I--"

"Whose Patronus?" she spat.

"I don't know. It was... it was a doe..." Harry had gone slightly starry-eyed.

"You followed an *unknown* Patronus into the woods?"

"Well, yeah. Like I said, I just knew it was meant for me. And it was good, Hermione; you could tell it was good. You know? Like the person who cast it was friendly, was trying to help."

So, his Patronus was a doe. There was no time to think of that now, so she filed it away for later contemplation. But it was impossible for her not to smile a bit inside at Harry describing Snape as friendly.

"So a 'friendly' Patronus came, and you decided it would be fine to just leave here without letting me know or asking me to help you find your way back. So, tell me, what happened after you'd made those brilliant decisions?"

Harry's enthusiasm was starting to wane. He looked to Ron for help. Ron opened his mouth, but Hermione raised her wand. "I'm not ready to deal with you yet, so just keep

quiet!" Ron shut his mouth with a snap.

"Go on," she ordered Harry.

"Well, the Patronus--and I swear, you would have followed it too, Hermione. It was... well, lovely isn't quite the word I mean." But Hermione raised her wand again, and Harry hurried to continue. "The doe went into the woods... and I--don't be mad; it turned out well--well, she went to a pool, this frozen pool--and I looked in, and it was there!"

"The *sword of Gryffindor* was in an iced pool, what, a mile from our tent?"

"Give or take, yeah. And I saw it in there, so I cracked the ice and--"

"Dove in like a total nutter without even taking the Horcrux off," Ron finished.

"You did *what*? Without a Warming Charm or--"

"And then Ron saved me. And got the sword." Harry looked at Ron, who smiled back gratefully.

Hermione was silent. She turned to Ron at last. "How did you find us?" she hissed.

"I've been looking for you for ages, and then tonight I saw the doe, and I thought it was Harry doing it--"

"Forget the doe. How did you know to come to the Forest of Dean, Ron?"

"The Deluminator."

"Pardon?" she said sharply.

"It was the Deluminator. I heard your voice in it. And then I knew where to go, and--Hermione, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know it's no excuse, but the Horcrux--"

False anger was melting into real as she stared at the full, healthy, familiar face in front of her. "The Horcrux!" she shrieked. "The Horcrux! How dare you come here and complain about the Horcrux? Who's been living with it since you've been gone, Ronald? Do you think Harry and I have been *enjoying* the time we've spent with that bloody thing? In fact--" She whirled on Harry and stuck her hand out. "Give it to me."

"What?"

"The Horcrux--give it to me."

"I can't... Hermione..."

"You *can't*? Harry, I'm serious, I'm going to stab that thing right here, and *I deserve to do it*. I deserve to do it because I stayed. You think there aren't things at home that I miss? You think *I didn't leave anything behind*, Ron? I *stayed*. So give me that thing and let me pretend that it's you I'm stabbing."

"Hermione, you can't."

"Why not?"

"Because Ron already destroyed it."

"*Ron* destroyed it?" Her voice was reaching an untenable pitch.

"If you're going to go on screaming at me, I'd put the enchantments back on, because right now, I'm sure they can hear you at Hogwarts," Ron said, beginning to look angry himself.

Hermione's wand jabbed the air as she shot the protective spells in a high arc around the tent, glaring fiercely at Ron all the while. She turned back to Harry.

"And it worked? It's dead?"

Harry held out the broken locket, and Hermione took it. It lay open and benign in her palm. Both its glass windows--eyes, her mind insisted--were cracked and blank. It was dead. A huge, hitching sob burst from her chest.

Ron stepped toward her, but she shoved him away. She peered at Harry, who was looking frightened and embarrassed and was still clutching the sword of Gryffindor tightly in his left hand.

"It's dead, and we have the sword?" Her voice was quiet and trembling.

"This is what I've been trying to tell you," Harry said.

She looked back and forth between their faces. They were so pleased with themselves, and in time, she knew she would be pleased, too, but now she could only think of the man who had made this possible, who had defied everyone who had ever sought to control him to come here tonight and give them this hope.

"Then I'm going to bed," she said. "But before I do, I want to tell you something, Ronald Weasley. There are people out there who would do anything, risk anything, to help us. People who would die before they left us."

And with that, she turned and flung herself onto her bunk.

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When Snape arrived back at Hogwarts, he went directly to the dungeons. He had not lived there for many months, and yet he still considered them his home. He was not yet ready to go upstairs for his debriefing. He wanted time to think things through before he was faced with Dumbledore. He wanted to relive his time with her in his mind, if only for a few moments.

The door to his old chambers still responded to his touch, and when he entered, it was difficult at first to see what had changed. His desk was still in its old place, his mother's rug beneath it. He proceeded into the living room. The bookshelves there had been decimated, and the hearth lay dormant, but the couch still sat before it, and he sank onto it and let his head rest against the firm back.

The room seemed to hold him in its thrall. It seemed to him that, here, he was still himself, and that when he left it, he would be impossibly diminished. He closed his eyes.

When he woke, his hand flew to his wand instinctively. Where was he? Had he been *sleeping*?

Pain brought it all back. The Forest of Dean, Hermione, and then his chambers, yes... The ring was burning. He flicked his wand at a lamp and removed it.

*Three down. Four to go.*

So the sword had worked. He was vaguely glad, but it seemed he could not muster the strength to feel much of anything. *Three down. Four to go.* He tried to picture Hermione in her bunk, sending him these words beneath her bedclothes. How had she meant them? Were they words of comfort, of strength? Was she counting down to some unimaginable time in the future when the war would be over?

He could not imagine what that world would be like. There had never been a moment of his life when the world had not seemed to be waiting for Voldemort. Waiting for him to rise, waiting for him to fall, waiting for him to return, to seize and plunder and vanquish. Waiting. If Voldemort were dead, if he were truly dead, what would happen? Would he get up in the morning and return to these rooms? Would he teach Potions to children? What would be the point of anything?

*Three down. Four to go.* Had she meant the words bitterly? Was the countdown, for her, now about Potter, about the moment when *he* would fall? Snape's head hurt. For a moment, in that dirty little tent, he had felt he was doing something meaningful. After all this time, something that would help. As he'd looked at her notes and volunteered what he knew, he had felt calm and strong. Powerful. But now it seemed that he was rushing down the same blind tunnel that he'd been careening down for years, toward an ending he could neither see nor believe in. He was somehow rendering himself obsolete, erasing himself.

It was not the sacrifice that troubled him. He had understood for a long time the value of his life. The day that he had agreed to turn spy for Dumbledore, he had known, had understood, that he would die doing it. And that had been all right, hadn't it? He would pay, and then he would die, and the pain would end, and that seemed like reward enough for services rendered. No, he was not troubled by dying. It was something else, something that he could not name that plagued his mind. It was this countdown, this sense that the end was approaching, and that he felt no *relief*.

He stood. What was he doing down here in this empty room, staring into a nonexistent fire, sleeping, for Merlin's sake? He had a job to do. He crossed back into the office and out into the corridor. But as he shut the door, he put a more complex ward on it. It troubled his mind to think that someone else could enter there, though he could not explain why. The room seemed to tug at his mind like something almost forgotten.

As he made his way down the empty corridor toward the staircases, he saw Minerva coming toward him. He wanted to turn swiftly down the next hallway, but he was too close to her. She would know he had seen her, and he had no wish to appear as if he were running from her.

"Minerva," he said as she approached.

"Headmaster," she retorted with a dismissive nod.

"You have business in the dungeons?"

"I could ask the same of you."

"I am the headmaster, Minerva. This school is my business."

She glared at him. "Indeed."

He began to walk away, but she called him back sharply. "Snape!"

He spun on his heel, feeling the familiar lift and swish of his robes as they settled around him.

"Why did you do it?"

"I would think that would be perfectly obvious."

Her face contorted. "We trusted you."

"And I trusted you," he said with a malicious little smile. "People can be so disappointing."

He turned and strode away, but not before catching a glimpse of McGonagall, mute with rage, two spots of color burning high on her cheeks.

As he entered the stairwell to the Headmaster's office, he did not climb the stairs, but allowed them to carry him up, taking the few extra moments to calm his breathing. What had he been doing today? He'd allowed McGonagall to get under his skin and had hinted without restraint at that which he *knew* he must not reveal. He had allowed Hermione to strip him of all his defenses, all his masks, all his protection, and then he'd returned to the castle and *fallen asleep* in a strange room. He was cracking. He was cracking, and he needed to shove these strange and insidious feelings of discomfort back down into some unexamined place in his gut. He opened the door.

"You're late. Were you successful?" Dumbledore asked as soon as he had entered the room.

"I was," Snape replied evenly. "Potter retrieved the sword."

"And does he know you gave it?"

"No. Potter remains blissfully ignorant of the source of his aid, as do all your loyal *servants*, Dumbledore." Now he was baiting Dumbledore. He had to get out of this room.

"I take it you have seen Hermione?"

"Whatever gave you that impression?" Snape asked coldly.

"Because you have the manner of a man who has seen the gates of heaven slammed shut in his face. I am glad it was not Riddle you returned to tonight."

"Tread carefully, Dumbledore," Snape growled. "I have tolerated--"

"You have tolerated much more than most men could bear, Severus, and you have done it with grace. Now is not the time to fall to pieces."

Snape looked at Dumbledore, sitting as he always did in that godforsaken chair, his blue eyes calm and steady. He would try. Goddammit, he would try.

"No. No, surely not. There is much left to be done."

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In the morning, Ron, clearly angling to get back on her good side, volunteered to go looking for food. He seemed a bit nervous about leaving the circle of enchantments, and Hermione only raised an eyebrow when he asked if she would really let him back in, but Harry assured him that he would be waiting near the tent flap. When he had gone, Harry said, "Do you have to be so hard on him?"

"Hard on him? Harry, he--"

"I know. I was here the whole time, Hermione. Believe me, I remember."

"Then why are you so willing--"

"Because, listen, sit. Because of what happened out there."

"Because he saved your life? Harry, please don't take this the wrong way, because I'm awfully glad you didn't drown in some ice covered pool, but--"

"Shut up."

"What?"

"Shut up and listen to me, Hermione. You may not agree with me, but you're going to hear what I have to say."

Hermione looked at him, wide-eyed. She and Harry had been so careful over the last several weeks never to be sharp with one another, because to do so felt too dangerous, as if at any moment they could splinter apart as well and find themselves totally alone. But Ron's return seemed to have broken that pact, and as surprised as she was, it felt good to be with *Harry* again, instead of some polite boy who tried to stay out of her way.

She sat down in the ugly velvet chair and watched as Harry paced before her.

"Go ahead."

"We both knew that Ron was more affected by that Horcrux than we were."

Several arguments sprang to her mind, but as soon as she opened her mouth, Harry shot her a look that silenced her.

"And I think I know why, though I can't explain all of it."

"Oh?"

"Something's different about you."

"What?" Was he going to blame this on her somehow?

"Hermione, I've known for a long time that there's something you're not telling me."

Panic gripped her. Her cheeks felt hot, but her chest felt cold and fluttery. "Harry--"

"No. It doesn't matter. You don't have to deny it, and I don't expect you to tell me what it is. But I know that there's something out there that's grounding you, that's keeping you fighting--"

"Harry, I--"

"Stop. I'm not saying that you don't care about the war. I know you want to see our world free *of* him. I know that. You wouldn't be here with me if you didn't. But there's something else. Something at the end that you want, and you keep going even when it's impossible because you are determined to get there. I see it in your eyes. I saw it when we were in Godric's Hollow with Nagini--death just was not an option. You were so brave."

Hermione felt so many things at once that it was impossible to speak. She wanted to sing, to scream, to fly across the room and hug the life out of her friend.

"And I know it because I have that, too."

"Oh, Harry."

"I have that in Ginny. I'm going to get back to her, Hermione. I'm going to. And when I'm scared, and when I hate it all and I wish that we could just go home or go into hiding for real and give this all up, then I close my eyes and I see her face, just looking at me like she did the day of Dumbledore's funeral, like she just knew what I was going to do, and she knew... she *knew* me."

Hermione nodded. Would he get back to Ginny? Would he? She made a silent vow to Ginny that she would see to it, that she would make sure he did.

"I don't know what it is for you, but for me, it's Ginny. And the Horcrux knew it. That Horcrux... it made me think terrible things. You know what I mean. Terrible things. Things that made me want to die, to kill her, to kill myself... I thought--"

"I know what you thought," she said and her voice was choked and strained.

"Yes. But when I took that thing off, the truth came back, you know? As soon as it was gone, I knew it had been fake... because that feeling--it doesn't just go away, does it? You can't break it; you can't mutilate it. It's always there. And lies don't touch it."

"It was like that for me, too," she said quietly.

"Yeah. Yeah, I knew it was. You'd take it off and that haunted look would just go away. But for Ron it isn't like that--for him it doesn't end. I don't know why, exactly, but I think... I think it's because he doesn't have whatever we have."

"What do you mean? He's got his whole family... and us... and Lavender. It's not like--"

"Ron's not as articulate as you are, Hermione, but he's not dumb, and he knew--*he* knew somehow that something was different for you and me. Whatever he's got with Lavender... I don't think it's the same. And I guess, because he could see that we were somehow... stronger, or more whole than he was, he thought it was us."

"I don't understand."

"He thought it was *us*. That we were in love."

"What?" Her voice was sharp across the stillness.

Harry gave her a bemused half-smile. "I know. But you can see that, right? How he would think that? And because he didn't have anything true to replace it, anything to carry in his heart... it just took him."

"But that's just ridiculous."

"I know, but think about it. He could see that the Horcrux wasn't affecting us as badly, and the more it hurt him, the more horrible he became, so we started sticking together more, comforting each other, you know. And it started to tell him that we didn't need him, that we hated him, that we wished he would leave... he started to see things that weren't there, he started to imagine these... these sounds at night..." He blushed, but went on. "But you know how that thing was; it stole the truth and warped it, until all he could see were the lies. And it's hard out here, Hermione. It's so hard. And if you and Ron were together, I don't know how I could stand it, to be so alone..."

How perverse, how wrong to feel lucky. To feel lucky to be rotting in a tent, nearly killed every time you tried to venture out. To feel lucky to be married to a condemned man, a hated man, whom you could not see. But lucky was what she felt for a moment, and she tried to imagine what it might be like to try to do this without Snape burning away inside her chest and found she could not do it.

"He thought... he thought we were going to leave him. It's why he wouldn't leave the tent, wouldn't help with anything. He was sure that if he did, we'd go--together--and leave him there..."

"No," she whispered.

"Yeah."

Harry ceased pacing and sat down on the ground in front of her chair. He looked at her seriously. "When I opened the locket, just before he stabbed it, Riddle tried to fight."

"What--?"

"These horrible... *things*... came out of the locket. They looked like you and me. And they laughed at him together... they said we were glad he was gone, that we were happier without him... they said..." He didn't finish. "Well, I know what that would have done to me. Sometimes... you guys are the only family that I have, and when I think about what it would have been like if we hadn't--"

Hermione dove out of the chair and took Harry by the arms. "I get it," she said. "Okay. I get it. Stop."

She looked at Harry, at his dear, earnest face, and she saw how badly he needed her to accept this, to take Ron back, to be three again. "Okay," she said again.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, listening. When they heard Ron's crunching footsteps approaching, Harry rose, but she pushed past him and went to the flap. She stuck her hand through the wards, and Ron seized it, and she pulled him back inside the circle.

## Chapter Thirty-One

*Chapter 31 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Many thanks, of course, to JKR. All you recognize belongs to her, and of course, all fully italicized lines are from Deathly Hallows. And much love to Shellsnapelover, my glorious beta, without whose thoughtful advice I would be lost. Oh, and to avoid confusion, yes, there are two Deluminators.

---

Snape was sitting at his desk in the Headmaster's office, thinking carefully through his last few encounters with Voldemort. All the traveling, his capture and torture of Ollivander, his insistence that he find Grindelwald... what did it mean, and how was it related to that symbol Hermione had drawn? He cursed himself for having assumed that the Dark Lord was slipping into some strange new form of fanaticism when he could have been lingering around him, encouraging him and becoming privy to his secrets.

Given the events of their last meeting, he could hardly stroll into Malfoy Manor and gain his audience. What had he been thinking, letting such an opportunity go by?

He was startled from his reverie by three loud, insistent knocks on the door to the office. It had to be a member of the faculty--no one else knew the password to the Headmaster's office, and he rose with a sigh, wondering what brand of nonsense he would be dealing with today.

When he opened to the door to Minerva's grey and angry face, he was so taken aback that he failed to greet her. Had she returned to continue their argument?

"Snape," she hissed. "I want to see you in my office."

He smoothed his features, regained his composure, and replied, as silkily as possible, "Minerva, if you need to speak with me, I'm certain I can arrange a time for you to visit this office *at my convenience*."

She seemed to pale even further and glanced quickly over his shoulder. Did she expect the Dark Lord to be sitting in the wing chair, drinking scotch?

"My office," she repeated more fiercely.

"Whatever your concern, Minerva, I'm certain that--"

"*My office*," she said a final time, spun on her heel, and took off down the staircase, leaving him no choice but to pull the door shut behind him and follow her, trotting at her heels like a schoolboy who had been summoned by his head of house.

Flitwick and Hooch were chatting near the entrance to the Great Hall as they passed, and he saw the look that shot between them, the bewildered amusement, and he vowed to make Minerva pay tenfold for this humiliation. Perhaps he would insist that even her use of house points be approved before...

She swung through her office door and slammed it shut as soon as he had entered, triple warding it and casting a Silencing Charm over the room.

"Gracious," he said mildly, as if he were completely unconcerned by this turn of events.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she barked, and he took an involuntary step away from her.

"I assure you, I haven't the slightest--"

"Oh, I suppose you did tell me in your own inscrutable fashion," she muttered, seemingly to herself. "But why didn't ~~he~~ tell me?"

Was it possible? Was it possible that she had somehow figured it out? It seemed almost too much to hope for; surely, he was simply hearing what he wanted to hear from her, and in a moment, he would discover that Slughorn had rearranged his Potions schedule in a way that conflicted with Gryffindor's Quidditch practice or some such idiocy that would leave him angry and ashamed that he had dared to imagine--

"Severus," she said, and her tone was pleading. "Severus."

"Minerva," he said, growing alarmed. "Get a hold of yourself. What in Merlin's name are you going on about?"

"I should have known. It would have been just like him, and I can hear him telling you that you mustn't ever let us know, that to do so would be death, but Severus--"

He turned from her then, as he was not sure he could keep his face still and unaffected. But she crossed in front of him and touched his arm. *Touched him.*

"I can understand if you're furious with me. I have conducted myself like a child, and a foolish one at that. But you must believe that I had no idea, that I--"

"That you never once--never *once*--considered that we are at war, that I am a spy, that my situation might not have been exactly what it seemed? That you never for one moment had a shred of faith in me? That you have refused, over and over again, to see that instead of ruling this school like an iron-fisted Death Eater, I have tried to protect our charges--our children--from harm, that I would rather *die* than--?"

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and her voice, her tired old schoolmarm's brogue, seemed in direct contrast to his outburst, and he quieted.

He closed his eyes. He wanted to scream at her; he wanted that very much. He wanted to scream until he was hoarse and gasping for air; he wanted to reduce her to tears and pleadings; he wanted her to beg for his mercy. But more than that, he wanted to collapse into the chair in front of her desk and tell her everything. She had touched him and said his name. More than that, she had dragged him down to her office to do it. She had kept it from Albus. He had an ally.

"Sit," she said, and though he was loathe to take her orders, he sat, because sitting at least relieved the pressure of standing so rigidly.

It seemed once he could stop worrying about what to do with his body, he found his voice. "Who have you told?" he asked quietly.

"No one."

"You must not. You must not tell anyone, Minerva. It is imperative. The lives of our students are on the line. I must be allowed to remain here--my cover must remain intact."

"I understand that. I just wish that the others--"

"You think your childish insults mean anything to me? You think they are somehow more inventive or more cutting than those I have endured my entire life? I don't care what you think of me, or what you say to me, or what you do to me--you or any of these other fools."

She nodded solemnly. "I deserve that."

"You deserve more than that. Tell me, Minerva, what finally gave it away? What was the last flake on the overwhelming *avalanche* of evidence of my innocence that finally sent it crashing through your thick skull?"

To his astonishment, she reached into her desk drawer and held up a slim, silver instrument. Dumbledore's Deluminator. He could think of nothing to say, so he held his tongue and waited for her to explain.

"Scrimgeour came to see me. Sometime in late July. Albus's will had been read and sorted through, I suppose, by the Ministry. He came very reluctantly, I might add, as though he did not want to be handing over anything at all. But he brought this. Albus had left it to me."

"The Deluminator."

"Yes. Scrimgeour read the will to me. He said, *'To Professor Minerva McGonagall, on behalf of all my staff, I leave this Deluminator, in the hopes that it will help those who are lost find their way home.'*"

Snape snorted, but said nothing.

"Yes, it was very typically Albus, I'm afraid. And I thought... Forgive me, Severus. I thought he was telling me something about Potter, telling me to help Potter somehow. I carried it around with me for weeks, but I could not determine what its uses were beyond the obvious."

"But you have discovered some other function? Something that managed, despite all Dumbledore's efforts to the contrary, to reveal my... *allegiance*?" he said archly.

"It said my name."

"Pardon?"

"It was just after that disastrous start-of-term meeting in your office. I heard a voice, Albus's voice, say, 'Minerva will come to see.'"

"That's it? That's all? And you heard this months ago, but now you show up and demand--"

"Albus's voice," she said. "You must imagine how I felt."

"As I hear Albus's voice far more often than I would like, I cannot say that I do."

"Yes, I suppose that's true," she said, tipping her head in acknowledgement. "But I heard his voice, and I pressed the button."

"Fascinating," Snape growled, and she glared at him.

"A ball of light seemed to swell from the device and hover just before my face."

Snape lifted an eyebrow but said nothing.

"It... it went inside me."

"Come again?"

"I know that sounds preposterous. But I tell you, that's what happened. And as soon as I had swallowed the light, it urged me toward your office."

"Indeed?"

"But I thought... well, it seems very foolish now. I thought it was leading me to Albus."

"Is there a point to all of this?"

She looked as if she would quite like to hex him, but she took a deep breath and said, "It led me to you, Severus. I wouldn't see it, but that's what it did. And yesterday,

when I saw you, and you called me untrustworthy... well, you all but told me."

"I behaved very foolishly yesterday; I will not deny that."

They sat in silence for a few moments. Snape's face was blank, but his emotions were tumultuous; he was too furious and too pleased to speak. Minerva simply looked ashen.

"Can you tell me? Is he alive?"

"Are you one of those?" he asked condescendingly. "You've seen the portrait, Minerva. He is gone. I killed him myself."

"No... Potter."

"Ah, Potter. Of course. Yes, Minerva. Potter is alive."

She pursed her lips, and Snape had the fleeting thought that this was why her students feared her so. She looked quite stern when she was near tears.

"You're sure?"

"Unless circumstances have changed in the last twenty-four hours, I can say with reasonable certainty that Potter is still with us."

She looked at him long and hard. "You have a contact." It was not a question.

He opened both hands before her in a gesture that was neither agreement nor disagreement.

"You have a contact. It must be Miss Granger."

"I hardly think this is a productive or appropriate line of questioning," he said sharply. "The less you know, the better. For all of us."

She looked as if he'd slapped her, and a kind of fierce pleasure welled up inside him. "However, there is one thing I'd like to know, Minerva."

"Yes?"

"Why did you bring me down here to share your little revelation? Was it because you wanted everyone to see me trailing after you like a chastised child? Did you want to show them that you can still give orders to Severus Snape? Or was it that you were ashamed for Albus to know how long it took you to work it out?"

She shut her eyes and swallowed, opened her mouth and closed it again.

"That's it, isn't it?" he said, half-enraged, half-filled with the furious glee of one who has found the right button and intends to mash it unmercifully. "You didn't want to have to grovel before Albus, to admit that the tool he left was wasted on you, that you simply *refused* to see--"

"Stop," she said quietly.

"--what was right before your eyes, that Minerva McGonagall *canturn herself into a bloody cat*, but she can't put two and two--"

"You make it very difficult to be kind to you, Severus."

"Indeed. Call it lack of practice," he sneered.

"I brought you down here because I wasn't altogether certain that you would want Albus to know."

"And whatever gave you that impression?"

"What do you know about the Deathly Hallows?"

\*\*\*

They Disappeared to a hillside just beyond the Burrow. As she and Ron emerged from beneath the Invisibility Cloak, Hermione had the oddest sense that time was doubling back on itself, that the three of them were third years again, sneaking down to Hagrid's hut under the cloak. To ground herself, as they trudged through the snow, she looked back at the Burrow, its odd, mismatched stories rising determinedly toward the clouds. It was strange to think that Ginny was there, Fred and George, Mr and Mrs Weasley. They had been there, at home, this whole time.

They slogged through the snow in silence for ages, but when they reached the top of the next hill, Hermione could see a tall, black cylinder rising even more improbably than the Burrow toward the sky.

"Bet you anything that's it," Harry said, and from the sound of him, he'd picked up speed and was well ahead of them now.

"Harry, wait for us," she hissed. "I don't want to be separated." But she was hurrying now, too. She disliked being in this wide open area. She had learned from Snape to like walls and ceilings, closed in places where intruders would have difficulty concealing themselves. There seemed to be too much... *opportunity* here, too many places to hide, too much sky from which Death Eaters could suddenly materialize.

"Come on," she urged Ron, finally taking his hand and nearly running at the strange castle-like structure in the distance.

"Hermione!" he protested, but began to trot alongside her.

They reached the gates, panting and winded. Beyond the crooked wrought iron, there was a garden of odd dimension and even odder population. Mistletoe hung from the twisted branches of stunted looking crab-apple trees, and the ground was littered with bulbous orange fruits in various stages of fermentation. The fact that the Lovegoods had somehow gotten a plant to fruit in the dead of winter was the least surprising thing about the entire tableau. The house rose like a malignant growth out of the countryside, tall and black and forbiddingly strange, and Hermione wondered, not for the first time, if there was anything useful to be found here.

It had been remarkably easy to convince the boys to come. Ron had been slavishly agreeing to anything she'd suggested since his return, but beyond that, it seemed that he longed for some adventure for the three of them to undertake. She thought he wanted to somehow forge new memories of the three of them to replace the time they'd spent apart.

Harry strode to the door, dropped the Invisibility Cloak and knocked. Before his hand had returned to his side, the door was wrenched open, and Xenophilius Lovegood stood before them, his white hair standing out about his head, clad only in what appeared to be a stained nightshirt. His face was very nearly a caricature of surprise. He did not greet them, but stood unmoving in the doorway. Hermione thought he looked quite like one of the gnarled trees wreathed in white mistletoe.

"Why are you here?" he asked, finally.

"Could we come in, Mr Lovegood? We're in considerable danger out here," Hermione said firmly.

"I--well, that is--oh, I suppose so. Hurry up!" he said, as if they'd been wanting to linger in the garden.

He nearly ran from them as they pushed into the entryway. Before she'd had much of a chance to look around, Mr Lovegood was charging up a rickety-looking spiral staircase to the upper floor.

"But where is Luna?" Ron called.

"She's..." He turned on the stairs and looked at them wildly. "Luna is... well, *she's down at the stream, fishing for Freshwater Plimpies.*"

"I'll just go down, then, and get her, yeah?" Ron said excitedly. "Luna--you guys! She'll have news; she'll have seen Ginny!"

"She'll be back in no time!" Mr Lovegood said quickly. "Come. Come up here and sit. I've got the press running--I'll just--" And he took off again.

Hermione was reluctant to leave the kitchen, but Harry and Ron were already ascending the staircase, which looked as though it might collapse under their combined weight. She paused until they had reached the top and then began to climb herself.

"Mr Lovegood," she said when they had all congregated next to a creaking and banging machine that seemed to be emitting more smoke and noise than issues of the Quibbler. "I really wish that you would go and get Luna. We've been on the run a very long time, as I'm sure you realize. We haven't seen anyone in months... it would be good to see her. It would feel... like home."

Xenophilus Lovegood looked at her with a strange, pinched expression, and it seemed to her that he acquiesced. He jerked a tablecloth from a large workbench, scattering books and parchment everywhere, and threw it over the seizing machine. "*I'll go and call her and then--yes, very well. I shall try to help you.*"

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"I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about."

Minerva rose and walked to her bookshelf. She selected a volume and returned to her chair, pushing the book across her desk to Snape.

"*The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore?*" He gave a short, barking sort of laugh. "You're actually reading that Skeeter woman's bosh?"

"Turn to page 463."

Snape took the book reluctantly and turned to the page. On it, there was a letter from Dumbledore to Grindelwald. *Grindelwald again...* What was the connection? Why did the wizard keep cropping up? He skimmed the letter with growing confusion. Albus had intended to... *rule* with Grindelwald? He looked up into Minerva's expectant face.

"So Albus had some rather unsavory connections in his youth," he said as if it mattered little. "I am hardly in a position to throw stones."

"It's not the letter, Severus. It's the signature."

Snape's eyes returned to the page, and he nearly gasped. The symbol. Hermione's symbol. He paused before raising his face from the text. There must be no sign in his manner that excitement was surging through him.

"I am not familiar with that mark. I take it you know what it means?"

"It is the sign of the Deathly Hallows."

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Mr Lovegood was gone for so long that Hermione began to grow restless. She rose from the workbench where she had been seated and walked back to the steps. The upper floors of the house were lofted and connected by a complicated series of staircases. By leaning into the stairwell, she could see into some of the other rooms. Directly across from them on the next floor was what had to be Luna's bedroom. The walls were painted in dusty blue, and hanging from them were bundles of strange herbs tied with twine. Luna's bed was spare, but covered in a thick silver coverlet, and a jumble of books and boxes seemed to serve as her nightstand. But what was truly striking about her room was the ceiling. On it, there were painted five portraits: Harry, Ron, Neville, Ginny and Hermione herself. Luna's style was extremely vibrant, but there was a certain life-like quality about the portraits all the same. A thin gold chain seemed to wind about the figures, binding them together with a thread that reminded Hermione of a spell. She leaned further out onto the landing. The spell was made a single word, repeated thousands of times. *Friends.*

Hermione was suddenly terribly glad that they had come. Friends, yes. Friends. These were her friends, these were the people who fought along side her. She felt renewed by the picture, and she longed to see Luna, to have her face here with them to complete the picture. "Harry, Ron," she breathed. "Come and see."

Harry joined her on the landing and looked up at the portraits. "Ginny," he said quietly, and she reached over and squeezed his hand. Just then, Mr Lovegood appeared at the foot of the steps. He cleared his throat, and Hermione jumped back.

"*Luna is most excited that you are here,*" he said, beginning to climb the steps and carrying a tray precariously laden with cups and saucers. *She ought not to be too long, she has caught nearly enough Plimpies to make soup for all of us.* Help yourself to this infusion of Gurdyroots."

Harry and Ron looked dubiously at the pot of a thick, murky looking liquid, but Hermione thought it best to accept Mr Lovegood's hospitality, however strange. She poured herself a cup.

"Mr Lovegood," Harry said. "What was the symbol you were wearing around your neck at Bill and Fleur's wedding?"

"The sign of the Deathly Hallows?"

Hermione raised the cup to her lips and then lowered it. It was not just the heavy, earthy smell of it, but suddenly Snape's voice in her head, chastising her for drinking an unknown substance given by a stranger in wartime.

"*One simply uses the symbol to reveal oneself to other believers, in the hope that they might help one with the Quest.*"

"*But what are the Deathly Hallows?*" Hermione asked. Mr Lovegood was shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"*I assume that you are all familiar with 'The Tale of the Three Brothers'?*"

Hermione's heart began to beat furiously. *The Tales of Beedle the Bard!* As angry as she was with Dumbledore, it was cheering to think that they had stumbled back onto his path, that from here they might be able to sense whatever plan he'd had.

"It's a fairy tale," Hermione said to Harry, who had not read it. "It's about three brothers who meet Death."

"You mean they died?"

"No, I mean they met him, like the Grim Reaper. They *met* Death. He was angry that they had used magic to avoid him, so he gave them magical objects that would doom them. It's kind of a morality tale."

"Finish it, Miss Granger," Mr Lovegood said. "What did they win from Death?"

"Well, I'd hardly call it winning," she said. "The oldest brother got an unbeatable wand. With it he could win any duel."

"I dunno, that sounds pretty good to me," Ron said.

"The second brother got a stone that calls people back from the dead."

Harry looked up at her. She thought she saw an odd kind of hope pass over his face.

"And the youngest brother got an Invisibility Cloak." Harry's eyes widened noticeably, and Ron nudged her foot with his excitedly. She glared at him.

"But how were they doomed by those things?" Harry asked.

"The oldest brother couldn't keep quiet about his wand, and someone killed him to get it. The middle brother called back his lost love from the dead, but was driven mad when he couldn't truly be with her and ended up killing himself. But the youngest brother lived a long life because Death couldn't find him. It's just like any fairy story," she said dismissively. "It's meant to teach children to be humble and quiet and satisfied with what they've got. Not to use magic in ways it wasn't meant to be used, that sort of thing."

"A rather crude telling," Xenio Lovegood said. "But accurate enough in its essentials. The Deathly Hallows: the Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone, and the Cloak of Invisibility." He drew the symbol on a bit of parchment as he spoke.

"So you're saying you think those things are *real*?" Hermione said, bewildered.

"Of course, they are real. Very few wizards believe in them, but you have studied History of Magic, Miss Granger. Surely you recognize the many names of the Elder Wand: the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny. *The Elder Wand is the Hallow that is most easily traced, because of the way in which it passes from hand to hand.* Mr Lovegood turned and glanced out the window.

"Which is what?" asked Harry.

"Which is that the possessor of the wand must capture it from its previous owner, if he is to be truly master of it... *The bloody trail of the Elder Wand is splattered across the pages of Wizarding history.*"

"What do you mean, 'capture,'" Hermione asked. "You have to kill its owner to get it?"

"So it would seem."

"But who has the Elder Wand now?" Ron asked.

"*Alas, who knows?*" Mr Lovegood said. "*The trail goes cold with Arcus and Livius. Who can say which of them really defeated Loxias, and which took the wand? And who can say who may have defeated them? History, alas, does not tell us.* There have been rumours from time to time, but no one has seen the Elder Wand for nearly two hundred years."

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"There were rumours, Severus. Rumours for years, among those of us who cared for such things, that Grindelwald had the Deathstick. They say he stole it from the wandmaker, Gregorovitch."

"Minerva, forgive me if I've failed to understand you. But it sounds to me if you've just given an extremely long lecture on a fairy tale. Now, if you will excuse me, there are matters--"

"Snape! Listen to me. When I saw the symbol, when I realized he was a believer, I knew. Dumbledore must have had it. He must have taken it when he defeated Grindelwald."

"You just said yourself that the Elder Wand passes from wizard to wizard by blood! Dumbledore did not kill Grindelwald. The man is in Nurmengard as we both know." The entire conversation was ludicrous. He would have never taken Minerva McGonagall for the type to chase after these childish daydreams of special wands and stones that raised the dead. But however impossible her tale, it seemed that Voldemort had taken an interest in it. Ollivander. Gregorovitch. Grindelwald. Nurmengard. There was no way it added up to anything else. And Hermione's book. Dumbledore had left it to her. She'd seen the mark in Godric's Hollow, and the old wizard had *told* him he expected them to visit the town.

"Perhaps," she said. "But I cannot help but think that Albus had it. It explains so much. There were so many things he could do that I had never seen... never even heard of. And when I first began to realize that... things were not as they had seemed, that Albus must have asked you--must have ordered you--to kill him, I could not determine why."

Snape felt chilled, numbed, but he refused to think beyond the words he spoke. "Because he knew that Hogwarts would fall. He wanted me in a position to take over, to spare the students--"

"What else?" she asked sharply.

"Draco Malfoy had been ordered to kill him. He did not want the boy's soul fractured--"

"He did not want a true servant of Voldemort to be the master of that wand. He wanted you."

"Ridiculous," Snape said faintly. If he were the master of the Elder Wand, then...

Minerva was as pale as milk, but her eyes were strange and fiery. "The question is, why didn't he tell you?"

Snape set his jaw. "If I were to assume that all this had some basis in reality, I would gather that Dumbledore felt I might be swayed by the power of such a wand, that I might be lured--"

"No, Severus--if you have contact with Potter, then I cannot believe that he doubted you."

Snape sat in paralyzed silence. Minerva was right. Dumbledore had married him to Hermione to give him access to Potter. If Albus had truly thought there was the chance that he might go bad, he would never have risked the boy in that way. Not believing, as he did, that Potter would have to face Voldemort to defeat him.

"So you must ask yourself, who will track the wand to you first? Potter or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? And which of them, at this point, will have fewer compunctions about killing you? I brought you down here to tell you, Severus, because I think Albus sent you to die, that he sealed your fate as surely as if he had killed you himself. And

I don't think I could have told you while he watched you. I don't think I could have stood it."

Snape's mind bucked and reeled. If Minerva was right, and disarming was all that was needed to control the Elder Wand, then he did not have it. The Elder Wand was not his, and Dumbledore must know it! Why, then, hadn't he said anything? What was twisted game was he playing? He heard Dumbledore's last words in his mind as if in an endless loop. *Severus, please. Severus, please. Severus... please.*

"I thank you for your discretion, Minerva. But if, in fact, this was Dumbledore's plan, then it seems we have a problem. Draco Malfoy disarmed Dumbledore before I killed him."

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After looking out the window for Luna once more, Mr Lovegood had left them to return to the kitchen. Harry and Ron were whispering excitedly among themselves, but Hermione could not make sense of all she'd heard. Could Dumbledore really have believed this nonsense? An unbeatable wand? A stone that raised the dead? She was bitterly disappointed. This was not what she had come here to learn--they were supposed to be hunting Horcruxes! How did it fit?

"You heard what he said," Ron said. "A cloak that never wears out, that hides everything completely! It's your cloak! And *Dumbledore* gave it to you! We already have one Hallow!"

"Ron, don't be daft," she said. "That entire story was rubbish. The Tale of the Three Brothers is a myth."

"*The Chamber of Secrets was supposed to be a myth, wasn't it?*" he countered. Hermione had no immediate response to that, so she pursed her lips and glared at him.

The wheezing and banging of the machine behind her suddenly ceased, leaving the room feeling ominously silent. Absentmindedly, she picked up one of the papers that had shot from the machine and turned it over in her hands as she thought. She gazed at the parchment on which Mr Lovegood had drawn the symbol. Why had Victor thought it was Grindelwald's mark? Snape had said that Voldemort had been looking for Grindelwald, had wanted to see him. Did Voldemort believe in the Deathly Hallows?

"Look, it's just a story. A story about being afraid of death. It doesn't help us; it doesn't mean--"

"Hermione!" Ron said, interrupting her. "Harry! We've got to get out of here. We've got to go now!"

"Why? What are you talking about?"

"Look!" Ron said, pointing at the issue of the Quibbler she held in her hands. Harry's face stared back at her, blinking and looking around nervously. *Undesirable Number One*, it read.

"No," Harry said under his breath. "No."

Hermione eyes stuttered to the window. There were figures out there on broomsticks. Cloaked figures.

Mr Lovegood's voice startled her so badly that she nearly stumbled as she spun around to face him. He was standing at the top of the staircase, looking wild. *They took my Luna,*" he whispered. *"Because of what I've been writing. They took my Luna and I don't know where she is, what they've done to her. But they might give her back to me if I--if I--"*

Luna! Not Luna, with her misty, far-away eyes. Luna, who always came when they needed her. Luna, her friend. Why hadn't Snape told her? *Quickly*, she thought. *Quick now, Hermione. Think.*

The Death Eaters were congregating in the garden. Any moment now, they would burst into the house. There was shouting and a blast as the door caved in, and Mr Lovegood gave her a look of deep sorrow as he turned back down the stairs. "Potter is up here!" he called. *"Please... please... give me Luna, just let me have Luna..."*

The sound of his words tore at her heart. What wouldn't she give, if they had her family? If they had Snape? Perhaps if the Death Eaters saw them, if they knew that Mr Lovegood had told the truth, Luna and her father would not be harmed. Hermione grabbed hold of Harry in one hand and Ron in the other. While Mr Lovegood called, once again, to the Death Eaters, she whispered, "You must trust me. You must. Ron, put on the Invisibility Cloak. Both of you, hold tight to me." She aimed her wand at Xenophilius Lovegood. *"Obliviate!"* she screamed and then swung her wand toward the floor. *"Deprimo!"* The floor gave way, and they were falling, falling, spinning as they fell. If she could not turn, if she could not summon her concentration, they would crash into the kitchen, right into the arms of the Death Eaters--

And then, blessedly, her lungs compressed, and darkness took her.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

*Chapter 32 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything you recognize, including all fully italicized lines, belongs to JKR. I make no money. I owe huge debts of gratitude to RedOrchid, who has tirelessly helped me through the mire of the Elder Wand, and Shellsnapelover, who betas each of these chapters with speed and grace. I do want to let you know that there may be a slight (one or two day) delay on the next two chapters, as I am expecting a visit from my lovely beta, and so my writing time will be short during the next week.

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"Draco Malfoy," Minerva whispered.

"Indeed. And now, it seems I have a favour to ask." Snape took a deep breath. He knew that what he would do in the next few moments would change everything. He knew that now he would have to admit that he was directly disobeying his orders, changing the plan.

"What is it?"

"I trust you understand the seriousness of keeping this to yourself?"

"Of course."

"I will expect your absolute silence on the matter? Even with the Order?"

"Yes."

"Good. I do not wish to have to Obliviate you, Minerva. There is someone, however, that I will ask you to tell."

"Who?"

"Dobby."

Her face was almost comical. "You need not goggle at me like a first year. This has been useful information, to be sure, and I thank you. But there are things I must attend to immediately. I will go from here to my stores and then on to my old rooms in the dungeons. If Dobby will see reason, if he will give me his trust, send him there."

She raised her eyebrows slightly. "There are other elves, you know. Others that are bound to serve you."

"I have served enough masters to know that I could never want a slave," he said pointedly and strode toward the door. He stopped at the threshold.

"And Minerva?"

"Yes?"

"You realize that I'm going to have to make rather a spectacle of you."

Something like a smirk danced around her mouth as she nodded. It was a look that she had often worn when they were the heads of rival houses, a look he associated with banter about Quidditch and house cups. He quirked an eyebrow and tried to return it. Then, he lifted his wand and ended the Silencing Charm. He took a deep breath and began to shout.

"You think your petty concerns require you to drag me through this castle to your office? Do you think you deserve some sort of *special treatment*? Because I assure you that you do not. Disciplinary concerns route through *my* office--no exceptions! I have given you the privilege of awarding and deducting house points on your own. Until now. But as you have shown that you cannot be trusted to act with even a modicum of common sense, I must insist that I approve your--"

"I am the Gryffindor Head of House--" She began to yell in return, her eyes flashing brightly at him. She crossed the room and pressed the Deluminator into his palm.

"Silence!" he bellowed, unwarding and opening the door. "Henceforth, consider yourself on probation. I will be watching your actions very closely, Minerva. Take care not to step out of line. I would hate to think what would happen if I fired you."

He pushed through the clutch of professors standing outside the door. "Don't get any ideas," he snarled. "I would be more than happy to remove all of you from this castle."

He charged down the hall and down several staircases into the dungeons. Three quick turns, and he was at the door of his former laboratory. He pressed his fingertips against the door and entered quickly, shutting and warding it behind him. He could enter his old rooms from here.

It took him only moments to find what he needed, though the walls were lined with countless bottles of potions, unguents and salves. His fingers danced nimbly over the choices, snatching up Veritas serum, Pain Reliever, Healing Potion and Dreamless Sleep, and tucking them into the various pockets of his robes. He ran his hand over his worktable, which was coated in a light film of dust. How he missed this room, this quiet place where he had worked without fear of interruption, where he had bottled safety and comfort and calm. But he pressed on through the next doorway, entering the room that had once been his office, and from there, into the sitting room.

He settled himself into a chair by the empty fireplace to wait. Snape's mind was still charging forward, unchecked, sorting through the information he'd been given. Dumbledore's wand... possibly more powerful than other wands, its allegiance won only by force. Voldemort, taking Lucius's wand, believing another wand would be needed to avoid the problem of the twin cores. That information had come from Ollivander. Was it possible that Ollivander had told the Dark Lord of the Elder Wand?

Where was the Elder Wand now? Snape presumed that Dumbledore had been buried with his wand, as was the wizarding custom, but as he had not been able to attend the funeral, he could not be sure. If Dumbledore had meant him to take the wand, why wouldn't he have revealed it or left it somewhere for him to find? Snape was hardly about to break into Dumbledore's tomb to get it. But Dumbledore had left clues to Hermione to lead her to the legend of the Deathly Hallows, so perhaps Minerva was right, and the old wizard had meant the wand to play a part...

A rather large part of him wanted to charge immediately upstairs to the Headmaster's office to demand answers from the portrait, but caution and secrecy would not allow it. Not until he understood. Not until he knew what Dumbledore might have intended.

Dobby cracked into being near the doorway and stood, not trembling as he usually did, but with his pointed chin held high. What was the elf doing here so soon?

"Headmaster," he squeaked.

"Dobby," Snape replied cautiously. "You have spoken with Professor McGonagall?"

"Dobby is not needing to hear Professor McGonagall's explanations, sir, though Dobby was glad to listen to them. But Dobby already knew that Professor Snape was working for Harry Potter."

Snape frowned at the house-elf. "I am not sure that I understand you."

"Dobby is knowing since last year that Professor Dumbledore had secret plans for you."

"Dumbledore *told* you that I--"

"No, sir." Then he reached up and bashed himself soundly over the head. "Forgive Dobby for interrupting you, sir. But Dobby can see your ring."

Snape inhaled audibly. "My ring?"

"Miss Hermione Granger has one just like it. Dobby saw Professor Dumbledore hurt, and you cared for him. Then, Miss Granger turned up with a ring just like yours. Dobby knew then that Professor Dumbledore would be needing to leave us and that he must have joined you with Miss Granger to help Harry Potter, sir."

"But in my office--Christmas day--"

Dobby took up his attack on his head once more. "Dobby is sorry, Professor Snape. The other house-elves, they is not associating with Miss Granger. They is angry that she is trying to free them. So they does not know what Dobby knows. Dobby was not wanting to call attention to himself, sir. Dobby did not think he was supposed to know."

"Stop," Snape said. "Do not punish yourself anymore."

Dobby's hands fell limply to his sides, and he beamed at Snape.

The elf had known because of Hermione. A tiny voice at the back of his mind piped up once more. Had Dumbledore planned this? There was a neatness to it that troubled him.

"I need to go to the basement of Malfoy Manor. There is a prisoner held there that I need to speak with. But the enchantments are heavy; and I must not be discovered. I cannot get there without your magic."

"Dobby knows that basement well, sir," the house-elf said as a tremor shook him.

"Then you know the danger. If you do not wish to take me, I will understand. I will not order you to do so."

"Harry Potter and Miss Granger are Dobby's friends, sir," he said slowly. "Dobby wants--"

Snape nodded.

"Dobby will take you, Headmaster," the elf said and held up his bony, leathery hand to Snape.

Somehow, despite the fact that the strange little elf had made it clear that he would, as seemingly everyone did, act on behalf of Potter, Snape felt oddly moved by the feeling of the hard, sure grip of the house-elf's hand in his own.

"Thank you," he said, and the *crack* of Dobby's Apparition rolled through him like a whip.

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It was so dark in the Malfoy cellar that he saw nothing at all as he landed heavily on his feet. Snape threw his free arm out before him, afraid that he would stumble and crush the elf who had brought him here. The blackness was so complete that it seemed it seemed to have a life of its own, to twist and writhe before him, and his eyes ached with trying to see. He had no choice. He would have to light his wand.

Snape released Dobby's hand and cast a wordless Silencing Charm. Surely, whoever was down here had been alerted to their arrival by the sound of their Apparition, but as yet, no one had screamed. It was almost impossible to imagine that there was anyone down here, anyone alive at any rate, in the silence and the chilly dark. But so far as Snape knew, Ollivander had never been moved nor released.

He flicked his wand through the air to light it. In the dimness, he could see a small, gray figure curled in the corner of the cellar against the stone walls. *Ollivander*, he thought, taking a step forward. Whether he was alive or dead, Snape could not tell. The man lay completely motionless; there was no sign that he had heard their arrival, nor that he saw the light, surely the first light he would have seen in quite some time.

"Ollivander?" Snape said sharply.

Suddenly, he was seized about the knees and knocked to the ground, the hard stone beneath him sending buzzing pain up through his thighs. He hissed in a breath as he struggled away. How could he have failed to check the entire room? He had only a brief impression of matted blond hair before he shot a silent Stunner, immobilizing his attacker. *Draco*? What would he be doing down here in the darkness? He quickly scanned the cellar, his eyes finally coming to rest on the figure beside him, who lay as still now as the wizard in the corner, and he rolled the body over with his foot.

*Luna Lovegood. Bloody hell.* How long had she been here? And just as frightening, why hadn't he heard about it? He opened his left hand and touched his wand to the ring. *Do not go to Lovegood.*

Snape dropped to his knees beside the witch and felt her pulse. It was quick and feathery, but she seemed in no immediate danger. She was thin and dirty, and even by his wand light, he could see that her pale, translucent skin was streaked with bruises, but she looked otherwise whole. He propped her into a sitting position against the stone wall and pulled a phial of Healing Potion from his robes. Tipping her head back, he dripped the liquid into her mouth, letting it roll slowly down her throat. He followed it up with three drops of Pain Reliever and then moved away, advancing on the figure in the corner.

"Ollivander!" he said again, but the wizard did not blink. His silvery eyes continued to stare blankly at the back wall.

Tentatively, Snape touched Ollivander's papery gray skin. It was warm, pliant. He waved his wand over the wizard's body. He was alive. Alive, but perhaps buried in his own mind. "Ollivander," he whispered. "I have not come to hurt you."

Still, Ollivander did not move. Snape slid a hand beneath the old man's head and gently raised it from the floor. He hated to do this, but he had to know if the wizard was in there, or if his mind had been irreparably broken. "*Legilimens*," he whispered.

*"Who is it... more of you? Leave me alone... I have nothing else... I have told all that I know... Kill me, please, just kill me. I am of no more use to you... this pain... the dark... please... Spare Miss Lovegood. She has done nothing. Oh, Merlin, please let it end."*

The burn of his ring called him back, and he withdrew from the old man's mind. Quickly, he removed the circlet and held it up to his wand. *Made it out alive. Must talk soon.* She had already been... No. He must not think of that now. She was alive; she had news. That was all that mattered. He would gain what he could here and then they would discuss it.

*I will be in touch*, he sent and replaced the ring, preparing once more to enter Ollivander's mind.

"What are you doing to him?"

Snape spun on his knees to face the girl, who was clearly fighting her way free of the last of the Stunner. He raised his wand, but hesitated. She was not moving, only watching him. "You healed me," she said finally.

"Miss Lovegood," he began.

"Don't hurt him."

"I have no intention of doing so. How long has Mr Ollivander been in this condition?"

"He stopped speaking two days ago. After *his* last visit."

"I see. Has he been tortured?"

"Perhaps at first. I haven't been here very long," she said in her odd high voice. "The last time *he* did... whatever you are doing."

*Fuck.* Who knew how much would be left of the man's mind if Voldemort had proceeded him there. If the Dark Lord thought that Ollivander was hiding something, he would have ripped and bludgeoned until he retrieved it.

"I was performing Legilimency, Miss Lovegood," Snape said softly. "I wished to know whether Mr Ollivander still... had brain function."

"Does he?"

"Yes. He has withdrawn into himself, but at least on the surface level, his mind is active."

"I am glad to hear that. I miss him. There's not much in the way of company down here," she said blithely, as if she were discussing the weather.

"No," Snape said, unable to think of a more appropriate response. She did not seem to be afraid of him and made no move to attack again. Still, though, he was wary and spoke to her as he would to a strange dog. "I do not wish to cause you distress, but it is necessary that I speak with Mr Ollivander. I will have to enter his mind again."

"But you are not hurting him?"

"I will be as gentle as I can."

"And will you heal him, too?"

"I will."

She nodded, seemingly satisfied. "You brought Dobby."

"Dobby helped me to come here." The elf bowed low in response. Luna's face registered no shock, but she turned and looked at questioningly at Snape.

"Miss Lovegood?" he said, though her unsettling, unblinking eyes had not left him. "Will you help me?"

"I don't have a wand."

"A wand will not be necessary. If you could lift him a bit, perhaps get him into a sitting position?"

The girl stretched hugely, as if she were unsure whether her limbs would respond to her commands. Then she crawled across the stone floor until she was kneeling beside Ollivander. Snape thought he would have to help her, as the man was limp and surely heavy, even in his emaciated condition, but Luna hooked her arms beneath Ollivander's and pulled him upright, bracing him against her chest. As she worked, she crooned to him in her funny sing-song voice. "It's all right, Mr Ollivander. It's just me, Luna Lovegood. I'm not going to hurt you. I just need you to sit up like this. Yes, that's it. That's very good. Professor Snape is here, Mr Ollivander, but I don't think he means us any harm. He gave me some Healing Potion, and he told me that he's going to heal you, too. Yes, just like that, Mr Ollivander. Just rest your head here against my shoulder."

When she had settled him, she looked up at Snape. "Is this good?"

"Very. Very good, Miss Lovegood. Thank you."

He raised his wand. "*Legilimens.*"

*"Snape! The girl said Snape! Doesn't she know? How could she not know? Snape! His right hand, come to... Leave me alone. Go away! He's taken what he needs. There is nothing else--"*

Snape delved beneath the man's surface thoughts; he penetrated them as if diving through a thin film of slime on the surface of a lake.

*"The wand--he knows about the Elder Wand--I tried to stop him, tried to block him, tried to forget, but he took it, all the same. Now, he sends his minion; now, he comes to take what's left of my mind--"*

Very gently, very softly, Snape began to speak into Ollivander's mind. "I have not come for Voldemort."

*"Lies... lies..."*

"The truth, Ollivander. I have come for the truth about the Elder Wand."

*"The Elder Wand! I wish I had never heard of it... I know nothing more! I have never seen it, never touched it!"*

"But you know of its power."

*"You seek the Elder Wand? You wish to rise, perhaps, above the Dark Lord? To reign yourself..."*

"No. I come only to understand."

*"If you know of the wand, then you know the stories... there is nothing I can give you, Snape. Nothing."*

"I have Veritaserum, Ollivander. Do not make me compel you to speak."

*"So it matters little, then. You pretend at courtesy, but you are no different than the Dark Lord. You will take what you want whether or not I wish to give it."*

"I will heal you either way. I will do no more damage than you make necessary, Ollivander. You can choose to help me. But you are right; I will have what I came to retrieve."

Ollivander gave a long mental sigh, and for a moment, there was quiet in the old man's mind. *Ask what you have come to ask.*

"Is it true that the Elder Wand passes only by blood?"

*"The Elder Wand is not like other wands; it is true. It cannot be handed over willingly; it must be taken by force."*

"By murder?"

*"I cannot say for certain, as I have not examined the wand myself. But I think not. To conquer should be all that is necessary."*

"What does that mean, 'to conquer'?"

*"Bloodshed would not necessarily be... required. Only to render the master of the wand defenseless, to hold him at your mercy."*

"I see. And will the wand function for a holder who is not a master?"

*"Not well. Not as well, perhaps, even as a poor match, a wand that has not chosen its wizard. I think that is why so many have gone back to kill the wizard they had stolen from... as in the case of Godelot and Hereward... and Loxius and Livius. The wand will not perform until it is won."*

"The wand recognizes power?"

*"Oh, yes. The wand is powerful, and it thirsts for power. But more than power, the wand wants mastery."*

"You think the wand is sentient?"

*"All wands are sentient, Snape. Your own wand recognized you, so many years ago, in my shop. It chose you as its partner. But the Elder Wand does not simply want a match. No, its needs, its demands are greater. It wants to be mastered. It craves rule... destruction."*

"Then, in Voldemort's hands--"

*"There is a terrible symmetry there, yes. I admit it the thought has... power."*

"Would it choose him as his own wand would? Would it choose him even if he had not won it?"

*"The Elder Wand is governed by its own unique laws... but laws nonetheless. I do not think that it can choose as a traditional wand would. It was designed to draw blood, to breed strife. When the wand is in the hands of he who does not master it, it seeks... This is why the rumours surface... the wand is seeking its master. Gregorovitch would never have boasted of the wand if it had not been coaxing him to do so. He did not own it, and the wand wanted to be owned..."*

"Tell me what you know of Gregorovitch... why does the Dark Lord pursue him?"

*"Gregorovitch had the wand, or so he said. I believe that he did. He was a good man, a good wandmaker. He was not given to false claims. I believe he inherited it, that it was perhaps bequeathed to him by Baliclus, who died its master. This is why I believe that the wand made him brag of it... it did not want to be studied, to lie dormant in a collection... The wand was seeking."*

"And Grindelwald? Did he take the wand from Gregorovitch?"

*"The Dark Lord... he came here after he had slaughtered Gregorovitch. He was my rival, but still, I cannot imagine the world without... it is a terrible loss for wizards. There are few wandmakers of his skill. But the Dark Lord said that he had taken Gregorovitch's mind before he killed him. He said a young, blond wizard took the wand, that he had seen him come upon Gregorovitch unarmed and had attacked... perhaps the mastery was reborn in him. I admit... I thought Grindelwald. And the Dark Lord knew that I had thought it. That wand is a punishment and a curse upon the holder. He who masters it is never safe."*

Never safe. This was what Dumbledore had tried to condemn him to. "Would it turn upon its master? Would the Dark Lord be able to wield it against its true--"

*"Again, I can only guess. But I think not. I think--the wand would not want to destroy its master. It would want to join him."*

"But if the master were the weaker of the two--if a child held the mastery, and Voldemort the wand--"

*"I do not know,"* Ollivander said, but Snape caught the flavor of the man's sub-thoughts. *"Potter?"*

"But you can guess."

*"I imagine that it would not. The wand is sentient, yes, as all wands are, and it seems to have an uncommon affinity for power, but its judgment... Can a wand judge? Can it feel anything besides the twanging vibration of a soul in harmony?"*

"I have come to you because I believe you are the only wizard who might know."

*"I have worked with wands my entire life. I have crafted thousands. Tens of thousands. But wand lore is inexact, unpredictable. I hear the high keen of a wand held in an unfamiliar hand, the subtle sigh of the wand that has found its wizard. But the wands in my store lie quietly in their boxes for eternity, if necessary. They do not seek. But this wand... it is bound by the laws of its creator, of chaos. I think it knows only the laws of force and domination. It would choose the wizard who had won it, I think."*

"You have been very helpful, Ollivander."

*"Snape... are you the master of the Elder Wand?"*

"Why would you ask me that?"

*"Because it seems only a matter of time before he knows. If Grindelwald had the wand, as the Dark Lord believes that he did, then Dumbledore must have taken it when he defeated him. You killed Dumbledore, Snape. A wizard as powerful as Lord Voldemort... he will be able to channel through any wand. But when he realizes that the wand is not the instrument of power he expected, he will know that he does not master it, and he will find you."*

"That will be all," Snape said, slipping quickly from Ollivander's mind. The wizard blinked rapidly.

"Snape," he croaked.

"Lie quietly, Ollivander. Save your strength. You have been most helpful." Snape uncorked the remaining phial of Healing Potion and tipped it down the old wizard's throat. He added several drops of the Pain Reliever and the Dreamless Sleep to the man's mouth and motioned for Miss Lovegood to release him. She eased him gently to the floor.

"I cannot take you to safety," he said to her. "No one must realize that I have been here."

"That's all right, Professor Snape," she said. "It's not so bad."

Snape huffed in disbelief. The girl should have been in Gryffindor.

"Sometimes, at night, I can hear people talking, moving around upstairs. I can pretend I'm at Hogwarts, falling asleep in my dormitory."

*Such an odd young woman,* Snape thought. But she reminded him a bit of Hermione. Such steel underneath. He wished that he did not have to do it.

"Miss Lovegood, I will have to Oblivate you. Both of you."

She nodded.

"I will send help as quickly as I can." Why was he making promises to a girl whose memory he was about to take? It was senseless; she would not remember any of this later, and yet, he found he could not leave her alone in that relentless darkness without speaking a few words of hope. "Hold on."

"Yes, sir. Should I sit very still?"

"That would be helpful, yes."

But she did not sit still. Instead, she leaned forward and brushed his sleeve with her hand.

"I didn't realize before. That you were on our side."

He snatched his arm away, suddenly horrified. What was he doing? In twenty-four hours, he had revealed himself to four people. Four! He was unraveling the plan as surely as if he marched up to Voldemort and announced himself a traitor. This was madness--*this* was death. All these years, this was what he had known he must never have. What business did he have being touched by house-elves and children?

"*Oblivate!*"

The girl's eyes had gone soft and unfocused, but she seemed to watch as he Obliviated Ollivander.

Then he looked down, and Dobby solemnly held up his small bony hand. *Damn it all.* He took it, but when he heard the crack of the elf's Apparition, his heart seemed to stutter and stop in his chest. As they moved into blackness, he felt suddenly sure that he had died, that somehow, someone had managed to curse him just before he escaped and that the crushing, suffocating darkness was the feeling of his soul being wrenched from his body.

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When they arrived in the Headmaster's office, he was sweating and afraid, and his very fear terrified and enraged him.

"That will be all, Dobby," he said coldly. "Thank you."

Dobby made no move to leave the room.

"I said that will be all. I have business with Dumbledore."

Dobby looked at him inscrutably and Disapparated, leaving Snape alone in the room, though he knew the former Headmasters watched him with interest. He walked to his desk and sat down with his back to the portraits.

The room was eerily silent, but he could not focus, could not begin to think what he wanted to say.

Dumbledore had sent him to his death, and he was afraid to die.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

*Chapter 33 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. I make no money. Endless thanks to Shellsnapelover (who beta'd this one from my house!), RedOrchid and OpalJade for their insights and support. I love you ladies very much.

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The deal had been, of course, that he would live as long as he possibly could. That was what they had outlined that night back in Dumbledore's office, after he had debased himself on that windswept hill, after he had fallen to his knees and begged.

The warmth of Dumbledore's office had seemed oppressive, and his heart beat erratically. He knew how much the old man disliked his presence there, how little he trusted him. "You disgust me," he had said, and Snape had felt the disgust still radiating off him in waves. He had longed to shrink down to nothingness, to conjure a hole into which he could slip and disappear from the world forever. And yet, Dumbledore had been willing to work with him, had been willing to accept his help. It had seemed then that it was all that he had ever wanted--for someone to accept his apology, even if his apology was for being ugly and skinny and sharp-tempered, for someone to recognize that he could still be of use.

He had agreed to turn spy that night, and the promise that he made was not just one of absolute fidelity, but to extend his usefulness over as much time as he possibly could. In essence, he had promised not just to do the job, but to do it *well*, to do it relentlessly, to press on past crushing fear and isolation and hatred, to preserve his role at all costs, to give as much as he could to Dumbledore. Because they both knew it would never be enough.

As the years passed, he knew why Dumbledore had extracted that promise from him. After the first year of teaching, a year in which he struggled to become used to the things his students said about him when they thought he could not hear; after the night of the Dark Lord's return, when the Mark had reappeared on his skin, so black and malignant, like an accusation; after the first time he had arrived back at Hogwarts, his flesh flayed and burning; he knew. It would be easy, would it not, to make some fatal error, to give himself away and let the torture end? For however the Dark Lord chose to end his life, it would be better than this.

But the difficulty had been the point. The suffering... it was the only way to atone. Not that he hadn't tried to lessen it. He plunged his fingers into his hair and let his head fall forward until it rested in the cradle of his hands. Everything about him had been carefully chosen to keep people away from him. It was the way of a good spy, he had told himself. If no one wants to be around you long enough to know you, if no one wants to consider you too closely, then your secrets are safe. But it had also been a protection of a different sort, he knew. If he were cruel and ugly, if he were purposely objectionable... then he wasn't suffering others' rejection, he was inviting it. It was weak, he saw now. He had deserved to truly earn their disdain. They should hate him for the right things. They should hate him for Lily.

So why should it trouble him that Dumbledore had arranged for his death? Shouldn't he be welcoming the end of these long and lonely years? If he died in a plan to save Potter, wasn't there a symmetry to that that should satisfy him? He could not fathom why he felt so empty and afraid.

But what was the plan? If he understood it, if he could see how his death would contribute, perhaps then he could be satisfied. But if Malfoy had the Elder Wand, and no one knew it but he and Dumbledore, then what was his death supposed to *serve*?

He felt anger rushing through him, speeding his heart and clouding his thoughts. There were things he wanted to do, things that were not yet taken care of. *This* was why

he had never wanted any attachments. Had he ever truly cared how the war came out? Had he truly ever hoped to see Voldemort defeated, or had he simply cared only to lift the heavy burden of grief and guilt that he had saddled himself with? Suddenly, it seemed that he had no idea, no recollection of who he might have been before that night in September when he agreed to tie his life to that of a seventeen-year-old girl. A seventeen-year-old, Muggle-born girl, who despised him, but looked into his eyes that night and promised her life to him. Promised because Dumbledore had tricked her, had used her, had *required her services*. Just as he had been tricked that night. Dumbledore had said he wanted to see them married to give Snape a chance at life, at survival. Lies. And he had hoped, had so foolishly, childishly hoped that Dumbledore might have wanted him to live. He had thought that might have meant that he had done enough.

But now, he was certain, he wanted very badly to see the Dark Lord vanquished. When had it changed? When had he begun ~~to care~~ for things beyond these walls, for people alive instead of dead? Unbidden, her image rose into his mind, the way she'd stood before that grubby little tent in the frozen January woods--her wand in her fist, her posture unbroken.

Why had he married this girl who had forced his heart open and crawled inside and made him want things? Not life--no, never life, not for her sake--but... he wanted Potter to succeed. He wanted to live long enough to guarantee that Potter gained the mastery of the wand, to see the Lovegood girl released from the Manor; he wanted to live long enough to help Hermione to try to reclaim her family--

*Not yet, he thought. I'm not ready yet.*

Perhaps it was because it had been a secret. Perhaps if he had always known, if it had not come as such a shock... Why had Dumbledore kept it from him? Why not explain? If he had known that the old wizard had had the Elder Wand, they could have made some plan, they could have hidden it, he could have taken the full mastery of it and let Potter find him, that he could have done--

He lifted his head. Dumbledore waited in silence behind him. How much longer until he spoke? Snape dreaded that moment. He knew he was on the edge of something, something he had never meant to choose, something that would cost much more than his life. When he opened his mouth, it would all be over. Because it seemed to him that the man in the portrait was not going to explain how this all made sense, how there was some other interpretation of events in which his life was not thrown away on a mistake. And when he demanded answers, when he challenged Dumbledore, the path he had been traveling would come to an abrupt end, and he would strike out on a far more dangerous mission than being a spy. It seemed to him he would shed the old wizard's guidance, his protection, however tenuous it was in death, and he would be just a man again, a man trying in whatever desperate and feeble ways there were to steer his family safely through a war.

"Severus," Dumbledore said, and Snape's heart plummeted.

"Dumbledore," he replied without turning around.

"Would you care to tell me where you have been? I did not realize you were now using house-elves as transportation devices."

Snape said nothing. What could he say?

"What are you keeping from me, Severus? I thought we had an agreement--"

"I believe the question is what you are keeping from *me*."

"I beg your pardon?"

"When were you planning to tell me about the Elder Wand?" Still, he could not turn and look Dumbledore in the face as he spoke.

"Who has your ear, Severus? Who have you been listening to?"

"Do not dissemble, Dumbledore. It does not become you. This is your war. You have laid the plans, and I am but your servant. I expect no apologies. I only want the truth."

"Look at me," Dumbledore said.

Snape remained motionless. There was a loud noise from somewhere behind him, and he wondered if Dumbledore could knock things over in his portrait.

"Severus! Look at me."

Slowly, Snape swiveled in his chair to face the portrait. Dumbledore was leaning forward, his elbows resting on his painted knees, his hands folded beneath his chin. His eyes were calm but bright.

"I will assume you have learned of the Deathly Hallows from Miss Granger. She's a bright witch, very determined. I knew that she would--"

"Stop. Flattering my wife will not put me off of this, Dumbledore. When were you going to tell me about the Elder Wand?"

"What is it that you wish to know about it?" Dumbledore asked calmly.

"What do I wish to know about it?" Snape thundered. "It was your intent that I become its master, was it not? And yet, I think young Draco Malfoy now holds that dubious honor. How was I to pass the Elder Wand to Potter if I did not know I had it? Why did you allow it to be buried with you? And why in Merlin's name have you not take steps to correct this flaw in the plan?"

"It is true that I had intended you to be the master of the wand, Severus. The Elder Wand does not change hands in the usual way; it cannot be given, nor taken in a simple struggle. The wand requires defeat--it requires the domination of one party by the other. In killing me, you gave Harry the only reason I could think of for him to want to conquer another person aside from Voldemort himself. He could not have taken it from me; it was not in him to do so."

Snape looked at him levelly. "I do not have the wand to give him, either in the physical or metaphorical sense."

"Indeed not. I let the wand be buried with me because Harry will not seek it there. There is only one person who would dare to breach the tomb."

"He is nearly there already. He has followed the trail from Gregorovitch to Grindelwald. It will not be long now, Dumbledore. He will take the wand--he will have no qualms about doing so! Why did you keep this from me when I might have prevented it?"

"What could you have done, Severus? Voldemort will take the wand. I have always known this. But the wand will not function properly when not held by its master. I told you that Harry must be willing to sacrifice himself to Voldemort and no other--this is because I intended him to come upon a Dark Lord who was in possession of a wand that would not kill him--that in fact, would want to join him, and would kill the scrap of soul living inside Harry without touching him, that would very likely send the curse rebounding against the caster."

"But Malfoy--"

"Yes, Malfoy. When I realized that Malfoy had taken the mastery of the wand, I admit I had a moment of distress. But then I realized that the plan had worked out far better than I could have hoped! The mastery is hidden! Voldemort will believe you to have control of the wand. Before it would have been a race--who would reach you first, Harry or the Dark Lord? All would hinge upon that, and I would have had to send you to Harry before he was ready in order to ensure that he would be the one who would take it. Harry might have become distracted, might not have finished his tasks and then all would have been for naught. But this way, even if Voldemort should kill you, he will not master the wand."

"And you chose to tell me none of this."

"I saw no need to tell you once it became clear that sending you to confront Harry would be useless."

"You did not think it necessary to tell me that the Dark Lord would wish to kill me to gain mastery of your wand?"

"If Voldemort believes that he has gained the mastery from you, he will grow sure of himself. He will believe himself invincible--he will be more apt to take risks, to be careless--"

"I see," Snape said quietly. "And Potter? He will die without the mastery of the wand. It will not act on his behalf."

"That cannot be helped. It was always a possibility, Severus; you know that. No wandlore can fully explain the Elder Wand--I have only history and suppositions to go on. However, in our current scenario, Harry will approach the Dark Lord only at the precise moment when the Dark Lord is most apt to be killed--and Voldemort himself will destroy the last of the barriers between himself and death! It has a strange beauty, does it not? And the Elder Wand will still be hidden. The Dark Lord will not possess the unbeatable wand."

"And who will kill him, if not Potter? The prophecy--"

"The prophecy is only as strong as we allow it to be; I have tried to explain this to Harry for years. Had Voldemort not acted on it seventeen years ago, killing James and Lily Potter and trying to kill Harry, the boy would never have come to house the bit of Voldemort's soul and hence a fraction of his power. Harry is an ordinary wizard--you know this, Severus. You have always said it. There is nothing particularly special about him. He was not born with extraordinary power--he was only marked with power by Voldemort. Once that power is gone, when the scar is destroyed, the terms of the prophecy will have ended. Any wizard will be able to kill Voldemort, and I daresay there will be many who would like to take a shot at it. Perhaps your Miss Granger will do it. I imagine that once you are gone, she will have great reason to want--"

"Stop there." Snape's eyes were molten stone as he glared threateningly at the portrait.

"Ah, yes. You are terribly sensitive where Miss Granger is concerned. I must caution you again not to share too much with the girl. She is still a child, and her devotion to Potter is extreme--should she become aware that--"

"You think she might be a bit *put out*? You think she might not want to follow your plans anymore? Why did you do this to her, Dumbledore? Her family is gone; there is only the slightest chance that she will ever find them or succeed at undoing the Memory Charm I have placed upon them. You tell me plainly that you are sending Potter, her dearest friend, to his death. Why did you marry us? Why marry us if you intended me to die? Why give her more loss to bear?"

"You are making your old mistake, Severus. You are seeing the witch and not the war."

Snape's wand whipped through the air before he had even had time to consider what he was doing. Red light shot from its tip and tore a jagged, diagonal slash across the portrait. He did not know whether he was furious or relieved when the canvas began to glow and knit itself back together.

"By all means, take out your frustrations. It is a healthy impulse. I admit, I had rather thought you looked forward to death. Part of me is glad that it is not the case. You have grown up a great deal in the last seventeen years."

Dumbledore's calm assessment of his character and emotions seemed to be Snape's final undoing.

"You cannot make these kinds of decisions without regard to--" he said, his voice so low it was nearly a growl.

"But I must. Someone must. Truly, the war can be won no other way."

"Then all your talk of deep magics, of love, has been a lie."

"Oh, love is real enough, and it has power, but it does not win wars."

Snape fixed the portrait in his dark, steady gaze. "Then you are no different than the Dark Lord. No different at all."

He wanted to swish from the room in an indignant swirl of fabric, but it seemed to him that the argument had taken the last of his strength. Everything he had trusted, everything he had believed in, had gone. Potter would not be saved. Neither of them would go to death in triumph. Dumbledore was not... he was not the man Snape had believed him to be, and the thought left him broken and unsure.

He opened the door to his bedroom. He needed to think. There had to be a way to put things back on track.

Perhaps Dumbledore could still be circumvented. Perhaps there was a way to coax Potter into defeating Draco...

He glanced up. Sitting on his bed, in a shaft of moonlight, looking as pale as death herself, was Hermione, and beside her, rocking miserably, Dobby.

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Hermione had never seen Snape looking like this, and whatever she had felt in the moments before he opened the door, however badly she had wanted him to come in and comfort her, she instantly pushed those thoughts from her mind.

His eyes were empty and hollow, and he looked stooped and shaken. The sight of him terrified her--perhaps more than anything she had seen in the past year. This was a man who simply didn't break. He took fear and made it anger; he took the impossible and made it look ordinary. He was not allowed to look like this, to stare across the room at her as if he did not see her, did not trust himself to believe she was really there. She rose and aimed her wand at the door, shutting and warding it, and quickly crossed the room toward him. She caught his hands in hers.

He stared at their hands for a moment and then looked into her face.

"How?"

"Dobby came for me. I dosed the boys with Dreamless Sleep. He said you needed me."

Snape looked over her shoulder at the elf, and she followed his gaze. Dobby looked an odd mixture of proud and terrified himself. "Dobby... Dobby thought... when we was coming back from Dobby's old master's house, Professor Snape looked..."

"He waited in the woods until I came out alone and told me that I needed to come. I gave them three drops a piece in their water with dinner."

"How did you find her?"

"It is the duty of the house-elf to do what is needed, sir. If you call for Dobby, Dobby will come to you no matter where you are. Dobby just thinks of you, and there he is. Dobby thought of Miss Granger, sir."

"Thank you, Dobby," Hermione said, releasing Snape's hands and turning to the elf. "I would guess that we've been here about forty-five minutes. That should give us at least two hours more. Would you leave us for an hour and a half?"

"Yes, Miss Granger," Dobby said and left the room with a resounding crack.

Snape's head seemed to clear slightly. "Forty-five minutes. How much did you hear?"

"All of it, I think. I came in just as you began discussing the Elder Wand. You need to sit down." He did not argue with her as she led him to the bed. He sat down heavily, and she sat beside him. He had regained some color, but Hermione still felt uneasy. The man she knew would be pacing and planning.

"You went to Lovegood's," he said finally.

"Yes. He told us about the Hallows."

"So you know what the Elder Wand is."

"The Deathstick. Yes. Though I didn't believe it until tonight."

"I would not have believed it myself if I hadn't gone to Ollivander. I saw young Miss Lovegood in the basement of Malfoy Manor. I--I admit, I was afraid. But you got in and out of Lovegood's--"

"He alerted the Ministry, and they sent Death Eaters. We got out in time. Ron realized it was a trap, actually."

"Weasley is back."

"Yes."

"I am concerned at how easily you have been located recently." His tone was severe, and Hermione actually felt a rush of gladness. If he was scolding her, he was recovering.

"He found us using a Deluminator. Dumbledore left it to him in his will."

"Well," Snape said almost sardonically. "There seems to have been quite a bit of that lately. Minerva also received a Deluminator. She... advised me... yesterday that she no longer believed me a murderer."

Hermione knew better than to smile. "Big of her," she said, but Snape seemed to catch her pleasure nonetheless, and his hand enfolded hers.

They sat quietly for a moment.

"Are you all right?" she asked finally.

He did not respond, and she stared at his pale, pinched face.

"Severus..."

"I was supposed to save Potter," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "I trusted him. I trusted Dumbledore. I thought... I wouldn't have minded dying if it would have saved Potter."

"We still have the Vita--"

"No! Think, Hermione. The Dark Lord wants the Elder Wand because it cannot be defeated. He will not be afraid to use the Killing Curse--he will be certain that it will not fail. And if Potter does not have the mastery of the wand... he will be correct."

"But I thought the wand would not work well for You-Know-Who if he did not have the mastery?"

"Ollivander said that the Dark Lord is powerful enough to channel through any wand. Its allegiance only matters in a match between the two." He sounded odd, distracted, as if he were listening to a far away sound that only he could hear.

"Then we make sure Harry gets the mastery."

"What are you suggesting? That we go against Dumbledore? That we storm Malfoy Manor? It would be suicide."

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting. It's no worse than what he's set up. What if we broke the Taboo? What would happen? Would we be taken to the Manor?"

"If you broke the Taboo, a gang of snatchers would come," he said dully. "They would check you against their list of known renegades and Muggle-borns. The snatchers are not usually proper Death Eaters--it's considered a demeaning job. So they would not have the power to call the Dark Lord directly. They might take you to the Manor--but Hermione, only Potter would be safe from murder on the spot, as everyone has orders to save him for the Dark Lord. And even Potter would only have moments to do what he needed to do before someone summoned him, before he arrived."

"And if we were all disguised?"

"Then they might not take you to the Manor at all. Then you would likely be taken to the Ministry."

"So we'd have to go as ourselves. Unless I made imperfect disguises. Enough to create confusion--"

"Perhaps," he said, shaking his head and seeming to sink deeper into the bed. "But still, I think--"

Hermione yanked her hand from his. "Why won't you help me?"

"Because I've chosen a side. I've chosen Dumbledore, and if--"

"You're wrong, Severus. We're not on Dumbledore's side. We haven't been for more than a year now, for as long as there's been something to hide. We're on our own side, on Harry's side. Why have we been sharing our information if you are unwilling to act on it?"

"I can't."

"You can't what? If we're all slated to die anyway, what difference does it make *totry*?"

She glared at him angrily and took his chin in her hand to force him to look at her, but what she saw in his eyes turned the anger into cold, numbing panic.

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He looked at her, confused. His brain felt foggy and dark. What difference did it make to try? None. None at all. It would make no difference. They would be picked off, one by one, leaving no one who knew of the Horcruxes, no one to finish what they had started.

He closed his eyes. She seemed to go on and on... he heard the volume of her voice rising, but he could no longer make out the words. Voldemort was after Grindelwald.

How soon until he knew? How much longer until these planned events began to take place? The Dark Lord had already begun to distance himself... Hermione and her friends had escaped Xenophilius Lovegood's and still, he had not heard a thing...

When she kissed him, his surprise registered in some buried part of his brain, but the rest of him went on stumbling through the darkness. How would he die? A traitor? Perhaps there was some final act he could commit to show who he had tried to be, something that would help, something that might give her strength... But then, who would believe it? And it might be best simply to evade him, evade him as long as possible. It might be best to hide, to give Potter as much time to find the Horcruxes as he could. Yes, he could hide. He imagined disillusioning himself, sliding beneath the bed, lying there in the dust and the darkness until he simply ceased to be...

Her hands were fumbling through his robes. He imagined the moment in which he would receive the call, the special burn in his arm that meant it was just for him. Would he be brave? Would he answer it or make the Dark Lord hunt him down? He must remember to leave something for Potter, something that would let him know when it was his turn to die...

When she took him into herself, when she began to jerk her hips to his, when she began to whisper his name, he thought *Yes. Use me. Use this. There is power here-- take whatever is left, whatever you need to sustain you.* Deeper and deeper into himself, he dove, seeking the blackness, the empty bottom of his soul, a quiet defeat that would erase everything. He felt his hold on her slipping; he could not remember her face, her voice, his own name; it had all gone. Thrown into the abyss.

But she shoved him to the mattress and buried her face in his neck, pinning him down and forcing him to experience her tongue as it snaked its way around his earlobe, as it laved the exposed skin of his neck. She forced the pleasure into him as she snuck her fingers into his hair, pressing them into his scalp, tugging; and her hips, oh, her glorious hips, plunging and grinding, and the soft, warm heat of her...

No. She called, but he would not answer. This was an illusion; it was only temporary respite, a prelude to a long, slow spiral into hell.

"Please," she begged, "please, please, Severus." And her hips drove harder; she was shaking them both with her effort. With her limbs, she struggled to tether him to the world, to the present. She pressed her cheek to his; her hair settled over his face like a cloud, and suddenly he remembered her, laughing in the snow, the wind buffeting that hair into a nearly living thing... He remembered the biting cold of the winter wind, the blinding whiteness of the grounds blanketed in snow. It seemed he was being assaulted by pain and pleasure, and he began to burn with it, to feel it taking him, forcing him to...

He gasped as he surfaced, like a man who had been held underwater past the breaking point, past the point at which it seemed perfectly reasonable to breathe the water, and forced himself up onto his elbows, catching her surprised mouth with his. He thrust up into the tight heat of the living witch that was his wife, and he felt her strength seeping into him like... magic.

"Come back to me," she whispered, and he could do nothing but nod mutely. She looked flushed and desperate; tears spilled from the corners of her eyes, and she was trembling. He propped himself on one arm and wrapped her tightly in the other.

"I'm here," he said, and he felt all of her tighten around him; he swore he could feel a surge of energy travel straight up through the core of him like a blinding light. "I'm here."

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When it had passed, when the shaking had stopped, she peeled herself from his lap and collapsed beside him, pressing her body firmly against his. She didn't know why she had done it, what had made her choose it, but it had seemed, in the instant that she saw his eyes empty out, the only thing she could have done, the only way she knew to wrench him back from the dead. Where he had been, she did not want to consider.

But it had seemed to her that there was power, there, in the act. She remembered it from their first night together, the night they had been married, how moved she had felt by their joining, as if some great magic had passed between them.

She watched his face carefully. It was empty now, slack, but she did not feel the same horror as she had before. His eyes--the Snape of him, her mind insisted--were dark but *present*. She wondered if he was sorry that she had come for him, sorry that he was here in this strange, sparse room again. It pained her to think of it, that he might be sorry, that he might have preferred wherever he had gone. What had she asked of him?

When she had heard Dumbledore's words, she had been afraid, yes. She had been enraged. But it had not shaken her, and why was that, exactly? Because she did not bear what he did? Even in hiding, she was loved. That night in Godric's Hollow, when the sign had risen from the shrubbery--there were words of comfort, words of strength from strangers. She did not have to appear regularly before a homicidal maniac and hide from him her treachery. She was not trying desperately to atone for some ancient mistake that had grown in her mind until it began to choke out all her hope.

Perhaps it had not affected her as badly because she had withdrawn her complete faith in Dumbledore months ago, the night that he had left Snape, tortured and delirious, in her care. It had seemed to her that in sending him to spy, he had inflicted those wounds on Snape as surely as if he had put them there himself. That he would leave him in such a condition, leave him with a student... She thought of the long hours of terror, of not knowing whether she was helping or hurting him... No, her feelings for the old man had never been the same.

But Hermione knew that Snape's inability to see himself as anything but Dumbledore's servant (on Dumbledore's *side*, he had said, and the thought made her want to leap from the bed and put that *portrait* beyond magical repair) was somehow predicated on the notion that he owed a crushing debt; to Hermione, it seemed that he had balanced his redemption on the man, that somehow he thought he wouldn't be clean or right until Dumbledore said he had suffered enough. Privately, she suspected that it was Harry's discovery at the end of the past year that Snape had come to do his penance for: he had revealed the prophecy to the Dark Lord, and it had led to the end of Lily Evans's life. His patronus... She looked hard at her husband's waxy face. Somewhere in her heart, she knew he meant to die for it.

Perhaps that was what Dumbledore had intended as well.

She slipped her hand beneath his shirt where she had tugged it free from his trousers. She pressed the palm of her hand flat against his stomach, felt the slow rise and fall of his breath. For a moment, as if it passed into her through his skin, she caught a glimpse of the magnitude of what she was trying to do. She was a child, a girl barely of age, and she lay there, trying to outwit two of the most powerfully magical men in wizarding history. She lay there, planning, in her arrogance, in her determination, to defeat Voldemort while circumventing Dumbledore. She would fail. There simply was no way. Her grip on him tightened.

Gradually, he began to stir. His hair was plastered in matted strings to his face, and she brushed them away. He rolled toward her, capturing her in his arms. She could still smell the scent of fear, the ripe, dank odor of defeat, but she allowed him to bury his face in her neck so that he could whisper directly into her ear.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No," she murmured. "Not sorry--everything is--"

"That was foolish, weak. I will not leave you to do this by--"

Guilt stabbed her heart. "You don't have to do anything--I can do it; it's my job. I'll figure it--"

He clutched her even more firmly. She was encased in darkness, surrounded by a cloak made of her husband himself as he wound his way around her, hanks of his hair falling over them like a curtain. There was nothing but him in the world.

Time passed, though she could not tell how much. She knew only the slightly laboured sound of Snape's breathing, the press of his body against hers. This was real. Everything else was a dream.

Finally, he whispered through the heavy silence.

"I will help you. We will try to save Potter."

## Chapter Thirty-Four

*Chapter 34 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All fully italicized text, and anything else you recognize, belongs to JKR. Thank you to my wonderful beta, Shellsnapelover, for her usual speedy and insightful work on this chapter.

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When Hermione returned, she half expected Harry and Ron to be wide awake, demanding answers. After she had whispered her thanks to Dobby and extracted from him the promise that he would return for her if Professor Snape seemed to be relapsing, she edged through the tent flap, searching her mind frantically for some kind of cover story, someplace she might have needed to go... *The library!* she thought wildly, but both boys were asleep where she had left them, their empty plates sitting before them just as they had been. Neither seemed to have stirred.

Still, she crept through the tent, silently levitating them into their bunks and drawing the blankets up over them. She looked hard at each of their faces, relaxed and open in sleep, shadowed in the flickering light of the lamp she had left burning on the table. Gently, she removed Harry's glasses and set them on the table beside his bed. She saw something pass over his face, but he did not open his eyes.

Her boys. All these hard months had taken their toll. There were hollows in their cheeks where there had been none before. Ron, in particular, had become nearly angular, and his nose looked longer on his thin face. His hair had grown out; it hung nearly to his shoulders, now, and pooled in a wavy mass on his pillow. Both boys were in rather desperate need of a shave. Harry's face was streaked with dirt, and Hermione thought she could see the old paths of tears beneath the grime. She cast a silent Scourgify on him, erasing the evidence of his pain. How much did he suspect? He said he was going to get home to Ginny. Did he know, did he guess what Dumbledore had planned? He had not spoken much about the end, about what would happen when the last of the Horcruxes had been destroyed. Perhaps because the end had never seemed to be drawing any closer. Perhaps because the next step in the plan was too impossible to consider.

Who thought of their own death at seventeen? She prayed that he did not.

What she and Snape had planned was foolish at best, suicide at worst. But as she gazed on the faces of her two dearest friends, Hermione was more determined than ever to go through with it. If there was a chance, any chance, that Harry could be spared, she would take it. *At what cost?* a small voice in her head piped up. *Your own life? Ron's? Snape's, God forbid? The chance that Voldemort might win?* But she shoved the voice down.

Hermione did not sit the watch outside the tent. She settled in the musty old chair across from their bunks and kept watch on Harry and Ron as they slept. Oddly, what she thought about that night was not the plan, not what she would tell them to convince them to undertake such a thing, but the Mountain Troll. She looked at the two of them and mentally erased the years until they were first years again, plump for the first time with the house-elves' cooking, living lives soaked in wonder and magic. She remembered them as they had been that night, the two of them bursting into the bathroom, calling her name. They had come for her. They had not left her alone.

It seemed crazy, and part of her chastised herself for drawing comparisons between their childish misadventures and the journey they currently found themselves on, but she could not help herself. They had come--though they might have died, though they might have been expelled. They had come anyway. How could Dumbledore have expected her to give them up without trying?

Suddenly, she was struck with the chilling thought that even if Harry survived, even if he were able to take the mastery and get out... if she or Ron were lost, the war might be also. The sense of responsibility in Harry, bred into him by his history... by bloody Dumbledore... if he thought that one of them had died for him...

Finally, she allowed herself to think of the man she had forcefully kept from her thoughts since she had arrived back at the tent. If she died... if she died, who would protect him? Who would step forward to defend him? And would he... would he find the strength to finish what had to be done? What had she set in motion?

When she finally succumbed to sleep, she dreamed as she had not since the destruction of the Horcrux, dreams in which Voldemort thought her the master of the Elder Wand, in which he tortured her, skinned her, burned her, but she could not tell; she would not tell; she would not endanger Harry or Snape; she would not give in. But as her blood boiled, her shields began to fail, and he reached into her mind and snatched the truth with his sharp, pale fingernails...

"Hermione!"

She woke in the chair to Harry whose face was inches from hers. "Hermione--wake up! I think we all fell asleep after dinner. Do you think there was something wrong with those berries we ate?"

"What? Oh...I don't know. Maybe. What time is it?" *Could it really be that easy to explain last night?*

"Almost noon. I guess we all slept through the watch."

"I'm sorry!" she said, bolting out of the chair.

Ron laughed. "Sit down. Clearly, we didn't have any unexpected visitors."

Hermione looked away, and her stomach sank. Now that they were awake, she would have to convince them. She would have to make them see what they had to do.

She went to the stove and started moving the pots and pans about, not wanting to look at the boys, just wanting to lose herself in the daily routine.

"Ron, do you want to go for food or shall I?" she asked.

Ron volunteered. Spring was coming, and there were more mushrooms and early berries, hard and bitter but edible. There was a farm about two miles to the south; perhaps he could snatch some eggs.

As soon as Ron had left the tent, Harry began lingering around the kitchen, looking at her shiftily. She wondered if he had woken when she came in, if perhaps he'd seen her tangled up in his dreams. Finally, she looked hard at him.

"What is it?"

He looked at her as if measuring how she would react. "I've been thinking about something. Remember when I told you that Vol--"

"No! Harry, you can't say--"

Harry rolled his eyes. "...that You-Know-Who had killed Gregorovitch? That he'd been after something?"

"Yes?"

"Look, I know you don't believe in it, but I think You-Know-Who was after the Elder Wand. I think Gregorovitch had it. I mean, he was a wandmaker."

Hermione could feel something that had been drawn tight inside her relax. She would not have to explain. He already knew.

"I guess it could have been," she said slowly. "But how would he have gotten the wand?"

"I don't know. But the person who took it--the person I saw in Gregorovitch's head before You-Know-Who killed him--it was Grindelwald."

"Grindelwald?" she exclaimed.

"Yeah--it all makes a weird kind of sense, doesn't it? That Krum thought the sign of the Deathly Hallows was Grindelwald's mark? If he had the wand, then maybe he used the sign to kind of brag about it, and--"

"But, Harry! If Grindelwald had the Elder Wand... Dumbledore--"

Clearly, he had not yet gotten that far, for he looked up at her with a horrible fire in his eyes.

"*Snape*," he hissed.

Hermione flapped her hands in a kind of frantic denial. "No, not Snape. Not Snape! You said Malfoy disarmed Dumbledore before--"

"But this is the Elder Wand, Hermione! You don't get it just by disarming someone!"

Their voices were rising, and Harry seemed to be circling her, almost as if he were getting ready to strike.

"Harry, when you saw into Gregorovitch's mind--when You-Know-Who saw, I mean--Grindelwald didn't kill him!"

"No. No, he didn't. But he attacked him; he forced him down--Gregorovitch didn't have a wand--"

"He overpowered him!" Hermione said, feigning excitement. "And when you came back to the Astronomy Tower that night--Dumbledore was weak. He'd been weak for months, since the curse on his hand. And you said he'd drunk a potion that night. I think Draco Malfoy overpowered him. I think that's what it means to 'conquer.' Dumbledore was at Malfoy's mercy. Malfoy could have killed him."

"But he didn't," Harry said, pointing at her, "Snape did that."

"I know that! But he could have!"

At that moment, she heard Ron calling from outside the tent. Harry charged past her and stuck his hand through the flap. Guilt twinged in her heart. Was she any better than Dumbledore? Refusing to tell him the whole truth, leading him into a plan that might kill them all?

Harry looked back and forth frantically between the two of them.

"What's going on?" Ron asked, looking slightly comical, his arms full of eggs and a water skin.

"We have to get the mastery from Draco Malfoy, Harry. We have to go to Malfoy Manor."

"Are you daft? We can't just pop into Malfoy Manor," Ron said, clearly alarmed. He walked quickly to the sink to put down his load. As soon as he had unburdened himself, he turned back to them. "Hermione, what are you saying?"

"Do you think Dumbledore meant for me to have the mastery?" Harry asked. There was a bit of awe in his voice.

Hermione paused. There was no sense in trying to explain anything about what Dumbledore might have intended. She took a deep breath. "Absolutely," she said. "Think, Harry. If Dumbledore meant you to have the wand, he'd have left it to you. But why tell us about it if he didn't mean for us to take some action? I think he meant You-Know-Who to take the physical wand... but I think he meant you to master it so that the wand wouldn't work for him."

"That makes sense. That makes sense!" Harry began to pace quickly around the tent again. "But how will we get there? Surely there are all kinds of enchantments on the place, and there'll be loads of Death Eaters..."

"Wait, wait. We're really talking about trying to go to Malfoy Manor? To do what?" Ron asked, sinking into a chair and looking terrified.

"To disarm Draco Malfoy. To conquer him," Hermione said. "To get the mastery of the Elder Wand. Harry, what if we broke the Taboo?"

"The Taboo?" Ron said, clearly more alarmed even than before. "If we broke the Taboo, we'd be rounded up by Snatchers in minutes!"

"How many minutes?" Hermione asked, wheeling around to look at him.

"What? I don't know. How many did it take them to find us in Tottenham Court Road?"

"But those were Death Eaters trying to find us. What about the Snatchers, Ron? You said you'd been captured--"

"Yeah, but I walked right into those... Look, I don't know. I would guess five minutes at the most, probably less."

"Five minutes," Hermione said, appearing to think. "Five minutes. In five minutes, I could change our appearances enough to confuse them... cast *Protego Horribilis* on the three of us..."

"Look, you two, I hate to spoil the party," Ron said, looking back and forth between them, "but assuming we were able to get into Malfoy Manor, how the hell would we get out again?"

Harry turned and looked at her expectantly.

"Dobby," she said.

"Dobby?"

"Dobby is a free elf," Hermione said. "He's always been willing to do anything for Harry. And he knows the Manor; he used to live there! If we call him, I'm sure he'll come. And house-elves aren't bound by the normal laws of Apparition. He should be able to get us out."

"That's taking an awfully big chance," Harry said, but she could hear the excitement still burning in his voice. "You're certain he would come?"

"I can't believe that Dobby would refuse to come if you needed him," she said firmly.

Ron stood up. He looked as if he'd been steamrolled. "I don't understand," he said. "I don't know... this seems like an enormous risk."

"I know it's a risk. To all of us. But we have to try. It's what Dumbledore would have wanted," Hermione said, swallowing the grimace that threatened her mouth. "In the end... if You-Know-Who has a wand that you've mastered..."

"Yeah," Harry said gruffly. "Yeah, I know."

"I'm just not following this. How can you be so certain that Dumbledore would have wanted us to walk into the home of a notorious Death Eater family--"

Harry seemed to come to some split-second decision in his mind. He looked at Hermione with a slightly crazed expression. "Are you ready?"

"What? Harry--no! Not yet! We have to--"

"Voldemort!"

*Shit. SHIT!* This was not how it was supposed to happen. For a moment, Hermione felt completely paralyzed. How the hell would she salvage this?

"Ron, look at me."

Ron turned toward her, looking angry and frightened. "What?"

She raised her wand, and he flinched backward. "I'm not going to hex you; I'm going to disguise you. Now, hold still."

He looked as if he might run from her, might run from the tent and leave them again. "Ron!" she bellowed. *Dissimulo Bellus!*

His stubble disappeared, though his hair remained long and wavy, its ginger color rejuvenated by the charm from the dusty, weathered color it had become. His nose became shorter and broader, and his freckles were reduced to a simple sprinkle across the bridge of his nose.

"What did you do?" Harry asked.

"I made him beautiful. Now you," she said. She thought she could hear voices in the distance, the squelching sound of feet moving over wet leaves. She shot Harry full in the face with a Stinging Hex.

"Ahh!" he cried, "Hermione, what the--"

"I'm sorry, Harry!" she cried breathlessly. "Your scar--I can't transfigure it; I just had to hide it the best I could. *Pillarius!*" Harry's hair doubled in length, now sweeping his shoulder blades.

The voices were much closer now. Harry was doubled over, clutching his face. Her eyes scanned the tent. Ron seemed calmer now that he didn't look like himself. "Ron, we won't be coming back--grab anything we can't leave behind--"

"Hermione! Do yourself!" he yelled.

She turned her wand on herself. What to do? One of them had to be recognizable. She couldn't get a good look at Harry to see how well his disguise had turned out. She cast a quick Straightening Charm on her hair, though it had never worked particularly well in the past, and gave herself nearly olive skin. She swept her wand in a wide arc that encompassed the three of them. "*Protego Horribilis!*" she whispered. "Don't forget--call Dobby if we need to get out. Harry, no matter what, you must overpower Draco Malfoy--no matter what; do you understand me?"

"Yes."

She could not mention Luna; there was simply no way to explain how she knew where Luna was being held. She would just have to pray that somehow they stumbled upon her. "Don't duel anyone else unless you absolutely have to. And Ron, if it seems like Harry isn't going to be able to--"

"It's time," Ron interrupted her. Turning, she saw a broad-knuckled hand attached to a thick forearm seize the tent flap and rip it backward. Hermione pulled up the leg of her denims and wedged the beaded bag into her sock, covering it with the heavy blue material.

*"Come out of there with your hands up!"* came a rasping voice. *"We know you're in there! You've got half a dozen wands pointing at you, and we don't care who we curse!"*

Hermione walked forward without looking back, hoping that the boys were behind her. If they seemed unafraid, perhaps it would confuse the Snatchers. She hadn't had time to give them any instructions about what to say, how best to lie. She would just have to answer first. Just before she crossed the threshold, she tapped her wand to her ring. *Going now.* There was no way to hide her wand, so she thrust it into her pocket.

When she saw the leader of the gang, her stomach turned sour. He was tall, but there was an odd stoop to his shoulders; his back seemed to curve forward, and all the skin she could see was dusted in thick grey hairs. He was cloaked in heavy Death Eater robes, but there was no mistaking him. It was Fenrir Greyback.

"Now, let's see who we've got!", he growled and lunged at Hermione, knocking her legs out from under her and pinning her to the ground. His breath was heavy and carrion sweet, and she breathed shallowly as he considered her. Dimly, she could hear Harry and Ron yelling in the background; she could see them hitting the forest floor, subdued by other Snatchers.

"Well, hello, pretty," Greyback said, leering at her horribly. "What's your name?"

"Penelope Clearwater," she said as bravely as she could.

"What's your blood status?"

"Half-blood."

"Easy enough to check," a second Snatcher said, pulling a long roll of parchment from the pocket of his robes. "And your little friends?"

As the other Snatchers attended to Harry and Ron, Greyback's hands roamed over Hermione's torso, searching out her wand. When he slipped a hand beneath her, he discovered it in her back pocket and grabbed it, his hands lingering over her rear, kneading her buttocks. "Which one is your boyfriend, pretty? I'd like him conscious so he can watch."

Hermione swallowed the urge to spit in his face and prayed that Harry and Ron had been listening to her exchange with Greyback, that they knew to lie. She wanted to get them delivered to the Manor, yes, but not killed the instant they arrived. There had to be some confusion. But Harry lied a bit too well, giving a rather convincing account of the location of the Slytherin common room. For a moment, it seemed that Greyback was afraid, that he might release them and move along. It was very hard not to hope for that. But when Ron called himself Stan Shunpike, the Snatchers began to laugh and seemed to gain confidence again, and Ron was forced to identify himself as a Weasley cousin.

Greyback hauled her to her feet, and capturing her hands behind her back, he dragged her over to a pair of prisoners tied back-to-back beside the tent. A boy and a goblin. *Dean Thomas*. Hermione's heart fluttered. Dean--would he recognize her? Would he say anything? She looked hard into his eyes and willed him not to speak. Greyback shoved her toward a smaller man who began to bind her to Dean and the goblin. "Tie her up nice and tight, Scabior. I don't want to lose this one. She looks... delectable."

The thin, rabbit-faced man who had tied Hermione to Dean had moved on to Harry. Dean's fingers clutched at her own where they were pressed together. A friend. For a moment, she took some comfort in the pressure of a friendly touch, but nearly instantly, she was stabbed with guilt. If the plan worked, she would be dumping Dean and this goblin, whoever he was, into the Death Eater's headquarters. The likelihood that she would manage to get all of them out alive was... not worth contemplating.

She felt the pack of prisoners jolt when Ron was brought over. As two snatchers worked to bind him to the rest of them, Scabior let out an excited squeak.

"Greyback! This one's got something!"

Hermione could not see what was happening; she was facing away from the action, but she could feel Ron stiffening beside her, and she could hear Greyback's lumbering steps as he approached.

"*Very nice*," Greyback purred as he drew something from Ron's robes. There was a long pause in which she assumed that the werewolf was examining whatever had been found. "*Oh, very nice indeed*. Tell me, my little Slytherin friends, *howdid* you come into possession of the sword of Gryffindor?"

Elation and terror warred in Hermione's chest. She supposed that Ron had stowed the sword beneath his robes when she had ordered him to grab anything that they couldn't leave behind. This was the confusion she had been hoping for, and yet, to lose the sword would be unthinkable. Snape had risked so much to get it to her, and without it, they would have no way to destroy the Horcruxes even if they found them.

"The sword of Gryffindor?" Hermione said, trying to sound shocked.

"That's just something of my dad's," Harry said. "We brought it along to... to chop wood."

"Scabior," Greyback said, suddenly sounding thoughtful. "We've got a Weasley, a girl, and a kid in glasses... you don't think..."

The rabbit-faced wizard leaned in very close to Hermione, peering into her face. She tried to keep her expression neutral, to practice thinking of nothing but black, empty sky, but she knew she was trembling. Scabior moved along to Ron and then Harry, on whom he lingered.

"Merlin's fucking balls," he breathed. "We've caught Harry Potter."

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Snape was nearly beside himself when he received her message. *Going now? Going NOW?* What in the hell could she have been thinking of? This was not the time; the plan was little more than an idea--she was supposed to contact him with a date, not *Going Fucking Now*.

Something must have gone dreadfully wrong. Perhaps Potter and Weasley had been awake when she had arrived. Had she told them everything? Had they thrown her out--had she been caught? His mind reeled with questions, though he struggled to think clearly. She would need help; that was the most certain thing. She was on her way to Malfoy Manor with little to no plan in place, and she would need very serious help.

Snape called Dobby to his bedroom. Instantly, the elf arrived, looking expectantly at him, and Snape had the urge to shout at the strange little figure before him *Why* had she done this?

"Miss Granger and her friends have broken the Taboo, as we discussed," Snape said stiffly. "If all is proceeding according to the plan, they will arrive in Malfoy Manor shortly. I cannot imagine why she has done this," he could not help adding, "but I suppose it is of no consequence; it is done. I think it best that you go to the basement of the Manor now, if you are willing. Do nothing until you are certain that they have arrived. Then take Miss Lovegood and Mr Ollivander to Shell Cottage, the home of Bill and Fleur Weasley. Miss Granger reports that it is on the outskirts of Tinworth. It may be protected by the Fidelius Charm. Will that be a problem?"

"No, sir," Dobby squeaked. "We house-elves must be getting in and out of our masters' houses, even when they is under the Fidelius Charm. We is not told the secret."

"Yes, yes," Snape said distractedly. "Very good. I think--yes, I think I will have to go to the Manor myself."

Dobby held up his leathery little hand.

Snape stared down at it. Was this wise? He wanted to get to the parlour, not the basement. The sudden image of himself trapped in the cellar as Hermione screamed above assaulted his mind. He could not risk that. He would have to try to get in unnoticed.

"Go on," Snape said, waving the little hand away. "I will leave directly. Remember--if... if things are not salvageable... get Potter out."

Dobby turned his gleaming tennis ball eyes up toward Snape's. "I will not leave Miss Granger, Headmaster," he said.

Snape's jaw clenched. He opened and shut his mouth. He knew that if he agreed, Dobby would take it as an order, and as much as he needed to order the elf to save her first, he could not. "Get Potter out," he said again.

"Yes, sir," Dobby said and disappeared with a crack.

Dropping the anti-Apparition wards on his chambers seemed ill-advised, but he did not have time to get to the Apparition point outside the gates, nor did he want to speak to Dumbledore, so he reluctantly flicked his wand to dismantle them, quickly Disillusioned himself, and left.

He arrived outside the wrought iron gates that he had passed through so many times in the past. He could lift his sleeve. The Mark would admit him through the gate, but it would signal Lucius to the presence of a visitor. Instead, he would have to undo the enchantments on the property if he could and hope that Lucius was too cocky to have included any fail-safes. He felt oddly numb, robotic. Fear strung him tight as a wire, but it seemed it existed only at the surface. Beneath there was only darkness and purpose.

Snape had only just lifted his wand when he was knocked aside by the Apparition of Fenrir Greyback's gang of Snatchers, their hands all firmly grasping a clutch of prisoners, bound back-to-back. As he scrambled away from them on his hands and knees, he quickly scanned their faces. Seeing her this way--wandless, defenseless--seemed to break through the silence of his thoughts and brought them screaming to attention. Potter and Weasley were reasonably well disguised, but Hermione looked as if she had made little effort on her own behalf. Anger surged up in him once more. What had she been *thinking*?

He did not dare to try to disguise her now, however. He got to his feet and edged toward the prisoners as Greyback demanded admittance. He did not want to touch her for fear that she would startle and give him away, but when the gates swung open, he slipped through them, keeping as close to her as he could.

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The first thing that she knew when they had arrived was pain. She'd stumbled as they landed, and her ankle had seemed to give beneath her. The second thing she knew was that Snape was nearby. He had not answered the message she had sent, but the electric tingle of her skin told her that he had come. She willed herself not to look around, not to betray him with her face. When Greyback marched them toward the Manor, she was in the rear, and she watched with mounting fear as the gates seemed to drift further and further away from her.

A cold, woman's voice came from the doorway. *"What is this? Who are you?"*

*"You know me!"* There was resentment in the werewolf's voice. *"Fenrir Greyback! We've caught Harry Potter!"*

Hermione caught a whiff of a delicate, floral scent as Narcissa Malfoy leaned in to inspect Harry. In her fear, her mind seemed to leap and stop on the oddest things. She savored the smell of Draco's mother's perfume as she inspected them, deciding whether or not to call Voldemort.

*"I know 'e's swollen ma'am, but it's 'im!"* piped up Scabior. *"If you look a bit closer, you'll see 'is scar. And this 'ere, see the girl? The Mudblood who's been traveling around with 'im, ma'am. There's no doubt it's 'im, and we've got his wand as well!"*

Narcissa hesitated, but she looked them over once more. *"Bring them in,"* she said.

Hermione was dragged over the landing by the movement of the others, and she struggled to get her feet back under her as they were hustled into the parlour.

"Draco!" Narcissa called. "Draco, come here!" She turned imperiously toward Greyback. "My son, Draco, went to school with Harry Potter and his filthy little friends! *That is Harry Potter, he will know.*"

Hermione held her breath as Draco descended a curved, sweeping staircase into the hallway, followed by his father.

"What is going on?" Lucius said.

*"They say they've got Potter,"* Narcissa answered. "Draco?" She indicated the group with her hand.

Draco stepped toward her. Hermione did not know what to do with her face. Should she try to stare him down? Look away? But when she glanced up into his eyes, she found them cloudy and hesitant. He moved from her to Ron without seeming to recognize them. Hermione craned her neck to watch him as he proceeded around the circle of prisoners, but he stepped quickly out of her line of vision.

"Well?" Lucius demanded. *"Well, Draco? Is it? Is it Harry Potter?"*

*"I can't--I can't be sure,"* said Draco, and his voice sounded nothing like the cold drawl she remembered from their school days.

*Confused,* she thought suddenly. *He's been Confused.*

Lucius came forward. Hermione could hear his heavy steps as he strode toward Harry, ignoring the others. *"There's something here,"* he whispered, *"It could be the scar, stretched tight... Draco, come here, look properly! What do you think?"*

But Hermione did not hear Draco return to his father's side.

"Lucius, we had best be sure. If we call him, we must be absolutely... we must not forget what happened to Rowle and Dolohov... to Travers."

She thought she heard Lucius taking a breath to reply, but just then, a voice that chilled Hermione's blood rang through the room.

*"What is this? What's happened, Cissy?"* Hermione did not have to struggle around to see who that voice belonged to. Since the night at the Ministry, it had turned up in her dreams.

She did not wait for Narcissa's explanation, but honed in on Hermione immediately, quickly circling the prisoners to see her more completely. The crazed and empty eyes of Bellatrix Lestrange raked her over from head to toe, and Hermione watched in helpless horror as she raised her wand.

*"Finite Incantatem!"* she cried.

Hermione knew that she was fully herself again; that both the boys were now undisguised, unprotected; that they were disarmed and bound in the middle of Malfoy Manor; that there were four Death Eaters in the room who could summon the Dark Lord with a touch, but she could not stop herself from scanning the room for Snape. Was he outside the range of the spell? Had he been revealed?

She did not see him, but the fear did not release its icy grip on her heart. This was all going terribly wrong. She wiggled her hands frantically, but the ropes that bound her were not magical ones and had not been affected by Bellatrix's spell.

Draco suddenly shot forward from his mother's side, joining his aunt. "That's Granger!" he cried. "I can see it now--she had some kind of disguise on before, but that's Granger--and Weasley--and--"

Hermione could not look away as Bellatrix's long fingers began to draw up the left sleeve of her robes.

Lucius Malfoy suddenly burst into her field of vision. *"I was about to call him!"* said Lucius, and his hand actually closed upon Bellatrix's wrist, preventing her from touching the Mark. *"I shall summon him, Bella. Potter has been brought to my house, and it therefore is upon my authority--"*

"I think you are forgetting who caught the boy," Greyback snarled, entering the fray. "I found the boy; I recognized him; I brought him here, and when the Dark Lord arrives, I will be the one to claim the glory--"

Hermione did not understand what was happening. Though she certainly could not be afraid of Greyback, Bellatrix Lestrange took several steps backward, a look of abject horror on her face.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing tremulously at the sword of Gryffindor where it hung from Greyback's belt. "Where did you get it?"

"Ah, yes, the sword of Gryffindor," Greyback gloated. "Found it on this one here," he said, indicating Ron.

Bellatrix turned frantically to Lucius, and Hermione's eyes followed. Lucius's fingers were descending toward the Mark.

*"STOP!"* shrieked Bellatrix. *"Do not touch it, we shall all perish if the Dark Lord comes now!"*

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Snape had been lingering in the hallway since their arrival. He had suspected that it would only be a matter of time before someone cast Finite Incantatem, and so he had stayed where he would remain concealed even if the charm reached him. He had Confunded Draco simply to buy time, knowing that it wouldn't last. But now a different kind of time was being purchased. Bellatrix had seen the sword.

He held up a hand before his face, and having determined that he was still invisible, he crept into the parlour. Potter was facing away from him, blocked by the bodies of Dean Thomas and the goblin, but he had a fairly clear shot at Weasley and Hermione. He weighed his options. He might only have a single chance to cast the Protego Charm. Who would need it most?

Lucius, Narcissa, and Bellatrix had clustered about Greyback, examining the sword.

"*The situation is graver than you can possibly imagine, Cissy,*" Bellatrix breathed, staring hard at Narcissa as if willing her to understand. "That sword should be in my vault." Snape watched in mute triumph as Bellatrix's hand strayed unconsciously to her neck where it fingered a slim silver chain that disappeared beneath the collar of her robes. "In my vault, Narcissa. What else do they have? Things I swore to keep safe, things he trusted to my care... If he comes now... Dear God, what else do they have?"

Narcissa took a step backward, as if to distance herself from someone so condemned. Bellatrix opened her hands in supplication to her sister. *The prisoners must be placed in the cellar, while I think what to do.*"

"*This is my home, Bella, you don't give orders in my--*" Narcissa said quietly. Snape thought there was a hint of triumph in her voice. Finally, she could outshine her sister. She had not been the one to lose the Dark Lord's treasures.

"*Do it! You have no idea of the danger we are in!*" shrieked Bellatrix. She looked frightening, mad; a thin stream of fire issued from her wand and burned a hole in the carpet.

Narcissa glanced at the carpet, at the sword, at the children bound in her parlour and then back at her sister. *Take the prisoners to the cellar, Greyback.*"

"*Wait,*" Bellatrix said sharply. "*All except... except for the Mudblood.*"

Snape closed his eyes for the briefest second. What if he were to wait until they had untied her, separated her from the others... and then lunged for her and Apparated them out of here? Surely Potter and Weasley could call Dobby... they might even meet him in the cellar...

But he knew he must not do that. He tried to remind himself that he was here to save Potter. He must not care for anything but--

As Greyback began to slice through the ropes that bound the prisoners together, the group turned slightly, giving him a clear shot at the boy. Lucius and Narcissa were still whispering with Bellatrix. Draco was leading the other Snatchers from the house. He cast a wordless Protego Horribilis at Potter. He watched the pale golden light stream across the room and strike his left shoulder, spreading quickly over his body. He watched the fool's head jerk upward, looking for the source of the spell before he was dragged, along with the others, toward the basement.

Hermione was alone, unprotected, in the center of the room, her hands still bound behind her back. Snape fought the urge to scream. He should have protected her. She would have known how to act, how to fake the pain, how to keep their secrets, and he could have made her a shield, but now she was defenseless, and he could not stand between her and what was surely coming. He could not stop it.

It appeared to him as though Bellatrix turned toward his wife in slow motion. He saw her wand slice upward through the air and descend like a cracking whip. *Crucio!*"

Hermione screamed, a drawn-out howl of agony, and senselessly, it occurred to Snape that he had never heard her scream before, never heard in her voice any hint of pain. She collapsed onto the floor, but Bellatrix did not release the spell. Hermione's face hit the carpet, muffling slightly the sound of her cries. Her back arched, lifting her legs from the floor and causing her to shake violently as if she were seizing.

It seemed his every muscle was on fire for her. He staggered across the room toward Bellatrix, not knowing what he intended, having no thoughts except to get between his wife and that spell. Bellatrix's wand arm shook with the force of the curse she was channeling--Hermione did not so much look as if she were being tortured, but as though she were being electrocuted. Her piercing screams seemed to cut physical wounds into his skin. Fuck his wand. He would beat Bellatrix Lestrange to death barehanded; he would feel her skin rupture under his fingertips.

Suddenly, Bellatrix lifted her wand. Snape froze where he was. "Where did you get the sword?" she asked, leaning down toward Hermione's prostrate body.

Hermione choked on her own saliva as she swallowed. "Found it," she gasped.

"Liar!" Bellatrix shrieked, pulling a slim silver knife from the pocket of her robes and waving it in Hermione's face. "Tell me the truth, Mudblood, or I will carve that lying tongue out of your mouth."

"*We found it--we found it--PLEASE!*" Hermione screamed as Bellatrix's wand descended once more.

Dimly, Snape was aware that Lucius and the others were moving toward the cellar. There was some kind of disturbance, and Wormtail was being called to check on it, but he did not care; he did not care at all anymore if Potter got the mastery of the wand, if these fools believed him a Death Eater, if any of them got out alive; he would stop this from happening.

Bellatrix was standing over her now, her legs straddling Hermione's writhing body on the carpet. She reached down and hauled Hermione up by her hair, throwing her wand to the floor and pressing the knife into her neck.

"Last chance, you filthy piece of scum. *You are lying, and I know it! You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth!*"

Snape could see the thin stream of blood running down Hermione's throat. He crept up behind Bellatrix. If he did this well, he would save his wife and the plan at once. He raised his left hand and burned a single word into the ring with his wand. *Fight*. It did not matter if she read it or not; he sent it with such force, he felt sure that the word would travel straight into her heart through her bloodstream.

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It did not seem that there could be any more pain in the world. Her scalp burned, but she could not find the strength to wrench herself from Bellatrix's grasp. The curse... the fucking curse had taken her power and left her muscles loose and rubbery; the nerves under her skin still sang in outrage. Her vision was spotty, and all of what she had, everything, was focused on keeping what she knew beneath the surface of her mind. As the curse had rolled through her, Hermione had known for the first time what Occlumency was truly about--the blackness wasn't to hide your secrets from another person. It was to hide them from yourself, to bury them where you could not reach them, where they would stay safe no matter what was done to you. But then, blinding pain coursed through her hand, and a single word seemed to swell inside her until she was nearly bursting with it. *FIGHT*.

She curled her feet beneath her and launched herself backward into Bellatrix's body. Hermione felt the larger witch rock on her feet as the knife flayed the skin from her neck. Then suddenly, Ron was flying across the room. He caught Bellatrix with the full force of his body, and she hit the ground beside Hermione with a crunching thud. "Her wand--Ron, her wand," she croaked, and the words tore at her throat and made her mouth feel coppery and thick.

With her hands still bound, she could not remove the ring, and it burned and seared into her skin with ever-increasing intensity. But the pain seemed to clear her head rather than cloud it, as the Cruciatus had done, and she could clearly see Harry, with an unfamiliar wand held aloft, as he battled Draco Malfoy. Red light shot from the tip of the thick black wand, and Draco dodged and danced to avoid Harry's spells.

She saw Ron leap to his feet, saw him Stun Bellatrix and Lucius. He took off after Narcissa Malfoy who was running down the hallway, deeper into the house. Greyback had disappeared, leaving the sword where it had fallen when Bellatrix had turned her attention to Hermione.

She turned back toward Harry and Draco. It seemed she did not have the strength to rise from the floor. Her limbs would not obey the most basic of commands, and she was helpless here. Where was Greyback? Suddenly, she felt long cool fingers closing over hers, and she began to summon the will to scream. But the hair that brushed her burning cheeks was fragrant and familiar, and she realized that the hands were working the bonds that held her, rubbing the chafed flesh beneath with incredible care, and when she was free, when she could move again, those deft fingers removed her ring and replaced it, ending the white heat that was keeping her focused. Snape's hand pressed something cool and hard into her palm as well as what felt like a chunk of hair. "I am sorry I could not kill her," he breathed into her ear. Then he pulled back, and she fainted.

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Reluctantly, Snape retreated back into the hallway. If he needed to call Dobby, he needed to find a place where he would not be heard. From his position of relative safety, he could see Potter shooting spell after spell at Malfoy as he advanced on him. Malfoy fought back in kind; in fact, Snape thought he had never seen the boy possessed with such determination, but his spells seemed to glance off Potter like light on the water. The shield had held.

Potter drove Malfoy backward through the room, finally trapping him against the back wall beside the fireplace. He bore down on Malfoy with a ugly gleam in his eyes. "*Stupefy!*" he screamed, his wand held directly against Draco's chest. When Draco crumpled, Potter seized his wand and held it aloft in a kind of victory stance.

Snape knew he should feel triumphant. This was what they had come for, and now it was done, but instead he wanted to hit Potter, to seize him by the shoulders and whip him around, to make him look at what his victory had cost: the boy's own best friend lying bloody and unconscious, unnoticed, across the room.

But then Potter did turn, and as he ran toward Hermione, as he fell to his knees beside her, Bellatrix began to stir. In her hand, she still clutched the silver knife. She looked at Potter appraisingly from the floor, and he saw her hand flex and tighten around the handle of it. Snape watched the thought as it crossed her face. She was to save Harry Potter for the Dark Lord. He saw her fingers creeping toward the Mark as Weasley burst back into the room, Narcissa behind him, screaming for her son.

Bellatrix called to Voldemort; Snape felt her summons burn through his own arm, and now he would have to go, for the Dark Lord would know immediately if he were present. He would have to leave her here. He stood frozen in the doorway for a moment, his wand raised, his feet unwilling to go forward. Not until he knew help was coming for them. "Dobby!" he whispered. He heard the crack of the elf's Apparition, though he could not see him and ran out through the front door, still ajar from the earlier confusion, and down the long walk. He burst through the gate, and disappeared into the night.

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Hermione woke as glass cascaded around her. She felt a hundred stinging points of impact, and instinctively, her hands rose to cover her face, though the damage had been done. Slivers of it tore at her skin as she tried to brush the shards from her hair. Bellatrix was struggling free of the rubble, her knife raised threateningly. Harry began to pull Hermione out from under the twisted metal, she felt his hands driving the glass deeper into her own, and she heard a strange, choked whimper that she dimly realized was coming from her own throat. Narcissa lunged at Harry, and he dodged her, releasing Hermione and running toward the house-elf who stood improbably atop the fallen chandelier in the middle of the decimated parlour. Was he going to leave her? Where was Snape?

Harry turned back. "Ron," he screamed. "Take Hermione and go--GO!"

She felt strong arms hoisting her to her feet, though her ankles would not support her weight. She was sure that she would fall, would slip from his grasp and be left behind. Ron spun but nothing happened. The wards, she thought vaguely. The wards will not permit--

"Harry, help me--I can't!" Ron yelled, and she fell to the floor as Harry turned and ran toward them, clutching Dobby's hand. Her mind was growing foggy again; the pain was rising like an enormous red wave--

"Don't let go!" Ron bellowed as he seized her wrist in his fist, thrusting the sword of Gryffindor into her hand. She saw his other hand collide with Harry's; she watched with a kind of polite interest as their fingers locked around each other. But she knew it was over. The last thing she saw before the sweeping darkness descended was Bellatrix, who had risen to her feet, and the silver knife flying through the air toward her.

They were too late.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

*Chapter 35 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. I make no money. Many thanks and hugs to my beta, Shellsnapelover, and to RedOrchid, whose thoughtful advice is indispensable. This chapter is for my dear friend OpalJade, who is the very definition of steadfast and brave.

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When the darkness came, she was confused. She had heard a noise, but had not felt the impact of the knife. Perhaps death meant the end of pain, but if that were so, why did everything hurt so terribly? She felt as if she were being stung to death by bees, and her joints... her very bones... seemed to be on fire. Yet clearly she was moving inexorably toward something, and there was a rushing, watery sound around her that she was certain must be her own blood. Oddly, she kept hearing Harry screaming, "Shell Cottage, Shell Cottage!" And that was funny, because that was where she and Snape had meant them to end up, though there was no way for Harry to know that. *It's strange, the things a dying mind invents, she thought. Then, Who will tell Snape?*

She hit the ground hard, and the sword bounced out of her hand with the impact. She heard the sounds of running feet and a low voice whispering, "Shell Cottage is located in Cornwall on the outskirts of Tinworth."

She looked up, startled, and saw a distant light in the darkness that seemed like it could be the shape of a small house with the door standing open, but her attention was

redirected by the piercing fear in Harry's voice as he yelled, "Dobby! Dobby, no! No--HELP!"

Ron had released her hand, and she pulled herself across the hard ground with her arms, edging up beside Harry, who was leaning over the little elf's body. The handle of the silver knife protruded from his thin chest. This did not make sense--it was supposed to have hit *her*--she had seen it coming; it had been headed right for her. She looked up and saw Luna running across the ground toward them, but that did not make sense either, for Luna was in the basement of Malfoy Manor, because Hermione had failed to rescue her; she had failed.

She tried to open her mouth to ask what was going on, but she could not find her voice. A long shadow fell over her body, and she heard the voice whispering, "Come on, Hermione, arms up. That's a good girl; you're going to be just fine," and strong arms lifted her and cradled her to a chest that smelled unfamiliar. She started to kick--this was not who she wanted. Where was she, and what was happening? And if this was death, then why wasn't it kinder? Why did it just parade her failures in front of her like a terrible accusation--unless it was hell?

She tried to scream, but all that emerged from her throat was a drawn out whimper, and the voice she nearly knew shushed her and told her to hang on just a little longer, that they would help her... but she did not know who *they* were, and if this was hell, she wanted to go back to her friends...*please*...

And then there was nothing.

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When Snape returned to Hogwarts, he went, as he so often did now, to the dungeons, to his old rooms, his old potion stores. He had time; there was no need to rush. Dobby would take them to Shell Cottage and then he would return for him. There was no need to run, no need to throw open the door and stumble over the landing, no need to watch the purple stain of Dreamless Sleep running over the stone floor where it had fallen from his trembling fingertips.

Snape willed himself calm. This was an opportunity, and he must treat it as such. He could get what he needed to heal her and bring her replenished potion stores if he could be calm enough to collect what was necessary. Murtlap, Dittany, Sleeping Draught. Polyjuice, Pain Reliever, Contraceptive, Burn Salve, All-Purpose Healing Draught. The listing steadied his hands, and he packed his robes full of bottles and phials. Yes, he would bring this to her like a gift, and she would know how it had hurt him to leave her there; she would know that he would see Bellatrix Lestrange killed, that... that he... he would make it up to her.

He paced around his laboratory. Where was Dobby? It had been a half an hour at least. Surely, they were not still in the Manor? A small part of his mind began to think through his options, as the rest of it spoke soothing nonsense thoughts about giving things time and being patient. But panic bubbled beneath his skin, and he could not sit, could not plan, could not *think*.

When an hour had passed, he told himself that it would be safe to call, and whispered, "Dobby."

Nothing happened.

His eyes grew wide. He tried again. "Dobby!"

When there was no answer, he burst from his old room and ran through the castle. He was still Disillusioned; no one could see him, but several students looked curiously as tapestries flapped in his wake, and once he jostled a sixth-year Ravenclaw who screamed, but he did not stop; he kept running, leaping the steps three at a time, tearing toward the Gargoyle, who stepped aside to admit him as soon as he touched it. He was running up the spiral staircase, consumed with the idea that he would demand that Albus tell him where Shell Cottage was located, even though he was dimly aware that a portrait could not be a secret-keeper and that the Weasleys had not even been married, let alone homeowners, when Albus had died. Still, Albus would know--Albus would *have* to know; Snape would torture it from him if he had to; did he think Snape knew nothing about torture?

When he reached the top step, he heard a voice, her voice, just as he had that night so long ago when she had hidden herself in the stairwell and waited for him, and he nearly laughed aloud with relief. He put out both hands and began to feel for her when he heard it again. Pleading. *Severus*.

It was coming from his pocket.

Snape's thoughts were so confused--had he just a moment before been considering torturing a portrait?--that at first it seemed perfectly logical. Yes, she was in his pocket. Merlin, had she been in there the whole time? Then he made a fist with his left hand and punched the stone wall as hard as he could. There was an odd crunching sound and liquid fire radiated out from his knuckles, burrowing into his elbow, and he snatched his hand back and clutched it to his chest. But the pain had done its job; it had cleared his head, and he slipped his good hand into his pocket and withdrew the Deluminator.

*He found us using a Deluminator. Dumbledore left it to him in his will.* Hermione whispered in his mind. And Minerva added, *I heard his voice, and I pressed the button.*

He jabbed the button down with his thumb, and instantly, a ball of light rose from the device and hovered just before his face. Snape blinked twice before opening his mouth and taking a deep breath. He could feel the warmth as it entered his throat, the pressure of its *presence* as it settled into his chest. The light seemed to fill him with a kind of purpose and calm that he had been unable to find without it. The wards were still down in his bedroom. He could leave from there.

He removed the Disillusionment Charm and opened the door to his office. "Hello, Albus," he said mildly as he crossed the room.

Then he entered his bedroom and spun.

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But it had not worked. Snape arrived in a cove of trees on the rocky coast of Cornwall, as he had described to Dobby, but there was no cottage, no group of injured teenagers, no house-elf, nothing that should indicate that he had found the right place. Perhaps he had Apparated to Tinworth because that was where he had hoped she would be. Because that would mean that she had gotten out alive.

But she was alive, his mind insisted. She was alive because he had heard her voice. She was alive somewhere, and she had called for him. He picked his way along the rocky edge of the cliff overlooking the sea. The salt air kept his mind clear, and the movement seemed to keep him from flying apart. He could not go back to the Manor, not if the Dark Lord were still there, but perhaps he could hide himself outside it and watch for signs of what was happening inside. Then if he had to get in, he could call on...

Snape came upon a grave, freshly dug and surrounded in bleached shells and stones. At the head of it, there was a larger stone, engraved with the words *Here Lies Dobby, A Free Elf*. He sank to his knees beside the turned, fragrant earth.

He did not pray, but something issued from his mouth, a stream of senseless sorrow and gratitude, and he bent his head low over the grave and whispered to the little elf below the ground. *Did not mean to ask this of you...very brave... a good elf... she loved you very much... will always be grateful...*

"Professor Snape?"

The voice came from behind him, and he jumped violently to his feet, spinning to face it.

Luna Lovegood stood before him, looking nearly ethereal in the moonlight.

"Miss Lovegood," he said warily, raising his wand slightly.

She held up both hands. Her wand stuck out from the pocket of her dressing gown. "I am a friend, sir."

He nodded. There was silence for a moment as he stared at her. "You made it out of Malfoy Manor," he said finally.

"We all did," she said.

He could not stop the hiss of breath that escaped him, nor the choked sound of his voice as he whispered, "And Herm--Miss Granger?"

"She is badly injured. Fleur nursed her a bit, but whatever happened... we don't know how to treat it."

"The Cruciatus," he said sharply, "Where is she?"

"In the house," Luna said, waving her hand vaguely to the east.

"I cannot see it, Miss Lovegood. The Fidelius Charm. I admit, I thought at first I had come to the wrong place. Until I found this," he said, indicating the grave.

"I can hardly bear it," she said frankly, in her funny little voice. "When he came today and told me that he had come to get us out, I knew *how* I had seen you in the basement. Mr Ollivander said it was the dark, that it played tricks on you after a while, but that day, when I woke up, I had the oddest taste in my mouth, and my first thought was of the hospital wing, of the day I fell out of the Quidditch stands during my first year. I kept thinking and thinking, trying to remember why I had been asleep, if one of the Death Eaters had come and dosed us with something. But I felt good. Stronger than I had in a long time. And I kept seeing Dobby in my mind's eye, his little hand reaching up for yours."

Snape could not speak.

"And when he came today, he said I must be brave, that he would take me to safety. I told him I would rather stay until Harry and the others got out, but he said that his orders were to rescue me first. He knew I was down there. It wasn't in my mind."

"No, it was not, Miss Lovegood," Snape said stiffly.

"He died just after they got here," she said. "I think he knew... I hope he knew that they had made it." Her hand came up and brushed at her cheek.

Snape did not know how to respond to her tears, to any of this.

"Miss Lovegood," he said helplessly. "I want to heal Hermione."

"Yes. Yes, I thought you would. She's in my room, you see. She's.... she's delirious, sir. She's been saying your name."

He thought of the Deluminator. *Severus*, she'd said. "Has anyone--"

"No, of course not. I put a Silencing Charm on the room before I came looking for you."

She had been looking for him?

Luna's face melted into a very odd expression of compassion. "You sent help for me. And she clearly knows your secret. I knew you wouldn't leave her. Professor Snape, you need to Disillusion yourself so that I can take you into the house."

"But the others--"

"Harry is with Griphook, the goblin. The others are in bed. Fleur poured firewhisky all around; I saw her put something purple in it. I didn't drink it." She paused. "I think I can get you upstairs. I am sorry that I can't tell you the secret, Professor, but I'm not the keeper."

"No. No, of course not." He stood there unmoving.

"Put on the charm, sir," she said gently.

Snape lifted his wand. Vaguely, he recognized that he was taking orders from Luna Lovegood, but it did not seem to matter. She was going to take him to Hermione. He cast the charm.

Luna offered her small, white hand, and he took it, following her almost blindly back along the cliff, across what seemed an empty moor, and into the cottage. It was close and warm inside, and bore the look of a house meant for two that had suddenly been forced to accommodate many more. Shoes littered the floor, and there were dishes piled up in the sink. Everyone had clearly gone to bed in a hurry. Luna led him past a small living room in which a low fire burned, abandoned in the grate, and up a set of rickety steps. When they reached the landing, he could hear low voices from behind a door, the guttural sound of a goblin's voice. They moved quietly down the hallway, and Luna pulled her wand from her pocket and tapped on the door. It opened before her, and he followed her in and watched as she closed and warded the door once more. He added his own Silencing Charms to the room and moved to the small, narrow bed on which Hermione lay fitfully.

"I--I'd like to be able to leave you to your work," Luna said. "But I don't know where to go, and I don't know how to explain why she has improved unless I say that I did it."

Snape turned away from Hermione and looked at the Lovegood girl for what felt like the first time. He had always found her so... unfocused, so odd; her potions were abysmal, and yet, there was this coolness under pressure, this strength. She was a fine planner. A good ally.

"There is no need for you to go anywhere, Miss Lovegood. I can give you a potion for sleep if you would like to rest. I... I am in your debt."

She seemed to consider him. "And you will not need any help?"

"I will be fine. You should feel free to sleep if you need to."

"Then I will take the potion. Thank you, sir."

Snape felt inside his robes for the Dreamless Sleep and conjured a spoon. He measured out five drops and handed it to her. She did not hesitate, but took the dose and lay down upon her bed.

"Thank you, Miss Lovegood," he whispered, but she had already closed her eyes.

He turned back to Hermione. They had removed her clothes and draped her in a clean white sheet. He picked up her hand and examined it. The skin had healed over, but there was still something foreign beneath. It looked as if Fleur Weasley had given her a Healing Potion without first cleaning the wounds. The light was bright in the room, and Snape extinguished all the lamps except the one right beside the bed. He waved his wand over her body, and a mist rose from it, hovering over her. He watched its colors change from pink to sickly green, dark yellow--ugly, accusing colors. Above her ankle, the cloud turned a deep and roiling purple.

Snape sat down on the edge of the bed and tipped a phial of Pain Reliever slowly into her mouth. He massaged her throat, encouraging her to swallow. He placed several drops of Dreamless Sleep under her tongue and heard the slight smack of her lips, which he found encouraging. Some of the furrows in her brow slackened, and he hoped that her headache was lessening. He knew the blooming headache of the Cruciatus far too well.

Her hair was matted on the pillow, and he moved to smooth it back from her face when he felt something sharp tear into his hand. Glass. Her hair was full of glass. Who were these idiots caring for her? Surely what he felt below her skin was glass, too. He did not look forward to what came next, but it would have to be done. He raised his wand and cast a Shielding Charm between himself and Hermione.

"*Accio Glass!*" he said. Hundreds of slivers peppered the shield before falling to the ground. Snape cleared them away with his wand and quickly returned to Hermione. Her skin had opened in more places than he could count to allow the glass out. He took off his robes and turned them inside out, revealing the potions stored inside. He laid them on the bed and slid his fingers over the bottles, selecting a slim bottle of Dittany. He thumbed it open with his left hand, and for a moment, he could not remember why that hurt so terribly. *Ah, yes, the wall*, he thought, and paused to swallow a dose of Pain Reliever himself. He could attend to his hand when he was finished with her. He took a few drops of Dittany onto his fingertips and followed his wand with his fingers as he sealed and smoothed, sealed and smoothed. He took particular care with her face, using perhaps a tiny bit more Dittany than he usually would to ensure that she would not scar. A few bloody tears had slipped from her eyes when he had removed the glass, and he gently opened one eye and then the other to look for abrasions, and dropped a single drop of Dittany into her left one. Fortunately, it seemed it had not been the eye that had been pierced, but the tear duct.

Snape moved down her body systematically, then turned her over to reveal her back, where the glass had cut more deeply. He was working over the backs of her legs when he saw the first spasm. Taking her calf firmly in both hands, he massaged the muscle until it loosened, working his fingers down her leg into her foot, which he pulled and rubbed, forcing her to flex her toes. As soon as he had finished with one leg, the other began, and he noticed her right hand curling into a fist. He cast a Warming Charm onto his hands and resumed working his fingers into her flesh, kneading and pulling, forcing her muscles to release their tension.

As he worked, he thought of her hands, these hands he held in his, toiling over his body so long ago that it felt like another lifetime. He had few memories of those long days and nights, only dream-like snatches of waking to her body extended beside his, the coolness of a rag smoothed over his forehead, the pressure of her fingertips as she rolled a sliver of ice over his lips. Dumbledore had left her there. He thought he saw, now, why the meddling old bastard had done it, for he had thought it impossible to feel more strongly about this girl than he had only an hour ago, and yet, as he tried to bring her relief from the pain, he felt his heart would burst from loving her. Whatever Dumbledore had said, he must have known what he was doing. He tried to feel angry, to feel manipulated and tricked, but he could not bring himself to feel anything but grateful in that moment.

He took her left ankle into his hands and carefully felt the bones. This would be difficult to set. He remembered the incredible care with which she had healed his broken fingers, and he was deeply sorry that he could not do as good a job for her. But he could not simply snap these bones back into alignment, and by the way they felt, he was very afraid that she had been given Skele-Gro.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and pulled sharply on her ankle. He felt a kind of sick grinding in the joint, and he gave another sharp tug, finally feeling the *click* he had been hoping for. He had no Deflating Draught with him to lessen the swelling, but he tore off a piece of the sheet and wrapped her ankle tightly. He did not like to have to mend these bones with a spell, but she would need to be able to walk right away--she had no time for convalescence. When the war was over, she could go to St. Mungo's and have it rebroken and set properly.

Gently, he rolled her onto her back once more. He selected a final jar from his robes and picked up her left hand, slipping the ring from her finger. Immediately, her head tossed on the pillow, and she began to whimper.

"Shhh. Hermione," he said. "It's just me. This will only take a second." He smeared Burn Salve over her ring finger, gently working it into her skin before he replaced the circlet, and she quieted.

Finally, Snape picked up Hermione's discarded clothing and shook the glass from it. He reached into the pocket of her denims, and with relief, he pulled from it the key and chunk of hair that he had given her in Malfoy Manor. When Hermione had thrown herself backward, knocking Bellatrix Lestrange off balance, Snape had been poised behind her, and the confusion had given him the chance to seize the necklace and a lock of Bellatrix's hair. He set the items on the bedside table where she would be sure to find them and folded her clothing neatly, leaving the pile on the end of the bed with his robes. He took the beaded bag from where it lay on the floor, moved the potions from his pockets into the depths of her bag, and set it on a nearby chair.

After checking to see that Miss Lovegood was indeed sleeping soundly, he prised off his shoes and slipped into the too-small bed beside Hermione. Her knees had drawn up again, and he smoothed them down with his hands, catching her legs between his and holding her body straight with his own. Gently, he turned her in his arms and rubbed the tightened muscles of her back. When he began to feel her relax into natural sleep, he pressed a hand between her breasts, where he could feel the beating of her heart. It felt steady and even. Her head nuzzled more deeply into the hollow of his neck, and he shifted slightly to accommodate their new position. The danger had passed. She was recovering.

Snape lay awake for several hours, listening to her breathing. Occasionally her hands would scrabble against the sheet, and once she jerked violently in his arms, but he whispered to her until she slept quietly again. Finally, he slowed his breathing until it matched her own and drifted into a light sleep beside her.

"Professor Snape." A hesitant voice called him back to the surface. "Professor Snape!"

He looked up to see Luna Lovegood standing nervously beside the bed. He glanced at the window. The sky was still dark, but just barely.

"Miss Lovegood," he said blearily. "Are you all right?"

"I just woke up. It--it's just before dawn, sir. I think I should get you out of the house."

Snape slid Hermione gently from his arms and swung his legs over the side of the bed. His entire left side was asleep. He stood and shrugged on his robes gracelessly. Hermione had not woken. He would not get to say goodbye, to tell her...

He leaned over her and smoothed her hair a final time. "Hermione," he whispered. "I have to go--"

"Professor, please hurry!"

He rose and took Luna's proffered hand. She moved quickly through the house and back out the front door, nearly running as she headed across the yard to the edge of the property.

"I'm sorry, Professor," she said. "Thank you for everything."

He released her hand. "Thank *you*, Miss Lovegood."

"Be safe," she said, and he nodded.

He watched as she ran back across the open moor and disappeared into the enchantments.

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Hermione awoke to Luna backing through the bedroom door, barefooted and smeared with dirt, her arms filled with what looked like flower bulbs.

"What are you doing?" she said, sitting up in bed. She winced with anticipated pain, but none came. Her head throbbed slightly, and her skin was sore and tender, but she there was nothing like the blinding agony that she had felt the night before. "What's going on? Where are we? How did you get here?"

Luna dumped the bulbs onto the floor beside her own bed and sat down beside Hermione.

"Dobby came for me," Luna said quietly. "Just as you were arriving. He brought Dean and Mr Ollivander and Griphook, too. He brought us here to Shell Cottage. Then he went back for you."

*Shell Cottage...* So Snape had sent Dobby. That part of the plan had survived. But something dug at her mind, something almost remembered... Dobby...

"I don't really remember getting here last night," she said. "I remember being in the Manor--and then I remember thinking that I was going to die--I saw a knife... Luna, where is Dobby?"

"Hermione," Luna said so softly and sorrowfully that she knew.

"Oh, no. No, that can't be. That's not right, Luna. That can't be right."

Luna put her arms around Hermione and rocked her very gently. "Harry buried him out in the yard, by the sea where he can hear the waves. He's free now, Hermione. It's okay. He'll always hear the sea and know that he is free."

Hermione sobbed quietly. Luna continued to whisper to her. "Professor Snape came last night. I found him out by Dobby's grave. I saw him once before, in Malfoy Manor. Mr Ollivander said I dreamed it, but I knew he had been there. Though it did seem rather odd to imagine that Professor Snape had come to save us. But he did. He sent Dobby to get us from that basement. Daddy says that you can know whether to trust a man by whether his elves trust him. I think Dobby trusted Professor Snape, don't you?"

Hermione nodded miserably into Luna's shoulder. Dobby had trusted Professor Snape. Dobby had trusted her.

"And then he came to heal you. He stayed with you all night. Every minute. Every minute," she repeated, and her voice made the words into a lullaby as she rocked Hermione back and forth. "I just took him back out now. When he came in, he looked as if he'd fallen into a nest of Acromantulas. I guess that's what love looks like when you're afraid."

Hermione sobbed even more recklessly. He had been here, and she hadn't known. "Was he all right?" she choked out.

"He was fine. He was just fine," Luna crooned.

"Luna," she whispered.

"It's okay... you're all right."

"Harry and Ron?"

"They're both fine. You must have been very brave, Hermione. You were in terrible shape when you arrived. We were very frightened."

Wave after wave of emotion threatened to send her spiraling toward darkness. Luna knew about Snape. Somehow, she knew. Hermione tried to take comfort in the arms of someone who shared her secret, who knew her husband's heart, but her thoughts turned once more to Dobby. They had succeeded. Harry had the mastery of the wand, and they had made it alive to Bill and Fleur's. Harry had a chance. But Dobby... she had sent him to death as ruthlessly as Dumbledore had intended to send Harry. She had asked him for his help, led him to that terrible house, and he had taken the knife that was meant for her. She shook in Luna's arms.

"What did I do, Luna? What did I do? I never meant him to die."

"Dobby was a free elf, Hermione. You didn't make him do anything."

"Yes, I did! If it hadn't been for me, we wouldn't have gone. I planned it; I put it in Harry's head. I asked for Dobby's help."

"If you asked, then he had a choice."

"No," she said.

"Yes," Luna said firmly. "And I don't know why you had to go there, Hermione, but whatever the reason was, you were very brave to try it. And now you need to be brave for a little while longer."

Brave a while longer. Brave a little while longer. Hermione did not feel like being brave. She felt like curling up in this white sheet, now streaked with mud from Luna's hands, and dying, but she knew that Luna was right. She had asked the same of Snape. There was still too much to be done. Suddenly she remembered the key that Snape had pressed into her hands. Her head jerked up from where it had rested on Luna's shoulder, and she saw it on her bedside table. Harry had the mastery, and she had the key to Bellatrix's vault.

"Can you stand?" Luna asked.

Hermione got shakily to her feet. Her ankle hurt like hell, but she could stand.

"Let's go see the others," Luna said.

Hermione held up the sheet as she walked toward the chair and dug some clothing out of her bag. Luna turned around while she dressed, and out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw her conjure a glass and some water. Luna was crushing some of the bulbs in the bottom of her glass with her wand.

"You still have your wand?" Hermione asked. It felt wrong to get dressed without picking up her wand and stowing it in her pocket. She felt very small and defenseless without it.

"No, this is Fleur's. She left it here in case I needed to cast any charms on you in the night."

"Oh... Luna, what are we going to say about what happened last night?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll take care of it."

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Harry sat at the kitchen table with a cup of tea in his hands. Ron was leaning against the kitchen counter, and they were talking seriously when Hermione entered the room. Immediately, Harry rose and crossed quickly to Hermione and hugged her tightly. "Thank God," he said. "I wasn't sure..."

"I'm all right," she said, and held out an arm to fold Ron into their embrace. The three of them stood there for a moment, and Hermione felt some of her strength returning. When they broke apart, she saw Luna watching from the doorframe, and she wished that they could share their plans with her. For the very first time, she wished she could tell their secrets.

"Hermione," Ron said. "You look... What happened? When we went to bed, you were still all..."

"I gave her an infusion of Gurdyroots," Luna said serenely. "I hope Fleur won't mind--I had to tear up her garden a bit."

Ron turned toward Luna with a look of amused wonder. "Luna, with everything that happened, I never got to ask you last night--how did you get here?"

"I was in the cellar at Malfoy Manor," Luna said. "Mr Ollivander was there, too. Just when we heard the commotion upstairs, Dobby appeared and told us that he would take us to safety. I didn't want to go, but he promised that he was coming back for you."

"Dobby was already there?" Harry asked incredulously. "But that means..."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat.

"Someone's helping us!" Harry nearly shouted. "When we were in the basement, we called Dobby, and he came and took Dean and Griphook. We told him to take them here, that it would be safe, that it was under the Fidelius Charm--but he'd already brought Luna and Mr Ollivander here! And right after he left, Wormtail came downstairs--and I swear, Hermione, it was like I had some kind of shield on me, but I can't have done, can I? Because the shield came off of you and Ron when Bellatrix cast Finite Incantatem. Wormtail reached for me with that silver hand he's got, and it wouldn't touch me. It was like... like it *couldn't* touch me and instead..." he looked rather ill thinking of it, "it strangled him."

"What?" Hermione exclaimed.

"Then I took his wand, and we ran upstairs, and I dueled Draco." He cut his eyes over at Luna, and Hermione nodded. "But there, too, it seemed like he couldn't touch me. The curses... they just seemed to bounce right off."

"Harry, I'm sure that it seemed that way, but I saw a little of that. You were doing a really good job--"

"Hermione, I'm telling you. He couldn't hit me--and he was *trying*. And then Dobby showed back up. I didn't call him. Did you?"

"I didn't call him," Ron said. "I was still dueling Narcissa."

"I--I don't know," Hermione said. "I was--I wasn't tracking very well--"

"And who Confunded Draco?" Harry yelled. "None of us even had a wand at that point! I think someone's helping us. I think someone's on our side."

Hermione glanced at Luna, but she was staring dreamily at the ceiling.

"Someone is on our side," he repeated.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

*Chapter 36 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All fully italicized text, as well as anything else you recognize, belongs to JKR. Great big thanks to Shellsnapelover, RedOrchid and OpalJade, without whom I would be utterly lost. And thank you to Elise\_Wanderer, whose emails back in March were the inspiration for this chapter. This one's for you.

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When he reentered the Hogwarts grounds, the sun was barely a sliver above the horizon. He had not yet entered the castle when the Mark burned. Had there been some evidence of his presence at the Manor? Something that would cause the Dark Lord to request him specifically? For it was a personal summons that smoldered in his forearm, and he paused in turning to bury his thoughts beneath a thick blanket of blackness in his mind. Then he hurried toward the gates once more, on his way to the Apparition point.

But there was no need. Voldemort stood at the gates, his silken robes alive in the slight breeze.

"Severus," he said. "I require entry."

"My Lord," Snape said with a slight bow. He drew his wand and began to undo the enchantments. "You could have breached them, you know," he murmured. "I have put up nothing that would truly deflect you."

The Dark Lord chuckled thinly. "There is nothing *you could* put up that would bar me if I chose to enter by force. However, we are friends, are we not, Severus? And friends knock when they enter each other's... houses."

"Indeed, my Lord. And I value your friendship above all things."

"I have business," Voldemort said, brushing past him and turning down the southern path. "Leave me. I will summon you before long, I think."

"Very well, my Lord. May we meet again soon."

Snape turned back toward the castle, climbing the steps toward the main entrance. When he looked back, Voldemort was gone. But he had been headed toward the lake, toward the tomb. Toward the wand.

When Snape entered the Headmaster's office, Dumbledore was waiting in his portrait, not bothering to feign sleep.

"Dumbledore," Snape began, though he did not look at the portrait as he spoke. Somehow to look at the old wizard would be to imagine that face disturbed in its rest...

"Severus," Dumbledore said, his voice quietly accusing. "Do I need to remind you that you are the Headmaster of this school? That you have duties..."

Snape whirled on the portrait, all sorrow forgotten. "You find my *performance* lacking?"

"More than two dozen students have disappeared from classes since the Christmas holidays, and you have made no mention of it. Imagine my surprise at discovering them holed up in the Room of Requirement, living like prisoners of war. If I had not discovered a portrait of my sister in the castle and gone to see her... Some of them are

wounded, Snape. Some have been tortured. They have fled this school for the safety of the room, and you have done nothing, said nothing. Is this because you have not noticed, or because you are not being *informed*? You have not been summoned in several weeks, and yet you are consistently absent from this office. Detention requests have been flooding in, and you are doing nothing. Is it any wonder that the Carrows have taken discipline into their own hands? How long before they report to Voldemort that his Headmaster seems to have lost interest in running his school?"

Snape bristled. "Which job are you criticizing, Albus? My obligations to the Dark Lord or my obligations to you?"

"Both."

"I see."

"Where are you going, Severus? What are you planning?"

"What plans could I possibly have? You have effectively ended my life. I am, at this point, simply trying to keep from being killed for as long as possible."

"I fail to see how that does any good unless you are *playing your part*. There is more to this war than three children in a tent."

Snape stared steadily at the portrait. There was a slight twitch in his jaw, but he said nothing.

"And have you even thought about how you intend to inform Harry of his duty?"

"Dumbledore, do you imagine that I--"

"Have you? Because the time approaches, Severus. Even I can see the signs, the strain. You must prepare. You cannot hide from what is coming. You must behave as if nothing has changed."

Behave as if nothing had changed. Voldemort had come to Hogwarts to desecrate Dumbledore's tomb, and the old man told him to behave as if nothing had changed. Inwardly, he sighed. He supposed that nothing really had.

"The Dark Lord is on the grounds tonight. I think we both know why he has come," he said wearily and turned back toward his bedroom door.

"Severus!" Dumbledore said, but Snape shut the door behind him.

Fury welled up in his gut, though whether at himself or Dumbledore, he did not know. The old wizard was right, of course. He had neglected his duties to the school. He had not appeared in the Great Hall for a meal since the day that Minerva had demanded his presence in her office, had not held a staff meeting, had somehow been unaware that students were going missing. Children had been hurt, and he was supposed to have been watching.

But he was angry all the same. What right did the world have to ask this of him? He could not do everything, be everywhere. How had he come to owe so much to so many? He sat down upon the bed.

He had to rest. Fatigue sang through his blood, and he felt he did not have the will to keep his eyes open, let alone deal with the piles of paper upon his desk. Detention requests could wait another two hours. Then, perhaps, a visit to the Carrows to remind them who was in charge at this school.

But even as he dozed, the real task loomed, dark and foreboding in his mind, behind his eyelids. Somehow, he would have to find a way to reveal the truth to Potter, to show him what lay at the end of the journey, the final step that had been planned for him since he was only a year old. Somehow, he would have to find a way to tell Lily's son that he would have to die.

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Hermione stood in an odd and bedraggled looking queue in the upstairs hallway of Shell Cottage, her hair drying into a fluffy cloud around her head. It had been the first shower she had taken since they'd left Grimmauld Place, and every stinging drop had felt like heaven. Hermione had washed her hair and then washed it again, despite the unmanageable mess it would become, just for the pleasure of feeling the shampoo piling up in her hands and running down her body. Cleansing Charms had sufficed during their many months in the tent, and though Hermione knew logically that she had been clean enough, there had still been something deeply satisfying about standing under water so hot that it turned her skin pink on contact, something marvelous about seeing the dirt run off her body and down the drain.

But showering was the only domestic pleasure that she rediscovered that morning. As the members of their motley household had woken, there had been nothing but confusion and short tempers in the cottage. Meals were cooked and served in shifts. Fleur, Luna and Hermione took turns nursing Griphook. Harry and Ron retreated into the yard to avoid getting in the way of the bustle. The situation was simply untenable. Shell Cottage was not big enough to house seven refugees of war and one newly married couple.

It was clear that Bill was slightly frightened of them. He never said as much; in fact, he was gracious to a fault and denied them nothing that they requested, never asking what they were doing or how they had ended up landing in his front yard, bearing with them an injured goblin and a dead house-elf. But the fear in his eyes was clear, particularly when his young wife was in the room. It must have been easy to pretend it wasn't happening, here by the sea, in a whitewashed cottage with a tidy little garden out front. They had brought the war into Bill's home.

Bill had arranged for Mr Ollivander, Luna and Dean to be moved to his aunt Muriel's house, to join the rest of the Weasleys in hiding, to ease the strain on the cottage. But before he could be moved, Mr Ollivander saw them, one by one, to take measurements for new wands. It seemed they all felt as helpless as Hermione had without her wand. Bill had supplied a charmed measuring tape, and Mr Ollivander set up in the tiny room that had been his during his stay at Shell Cottage. It must have originally been slated as a sewing room or a nursery, as the walls and ceiling seemed far too close for comfort, and Hermione was reminded vaguely of Ollivander's shop, of how he dominated the place.

"My dear, I will make this as quick and painless as possible," Mr Ollivander said as she entered the room. His grey eyes never left hers, and Hermione tittered politely. He smiled at her, but she could see the fatigue in his face. Luna, Dean and Ron had preceded her.

"Mr Ollivander, I can't thank you enough. This is really--"

"This is what I do. This is all I know how to do to help," he said. "Hands?"

She held out her hands, and a magical measuring tape zipped from his fingers to measure *her from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round her head*.

He took her wand hand in his own while the measuring tape continued to travel around her body, recording her arm span. He felt her fingers, her palm, her wrist. Then he reached for her other hand.

She hesitated. "Mr Ollivander, I'm just curious. I know you remember my wand--"

"Vine wood and dragon heartstring," he said promptly. "Eleven inches. Pliable. Excellent for Transfiguration."

"Yes, that's it," she agreed. "So, sir, why do you need--"

"Because people change, Miss Granger. You are not the girl you were when you first set foot in my shop seven years ago. If I'm going to make a wand tailored particularly

to you--and let me assure you, I do this extremely rarely--then I want it to be a wand that suits your needs *today*."

She looked at him steadily. "All right."

"You..." he said gently, "you are traveling with Harry Potter. You will be with him until the very end, if I am not mistaken."

She nodded.

"I want you to have the best wand I can make you, Miss Granger."

Hermione bit her lip and held out her left hand. Ollivander took it in his own and felt each of her fingers. His eyes flicked toward hers as he felt her ring finger, but he went on taking his measurements.

"I think I have everything I need."

"Mr Ollivander," she said, frightened.

"I am grateful to whoever sent help to get us out of that place. I thought I would die there," Ollivander said suddenly. "Good luck and God speed, Miss Granger. Please send in Mr Potter."

Harry was gone a long time. When he emerged from Ollivander's room, he called Ron and Hermione together into the room he and Ron were sharing and cast the Muffliato Charm over them.

"You-Know-Who has the Elder Wand," he said.

Hermione took a deep breath through her nose. Ron turned pale.

"I saw it very early this morning, after I spoke with Griphook. He went to Hogwarts. Snape let him in."

Hermione kept her face immobile. "Did you ask Mr Ollivander? Did he say--" she began.

"He said that there's no way to be sure."

"But, Harry--" Ron said.

"He said he *thinks* that it will not work against its master. That's just going to have to be good enough."

"But you knew where the wand was!" Ron said. "Why--why didn't we go and get it? If you had the wand *and* the mastery--"

"Even if I could have beaten him there, I wouldn't have done it. Last night, while I dug Dobby's grave, I thought... that is, it seems to me... we're doing what Dumbledore would have wanted. We go after the Horcruxes. That's what he sent us to do. The wand... we did the best we could."

Hermione took Harry's hand. He did not know the danger; he did not know what she did... what he would be asked to do. But it seemed to her that he sensed it. Perhaps it was the prophecy that made him so silent and somber now. *For neither can live while the other survives.*

"But we still have no idea where the rest of the Horcruxes might be!" Ron said.

"Yes, we do," Harry replied, and Hermione nodded.

"What?" Ron asked.

"Bellatrix Lestrange's vault. You heard her, Ron. She was petrified that we might have been in there. You-Know-Who must have asked her to keep something for him."

"But we can't get into a Gringotts vault--"

Hermione released Harry's hand and withdrew the key from her pocket. She held it up in front of her. "Do you still have her wand, Ron?"

"Yeah, but I--"

"Then we have her wand, her hair, her key. There's a chance that we--"

"How--how did you...?" Ron asked, amazed.

"In Malfoy Manor. When she was... questioning me. Just as you came in, actually. In the confusion, I snatched it. She--"

Harry held up his hand.

"I spoke to Griphook last night," he interrupted. "In exchange for the sword of Gryffindor... he'll help us break into Gringotts."

There was silence for a moment.

"But without the sword, we can't destroy the Horcrux even if we find it," Ron protested.

"We'll just have to wing it," Harry said. "Maybe we can destroy it in the vault and then give him the sword."

"Harry," Hermione said slowly. "I've been thinking about your scar. You've said before that you feel his emotions, see what he sees..."

"Hermione, don't start this again. I can't help it!"

"Listen to me! Harry, when you share his mind... do you hear his thoughts?"

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes? How often?"

"It's been... clearer recently. He's been very excited."

"Then, if we were to raise some kind of alarm as we left Gringotts... if he were to suspect what we were doing..."

Ron leaned forward. He grabbed at Hermione's arm excitedly. "Wait--are you saying... that if he suspected, if he *thought* about it... he could lead us right to the final Horcrux?"

She nodded. The three of them stood there in a kind of shocked silence. Wherever it was, they would have a frighteningly limited amount of time to get there before he reached it himself.

"It's going to happen very fast now," Harry said. "Once we've been to Gringotts, it's all going to happen very fast."

Ron's hand snuck into Hermione's, and she reached for Harry's.

"When do you want to leave?" she asked. It seemed to her that all three of them knew that once they left, they would not be coming back.

"When our wands come," Harry said finally. "We'll leave as soon as we have our wands."

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Snape took the Pensieve from the cabinet in the Headmaster's office, hefted it into his arms and carried it into his bedroom. He would be damned if he did this in front of Dumbledore.

It seemed to him that once things began to unravel, they would unravel very quickly. If Voldemort still believed him loyal, he would keep him alive for as long as possible so as to enjoy his services. He would not kill him until he felt sure he needed the full power of the wand. This seemed to coincide neatly with Dumbledore's orders. *If there comes a time when Lord Voldemort stops sending that snake forth to do his bidding...* When all but the last of the Horcruxes were destroyed, he was to tell Potter. He thought of Dumbledore's words again, *It would have been a race--who would reach you first, Harry or the Dark Lord?*

He looked at the Pensieve as he set it down heavily on a trunk at the foot of his bed. It was the only way he could think of to ensure that the message would be delivered in the event that the Dark Lord reached him before they did.

And truly, could there be any other way, even if he were to encounter Potter first? Would Potter believe, even from Hermione, that Dumbledore had slated him to die unless he heard the old wizard for himself? Certainly, Potter would not believe it from Snape's own mouth. And the boy would need strength, too. Would it fortify him to see his mother, to know what a fine witch she had been? If he could see how it had all happened, and how hard so many had worked, how hard Hermione had worked, to try to ensure his victory--would he, perhaps, face death a bit more bravely?

And then, of course, there was Hermione herself. She had told him, that night in the tent, that someday she would want to hear everything about his life before they married. A bitter chuckle escaped his lips. This was hardly the someday she had imagined, he thought, though he could not begin to picture what it was she might have hoped for. The pre-dawn hours of some post-war morning? Soft sheets and tangled limbs? Whispers in the dark? He did not think her so deluded. And yet he owed her this; an explanation of what had come before; a reason, if not an excuse, for who he had been and what he had done. A goodbye. He owed her, at the very least, a goodbye.

Snape lifted his wand. The beginning. There was no choice but to go back to the beginning, and he touched his wand to his temple and pulled away a long, silvery thread and dropped it into the waiting Pensieve.

Lily as a child, as he had known her before Hogwarts. It hurt him to remove her from his mind. He knew that he could and would plunge his face into the swirling silver before this was done, that she would be restored to him, but it would never seem the same to him as his original memory of her had done. He felt as if he were slicing away parts of himself. But maybe that was right. Maybe he was cutting away dead tissue, parts of his heart that had been starved for blood for longer than Harry Potter had been alive.

She had been the first and only person that his childhood self had ever dared to call a friend. He raised his wand again and drew away a memory of the two of them discussing Hogwarts, and he knew how he looked in that memory without even bothering to review it in the basin. He had been an odd child, even by wizarding standards. He had been awkward and ill-clothed, and though his father's relatives--this had been before Hogwarts, when he had still had some contact with them--liked to say that he would grow into his nose, it was becoming clearer at ten that he never would. He had moved, then, with an odd mixture of apology and arrogance, inherited, he supposed, from a mother who had a fierce pride in her magic and a deep fear of her husband. But he chose this memory because it had been so cherished by his ten-year-old self. He remembered thinking as he had lain there beside her under the canopy of leaves that she did not look at him like other people did--over his shoulder, as if they could not bear to meet his eyes. She looked at him anxiously, hopefully, reverently. To her, he was someone.

Then the train. He wondered if he should keep this one back, for it might not do to offend the boy. And yet he wanted him to see--wanted him ~~to know~~--how it had happened, what had sprung up between himself and James Potter immediately upon being placed in the same room. He did not want Potter's pity--to be compared unfavorably against his father's new robes and plump, well-fed cheeks--but he wanted him to see the rivalry that had existed from the very start. To see what Snape had known then--instantly--though his young self could not have articulated it. He had lost her there in that compartment. He had lost her before he had even known how to fight for her.

Then their sorting, and the hope that had died in him when she had sorted into Gryffindor. Had he needed a confirmation that she had chosen, the hat had provided it. She had chosen people that he could not understand, chosen a blood-deep rivalry that could not be overcome, though he would spend the next five years pretending that it was not so. And so he swiped a few memories from the next several years, though he could not explain precisely why. To show that he would have never given up on her, even when everything and everyone around them showed that it was impossible? To show that there was something, there must have been *something* that she saw of value in him?

And then their O.W.L.s. This memory was but a copy, the real one having been removed so many times. He had tried--years after, after he had gone to Voldemort and left again, after Potter had begun at Hogwarts--tried to take it out for good. He had thought that perhaps if he did not remember this one terrible thing, the moment at which all possibility had shattered at his feet, destroyed by his own hand, if he could simply forget that he had forged his own path toward ruin and destruction, then he could live without the crushing self-hatred he endured when the day drew to a close and quiet descended on the castle. But he could never leave it out for long. In the end, he always had to know why he had done it, why he had stood before a madman and pledged his allegiance.

He told himself through the years that he had done it to prove to her how much better, how much more powerful, he could have been than Potter, as if it had somehow been her choice that sent him there. But that was not true; it had never been true. He had done it because he had felt, when school ended and she married, the same way as he had that day on the grounds as the filthy word had slipped from his lips, that same crushing anger, that same fucking helplessness, that she would not love him, and he could not make her. And he refused to be helpless, and he refused to be weak. He had seen what love and weakness could do. And so he chose its opposite. But it was too late.

It was too late to unlove her. He had known her friendship, known her good and simple heart, and it was too late to unwant what he could never have had in the first place. And when he delivered the prophecy, when he realized what he had done, the only thought in his head was, *No*. No. This could not be allowed to happen. He had known already that he had destroyed his own life, thrown it away on some crazed teenager's fantasy of love, and he could not go on if his stupidity took her life, too.

So he had gone to Dumbledore. Dumbledore, the only man powerful enough, *good* enough, Snape's younger self had thought, to stop it. He had no wish to include this memory, to unman himself as completely as he had on the hill before Potter's eyes, but there was no choice. If Potter was to believe, he would have to see it, and reluctantly, Snape pulled the silvered memory from his temple and dropped it in with the others.

But she had died anyway. She had died because of what he had done, died because he had betrayed his only friend. There was a tiny part of him, a small, mostly unexamined part, that wondered if he had not joined the Dark Lord to make her angry. As if to say, *Look at me, Lily Potter. Look what you made me do. You could have saved me, but now I will be this*. And it was that part of him that haunted the first hours that followed her death. Was it possible that he could have been so reckless, so petty, as to destroy them both in a fit of temper? Had he killed the only person who had ever shown him kindness because he had been jealous? For that had always been like him, hadn't it, to smash the toy he could not play with? Self-loathing washed over him, as heavy and strong as it had been that night.

The grief--there were no words for it. It was impossible to describe, to catch in a single memory. Voldemort had fallen, but that was not enough. Nothing would be enough until he himself were dead in penance. If Dumbledore had not summoned him that night... had not given him a way forward... something to do to try, however impossibly, to make up for what he had done... he was certain he would not have survived the night. He dropped the memory into the bowl.

Was he doing it again? he wondered. Would this hurt Hermione? Would his last act in the world be to destroy his wife, to break her heart as cleanly as his had been broken? He thought of her again as she had been the night in the tent, how calmly she had spoken of his Patronus.

There was no memory of it, no way to tell Hermione that his Patronus had changed the night Lily had died, the night he sat in Dumbledore's office and felt the weight of what he had done settle around his heart. Dumbledore had made him a deal, and he had taken it. The Patronus came, he supposed, as a reminder of his betrayal and his pledge to guard Potter. Always. No matter what.

Which he had done. Had done, though Potter infuriated him, made Snape feel, as he looked on him, like the child in the train compartment all over again, somehow intrinsically broken and unworthy. He drew several memories of Potter's first years at Hogwarts from his mind... Quirrell... those horrible months in which the outline of the Mark began to reappear on his forearm... No, he had never faltered.

But now he was reaching the meat of the narrative he had been crafting, and he hesitated. He raised his wand to pull from his mind the night that Dumbledore had returned to Hogwarts with the cursed hand. He could stop it; he could stop the memory after Dumbledore had asked Snape to kill him. He did not have to reveal what else he had been asked. They could keep this secret--forever, if that was what she wanted.

But he found he did not want to keep this secret, and if he knew his wife, she would take steps to exonerate him even after his death. She took her vow seriously; he remembered, with mingled pain and affection, that she had stolen their marriage records, that she had wanted them, she said, *for his trial*. His trial. Did she really believe that there would be a trial? That he could bear one if there were? He had been on trial for seventeen years. He lifted the memory from his mind.

Then their wedding. Now, tears threatened him, and how could that be? How could it be that he could sit here and relive the betrayal and murder of his childhood friend, his love, without breaking down, and yet the memory of a rather hostile exchange between himself and Hermione could find him on the edge of tears? There were things here... things he wished he could take back. And she... oh, he nearly laughed, despite the sorrow that gripped his heart in its jaws... she had said, *I assure you that I have no more interest in your body than I have in the giant squid*.

Hermione. He wanted Potter to see what she had undertaken, how pure that bravery was right from the very beginning. He wanted him to know how she had hesitated when Dumbledore had asked her to keep a secret from him, wanted Potter to hear her say that if she had known the marriage was to save him, and not Snape as she had been told, that she would have done it anyway. If only there was some way to tell her that he would do it all again, that he would take back his arguments and his barbs. If only he could take her hands and marry her properly, tell her that there was no other partner... that there had never been anything like her.

He raised his wand again. There were plans to relay, information that must be given to Potter--Hermione's parents, the idea of decoys planted on Mundungus Fletcher, the accident with George Weasley's ear. Nothing she wouldn't be familiar with, though Potter would likely find it all quite overwhelming. He smirked slightly. For the slightest second, he imagined what it would be like to face Potter after he had seen these memories. What a perverse pleasure he would take in watching the boy struggle to assimilate all this into his world view.

But any amusement that he might have felt was quickly squashed by the knowledge that next would be Dumbledore's revelation. He went over the memory slowly in his mind: the eerie, flickering darkness of the Headmaster's office after school hours when all else was quiet; the way Dumbledore had paced and lectured, his face pinched and tightened; and his words that, even in a memory, could still hold Snape breathless with horror.

*Tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the Killing Curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Voldemort's soul was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself onto the only living soul left in that collapsing building. Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Harry, and it is that which gives him the power of speech with snakes, and a connection with Lord Voldemort's mind that he has never understood. And while that fragment of soul, unmissed by Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die.*

*So the boy... the boy must die?* He had said.

*And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential.*

Snape would show him nothing else of Dumbledore. There would be no hint of the Elder Wand here, of all that had been revealed of Dumbledore's plans. Potter would need strength, not confusion, in his final moments, and Snape would not be the one to shatter the boy's image of the former Headmaster. Hermione could tell him after... if he lived. If she saw fit.

Hermione. With enormous regret, he drew his wand a final time and lifted from his mind the memory of sitting beside her in the tent, their hands interlaced as they went over her notes concerning the Horcruxes. That particular memory... he had hoped to die with that still inviolate in his mind. That was supposed to be for him alone. But if he had--if he had to choose a single thing, a single note on which to end his life, he would choose this. His face followed the silvery thread as it dropped into the bowl. He was unwilling to be without this memory for more than a few moments.

Snape traveled through the mire of his own memories. He watched, as if in death, his life as it played out before his eyes, and it seemed to him that there was a sort of horrible beauty to what he saw. It had been a life poorly lived, but it had been his, and in whatever strange and twisted ways he had allowed, he had loved and been loved.

As the final memory wound to a close, as he saw himself lean down and take Hermione's face in his hands, he saw the welcome in her eyes as he approached, saw her mouth lean in toward his. He took a step toward himself and watched their faces as their lips joined, saw her arms threading around his neck.

When the Snape in the memory broke away, he said, "Do you remember when I told you not to repeat our plans back to me? That things said aloud are harder to hide?"

And his beautiful, war-beaten wife had looked back at him with tears in her eyes and nodded.

Snape watched as he Disapparated from the tent, and then he felt himself rising, lifting out of the Pensieve and into his bedroom once more.

It was the only goodbye he knew how to give her.

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Harry, Ron and Hermione had been planning for most of the day. Griphook had agreed to draw them a map of the underground tunnels and vaults. He would be accompanying them into Gringotts under the Invisibility Cloak to help them circumvent security. After that, it would simply be a race against the Polyjuice Potion.

She lay down on her bed. The room was empty; Luna was gone. How long had it been since she had had a room to herself? Not since the summer before her sixth year, nearly two years ago, now. Since then, there had always been someone--Lavender and Parvati, or Harry and Ron--and Hermione felt strangely lonely. She turned onto her side and looked at the empty bed where Luna should have been. She was with the Weasleys now, Hermione knew. She was safe, and she was with friends. That was what she wanted for Luna, of course, but she couldn't help but wish that she were here; Luna, with her squeaky voice and her odd pronouncements. Luna, who had seen Snape and could answer all her questions. How had he found them?

And as if she had called him into being by thinking about him, Hermione felt her ring burn. She removed it, suddenly glad to be alone.

The words inside were strange, but they called to something nearly forgotten in her. *Say it.*

Say it? Say what?

An image began to rise in her mind. Snape, flushed and damp, his hair falling around her face, his eyes wide.

*Say it.*

"Severus," she whispered.

At the sudden heat in her hand, Hermione removed the ring once more.

*I am coming.*

She hurried out of bed and slipped Harry's Invisibility Cloak from her bag, which had lain, forgotten, in the chair all day. Quickly, she wrapped herself in the cloak and tiptoed down the hallway, down the stairs, through the kitchen and into the night.

She ran across the hard ground toward the edge of the property line, feeling the tickle and bite of the grass and stones beneath her bare feet. When she crossed outside the bounds of the Fidelius Charm, her skin began to tingle.

"Severus," she whispered again, but he did not answer, so she thrust her arm outside the Invisibility Cloak and felt the smooth warm pressure of his hand as it slid into hers. He led her to the rocky cliff that overlooked the ocean, picking his way across the stones, never letting go of her hand. Finally, he seemed to have reached his destination and sat, and she joined him, letting the cloak slip from her shoulders and pool around her on the ground.

He did not speak, but she sensed his mood. There was a quiet sort of pain in him tonight, and as she sat beside him and dangled her legs over the edge, she knew that he had come to look at infinity with her.

She sat in silence, watching the waves crash relentlessly against the stones below. When she had been a child, before she had known magic, there had seemed to her to be magic in the sea, in its constant life and blithe disregard for the mortals who came to gaze on it. To the sea, their wars and struggles were but a single moment in the endless procession of time. Here, it did not matter who she had tried to be, or what would become of her, and there was comfort in that, though she could not say why.

She leaned her head against her husband's shoulder and felt the mingled warmth between them in the chilly air. The time was coming now, and she could not stop it anymore than she could stop the tide.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

*Chapter 37 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All fully italicized lines, and everything else you recognize, belong to JKR. I simply could not write this story without the amazing betaing and advice I receive from Shellsnapeluver, RedOrchid and OpalJade. Thank you, my dears.

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Their wands were delivered four days later. Hermione lifted hers from its box, relieved to find it warm and yielding to her touch. Ron had given her Bellatrix's wand to practice with, and it had felt dumb and heavy and somehow malevolent in her hands. But as pleased as she was to have a wand of her own again, the sight of Bill with a stack of boxes in his arms had made her chest feel cold and tight. They were going to Gringotts.

They had told Bill and Fleur nothing but that they were leaving and wanted to say their goodbyes and then be left in private. Bill had given them a long, measuring look before nodding. He and Fleur both looked an odd mixture of relieved and terrified.

"You will be safe?" Fleur asked, taking Hermione's arms and kissing her briefly on each cheek.

"As much as we can be," Hermione said.

"And you will contact us when you have done... whatever you need to do?" Bill said. He shook Harry's hand and embraced his brother.

"As soon as we're able," Harry assured him.

"I don't like this," Bill said. "It feels wrong, just letting you go back out there."

"You know we have to go," Ron said. "It's for--"

"Dumbledore, yes, I know," Bill said. "Still..."

Griphook stood watching the scene from the corner of the kitchen. His hooded eyes were unreadable.

There was another round of hugging and reassuring before Bill and Fleur turned and walked from the room. Hermione watched them ascending the stairs, Fleur's hand tucked into Bill's. As promised, they did not look back. For some reason, though they'd asked for privacy, it chilled her to watch them walk away. It made her feel somehow as if they were being left for dead.

"Ready?" Harry asked.

Hermione touched her bag. It was slung over her shoulder beneath her robes, which she had charmed to be several sizes larger to accommodate Bellatrix's height. At present, she knew she looked like a child playing dress-up in her mother's robes, and it was hard not to feel small and weak as she prepared to fill Bellatrix's shoes. She drew a flask of Polyjuice Potion from the bag and set it on the kitchen table.

There had been great disagreement over what to do with Ron. They certainly couldn't leave him behind, but he would not fit under the Invisibility Cloak with Harry and Griphook, and Polyjuicing him into another Death Eater had seemed like inviting trouble. It would be difficult enough to pass her off as Bellatrix Lestrange. In the end, they agreed that Hermione would use a Disguising Charm on him, and if anyone asked, they would identify him as a foreign wizard sympathetic to the Dark Lord's regime.

She pointed her wand at him. *"Dissimulo Adversus!"*

Harry gaped at Ron, and inwardly, Hermione grimaced a bit. Ron's hair had become long and chestnut brown, and his nose had shorted and turned up at the end. He was deeply tanned, as if all his freckles had run together; he was short, and... there was something about him that reminded her of a hippogriff... of something patched together out of disparate parts.

"What?" Ron said.

"Nothing. You'll do. Now, Harry, I think you and Griphook should get ready."

Harry bent down and allowed the goblin to climb onto his back. Griphook wrapped his arms around Harry's neck and twined his long fingers together at Harry's throat. Hermione threw the Invisibility Cloak over them.

There was nothing left to be done; no way to put it off even a moment longer. She uncorked her flask of Polyjuice and dropped in the chunk of Bellatrix Lestrange's hair. The potion hissed and bubbled, turning a purple so deep it was nearly black.

Hermione stared at the unappetizing potion for a moment before she cast a defeated look at the boys and drank it.

It hurt, though not as badly as it had back in her second year when she had accidentally turned herself into a cat. But still, there was a kind of... stretching... of her body, that felt unnatural, almost unholy. And as she stood before them, it was strange to see Ron's visceral response to her new form. He took a stumbling step backward and stuttered for a moment before saying, "Well done, Hermione. You look perfect. Just like her."

It was clear that he did not want to take her hand to Apparate, but she glowered at him and seized his wrist. They had to keep moving or risk being paralyzed with fear.

"Harry, grab on. Here we go."

They landed in the Leaky Cauldron, and the look that she had seen on Ron's face was echoed all around her. Tom, the old barman, seemed to wish to duck down beneath the bar and disappear.

"Good morning, Madam Lestrange," he whispered.

Hermione nodded curtly, but inside she was afraid. When they left this dark, close room, when she had to speak, could she possibly pull it off? It had all seemed quite logical back in Shell Cottage. She would drink the potion, and it would fool the Gringotts goblins. But now it seemed ridiculous at best. No one would be fooled. As if to confirm her fears, the barman stared after her curiously.

She raised the heavy, unfamiliar wand and tapped the bricks outside the bar, breathing heavily as they swirled away, leaving nothing but open space. She turned back as they walked through the archway. This was foolish; there was still time to go back to Shell Cottage. She simply could not do this; there was no way for her to *be* this person.

But Ron grabbed her arm and guided her forcefully through. "Too late," he said, under his breath.

For they had been seen. There were people out, people shopping, and Hermione's mind could hardly process the idea. Somewhere inside, she must have known that the world had gone on, that people continued to need robes and potion ingredients, food and company, but it seemed unfathomable that there would be people out in Diagon Alley, living on, despite all that was happening.

Several people ducked quickly into shops as she and Ron approached, but there were others who came toward her, their hands extended in supplication.

*"My children!"* screamed a man in tattered robes, his left eye covered in a bloody bandage, *Where are my children? What has he done with them? You know!*

The moment had come. As the man crawled toward her, Hermione snapped her head up and pushed her thoughts, *herself*, down deep below the surface of her mind. *My husband stands before Voldemort himself, and he is not afraid*, she thought, before she drew her wand and blasted the man aside with a Stunner. Ron looked aghast, but she refused to think of that. This was her role to play, and she would play it. She would do it because they had no choice anymore, and she would not be captured in the middle of Diagon Alley on this bright spring morning. They had come too far to fail now. She swept her robes up in a grand flourish as she stepped daintily over the place where the man had been, as if she could not bear to tread on ground that had been so besmirched.

She strode toward the huge marble building that towered over the rest of Diagon Alley. She had the oddest sense, as she began to climb the steps up to the bronze doors of Gringotts, that she was actually becoming someone else. Her intimidation faded, and she drew herself up to Bellatrix's full height. Her brows lifted subtly, and her features drew down into a look of quiet contempt. *Was this how he did it?* she thought. *Was there more than one Snape?*

As they approached the heavy doors of the bank, two wizards stepped forward, brandishing slim, white Probity Probes. Griphook had warned them of the guards, and Hermione did not falter as she walked toward them, relying on Harry to Confund them, as they'd planned.

"*One moment, madam,*" said a guard as she swept past him.

*Trust. Trust*, she thought. *"But you've just done that!"* she said, fixing the guard with a malevolent stare.

He retreated at once, looking confused.

Hermione proceeded to the long counter at which several goblins sat, *scribbling in large ledgers, weighing coins in brass scales, and examining precious stones through eyeglasses*. She had never been to this counter before. Each time that she and her parents had come to Gringotts, they had queued at a window to the left, which bore a large sign advertising the day's Galleon-to-Pound exchange rate. But she had been over this with Harry and Ron, and she swept up to the counter.

"*Madam Lestrange!*" the goblin before them exclaimed. *"How may I help you today?"*

There was something in the way the goblin looked at her—it was not quite alarm or surprise, but something cold and gleaming in his eye—that told her that they already knew. Gringotts had already been informed of the theft of Bellatrix's key and wand. What was most difficult for Hermione in that moment was remaining still and calm. She had no urge to run; there was no way they could escape now that they had begun, but she longed to draw her own wand—her good, responsive wand—from beneath Bellatrix's robes and Stun the goblins herself. It was not that she did not trust Harry and Ron... but it was difficult to stand by and wait for help to come.

"*I wish to enter my vault,*" she said imperiously, as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening. Could Harry possibly Confund them all? Did he realize what was happening?

When the goblin asked for her wand as identification, she protested, but could not think what to do except to hand it over. The longer this could play out as a friendly exchange, the longer they could keep from open warfare, the better. To be trapped in Gringotts... the thought horrified her. She supposed only Azkaban was more secure.

After a moment, the goblin handed back Bellatrix's wand. "And your key?" he said.

Hermione retrieved the key from where she had strung it around her neck. Was it her imagination, or had the goblin started slightly? She held out the tiny golden key.

"Very well. All seems in order," he said and stood up briskly. "I shall escort you myself."

Hermione looked down the line of goblins at the counter. They were not staring, not making any move to stop her or Ron, and she wondered what Harry had cast. The Confundus Charm, or some kind of Distracting Hex? Perhaps a combination... *Stop*, she thought sharply. *Whatever it is, it's working.*

The goblin led them through a door off of the main hall and into a dank little tunnel. He whistled, and a small cart appeared. She and Ron clambered in, trying not to leave too obvious a hole between them for Harry, but the goblin stared curiously into the empty space and the witch and wizard who sat smashed against the sides of the cart. Then, just as suddenly as he had taken notice of it, he seemed to forget it again and whistled once more, this time a high and drawn out tune.

Hermione recognized it from their planning with Griphook. It was not the danger whistle. He had whistled for the deepest level of Gringotts, twenty kilometers below London, where the oldest families kept their gold. For now, he believed.

The cart shot abruptly away from the doorway, bearing them deeper and deeper into Gringotts, twisting through impossibly narrow passages, then suddenly taking hairpin turns. Hermione grasped the edge of the cart and held on tightly. Deep below the thick blanket of her Occlumency, a cold fist of terror squeezed her stomach. There was no way to memorize the path they were taking; they were going too fast. The map would be all they had to rely on to guide their escape if the goblin were to discover them. The map and Griphook, its creator. Once again, Hermione felt the maddening unease of being completely at someone else's mercy.

The air grew chilly and damp, and the stone walls dripped with moisture. The very darkness seemed to bear down on them as they moved into the final labyrinthine passageways that marked the end of the Gringotts tunnels. The fires that burned from sconces on the walls seemed robbed of both heat and light, as if they knew that they were only guests in this underground world. Finally, the cart ground to a halt outside one of the last vaults.

Hermione produced the key once more, and the goblin stepped lightly from the cart and pressed his long fingered palm against the door to the Lestrage's vault; the wood melted away obediently. Then, he retreated to the cart, leaving them in the privacy of the chamber.

Hermione struggled to keep her thoughts below the surface, not to react to the contents of the vault. For she had never seen anything comparable to the Lestrage's wealth. There were huge hills of gold coins, piles of precious gems, ancient and clearly charmed pieces of furniture. Hermione saw what looked to be a knight encased in golden armour, swords, heavy silver dinnerware, jeweled flasks containing all manner of shimmering potions, even *a skull still wearing a crown.*

"Don't touch anything!" Harry yelled, as Ron picked up a galleon and then screamed, releasing it. A shower of coins fell from his hand, and he clutched his fist and held it to his chest. "You know what we were told! *Everything you touch will burn and multiply!*"

The vault, though it was huge, had seemed undersized to begin with, shrunken by the acres of gold it contained, and now Hermione was afraid to take a step, as it seemed all too likely that it would all come tumbling toward them, and they would be buried in mountains of burning treasure. She stood rooted to the spot, scanning the glittering mounds for anything that might bear the Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw crest. Ron lit his wand and slowly drew the light over the gold. Harry's arm emerged from beneath the cloak and joined him, adding his wand's feeble light into the gloom of the vault.

"There," Harry whispered, his beam of light settling onto a small golden cup that was resting on a high shelf on the south wall. "That's it."

There was no way to get it except to go over the coins that stood between them and the cup. Accio would not work; Griphook had explained that once they entered the tunnel, they would no longer be able to cast Summoning Charms. There was silence as they considered their predicament.

"I'm tallest," Ron said, finally. "I won't have to go far. Just up that mound, there, and I'll have it."

"But your hands," Hermione said. "Once you touch it--"

"We always knew that would happen," Ron said. "I can hang on."

"Get close to the exit, Hermione," Harry said. "When he steps on the gold, there's going to be an avalanche of coins coming, and I don't want you to go under. We'll have to move fast; there's--"

"But what about you?"

"Someone's going to have to stay and make sure Ron can get out. Here, you take... him... and this," he said, pulling the cloak from over his head.

"No! I don't want you uncovered," she said, glancing back at the vault's entryway. "When you get out, he'll see."

"And if you don't take the Cloak, *he'll* be seen! I won't have him burned or exposed for helping us."

Harry bent down, and the goblin, still wrapped in the Invisibility Cloak, slid from his back, rendering him completely visible. "Um, if you don't mind waiting in the tunnel?"

There was no reply, and Hermione could not see where the goblin had gone to. This did not feel right. At any moment, Griphook could signal the other goblin, and they could shoot away in the cart, taking with them all the information that they needed to get out, taking the Cloak.

"He won't leave, Hermione. He wants the sword," Harry said, seeming to read her discomfort.

*The sword.* If they were to keep their bargain, they had to kill the Horcrux quickly so that they could hand over the sword. She reached under her voluminous robes and pulled it from her bag.

"Ron, see if you can hook it with this," she said. "Then maybe you won't get burned too badly." She handed over what felt like the last of her protection in this dark and suffocating place.

"Go, Hermione," Harry said, and she reluctantly took a step toward the door.

Ron charged up the pile of gold, and Hermione watched, transfixed, as his feet slid and slipped beneath the showers of coins. Harry took a few stumbling steps backward as the fiery discs began to cascade through the air, radiating a heat that quickly filled the vault. Ron fumbled and fell to his knees, hissing as the molten metal covered his hands, and he began to sink--he was up to his knees now--

"Ron!" she screamed. Harry began to start up the pile toward him, but his movement only increased the fury of the Gemini Charm, and he, too, began to go under.

Sweat rolled down her body beneath the heavy robes. The vault was filling up with the stench of charring flesh and sizzling hair. She was seconds from charging into the gold herself, though what good it would do she had no idea. But the oppressive heat was clouding her thinking--all the composure she'd had as Bellatrix Lestrage was fading, and a single thought kept roaring through her mind: *burned and buried alive. Burned and buried alive.* The coins seemed to have become almost a living thing, a huge, fire-mouthed beast determined to consume them.

But then Ron seemed to put on a huge burst of strength, wrenching himself above the sucking, snapping jaws of the glowing coins and leaping toward the shelf that held the cup. He thrust the sword forward and hooked the cup neatly by the handle and quickly started down the mound, seizing Harry by the hair and dragging him along the surging wave of gold.

As the wave seemed to crest, coming toward her with furious speed, Hermione turned and dashed out of the vault into the dark tunnel, tripping over her robes as she ran, catching them up in her fists and charging onward, her screams echoing off the close walls of the tunnel. She felt branded by circles of fire as errant coins shot from the

vault and made contact with her shoulders, her neck, her fingertips as she frantically batted them away. Harry and Ron spilled forth from the vault, scrambling to their feet, dancing wildly, shaking the coins from their skin. They leaped away as the gold pursued them, still multiplying where it touched their shoes, singeing holes clean through the leather. The three of them ran up the track, away from the charmed treasure until they were free of the cursed metal.

"Kill it!" Hermione shrieked, heedless now of who might be watching, only wanting, *needing* this all to have been for a purpose, to have some reason for the raw, disfigured faces of her friends before her.

"Hermione--the Polyjuice--" Ron shouted.

"I don't care! Do it!"

Ron thrust the sword into Harry's hands, and he slid the cup from the blade, trapping it against the stone wall of the tunnel. Raising the sword above his head, he seemed to brace himself and then plunged it into the bowl of the golden cup. A dreadful shriek rent the air, far too loud in the closeness of the tunnel, and it seemed to spiral ever higher, bounding and rebounding off the walls until Hermione thought her head would burst. She fell to her knees, clutching her ears, and watched as a sickly black substance rose from the severed cup. It swirled like heavy smoke into the air, and she removed her hands from her ears to clap them over her mouth. Something deep inside told her that she must not breathe *that*.

When it had dissipated, she looked at the boys, their skin purplish and raw, melted looking, their robes barely more than tattered bits of cloth, and she began to fumble beneath her too-large robes.

"Come here... Dittany... let me help," she gasped.

But all Harry said was, "Griphook! Where's Griphook?"

Hermione turned and looked back at the wreckage in the tunnel, the mound of steaming treasure, and a horrible certainty surged like adrenaline through her blood. "The cart," she whispered. "The cart is gone."

Ron stepped up beside her. "You don't think he--"

"No!" Harry said. "He wouldn't. He wouldn't leave us here. Maybe he's buried, maybe--"

Harry started back toward the gold, and Hermione grabbed his arm, quickly releasing him when he hissed with pain.

"Harry, stop--you can't! If he's under there, you'll just make it worse, heavier, hotter--"

But the goblin pulled off the Cloak as he walked easily over the false gold toward them.

"Griphook!" Hermione shouted in relief. "Thank god. Are you all right? What happened?"

"I am fine. My skin is not so... susceptible... as your own. As for what happened, I think he knew even before the gold began to replicate," Griphook said in his rough, guttural voice, and Hermione found his tone difficult to read. "The Imperius Curse was not cast strongly enough. And you said each other's names."

*The Imperius Curse?* She turned to Harry, amazed, and yet, why should she be amazed? She herself had Stunned a man in Diagon Alley for no better reason than that she'd had to be Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Thank you for staying," Harry said, and he held the hilt of the sword out to Griphook, but Griphook shook his head.

"I cannot carry it through the tunnels. I will have to trust you a bit longer."

"How long will it be before they come after us?" Hermione asked. The loss of the cart had sent her mind spinning through the long, dark passageways of Gringotts. Her feet itched to run.

"Come after you?"

"Yes, how long ago did he leave? Will Gringotts security come first, or will he call the Ministry straight away? Is there somewhere we can hide?"

"Miss Granger," Griphook said inscrutably. "They will not send anyone after you."

"What do you mean? You said he knew--that he realized--"

"Bogrod recognized your deceit, yes, but he will not be sending the guards down after you. Tend your wounds. There is time."

"Do you mean that they're helping us?" Ron asked.

"Of course not. No search party will be sent because it is not Gringotts policy to pursue thieves. They assume that you will wander the tunnels until you die. Then, whatever you have stolen will be reclaimed and returned to the proper vault. No theft will have occurred, as no treasure left the building. Gringotts goblins take their reputation very seriously. It would not do to advertise breaches of security."

*They assume that you will wander the tunnels until you die.*

"But you know, yes? You know how to get out?"

"I know the way through the tunnels. But they all lead to the main hall, Miss Granger. There is no way out but through. Attend to your wounds."

Hermione waved her wand to remove Ron's disguise. When his features had rearranged, he looked worse, if such a thing were possible. The burns seemed concentrated over the lower half of his face and neck, and Hermione knew she must work quickly to keep him from scarring. With trembling fingers, she withdrew her replenished stores of Dittany from the bag and began to smear the viscous liquid over Harry's and Ron's burns. For a while, the only sounds were the mingled hissing of the Dittany over raw flesh and the boys' sharp indrawn breath as she worked. Griphook stood beside them and watched, saying nothing. When she had finished, she mended their robes as best she could with her wand and stood back.

"Let me do you, Hermione," Harry said, and she peeled away her robes, revealing her own wounds. The Dittany stung, but the pain was tempered by Harry's gentle fingers. It amazed her how comforted she felt by simply being touched with care.

"All right?" he said finally.

"Yes," she said and took the bottle of Dittany. It was difficult to tell in the dark of the passageway, but it looked as if the bottle were nearly empty. She hoped that they would not have further need of it before the end as she tucked it back into the safety of the bag along with Bellatrix's key and wand. She shortened her robes, strengthened by the feeling of her own wand in her hand.

"Now what?" Ron said.

"Now we climb," Griphook answered.

"You can't call the cart back?"

"It would not respond to me," Griphook said, and whether it were sadness or censure in his voice, Hermione could not tell, but she was suddenly struck by the notion that he was as much an outcast from his own world as they were.

The goblin brushed past them and began to hobble down the tracks. Harry, Ron and Hermione followed, but it was frustrating to move so slowly. The track was on a mild incline and straight for several kilometers, and there were many times she wished she could offer to carry Griphook so that they might traverse the tunnels more quickly, but each time she glanced at him, she saw that his strange, wrinkled face was set with a kind of forbidding determination. She wondered what it was costing him to do this, to break the code of his people, and she dared not offend him.

"Griphook," Harry said as they walked.

"Yes?"

"I know you said that it's Gringotts policy not to pursue thieves."

"Yes."

"And I don't mean to sound as if I think terribly highly of myself or anything..."

"But you are Harry Potter. And you wonder if they are not contacting the Death Eaters as we wander in the dark?"

"Yes."

"From what I saw, I gather that you have destroyed something that belonged to the Dark Lord, something of value to him, and for this reason, you think that he will be notified. It is not so. The Gringotts goblins do not know or care what treasure lies in the Lestranger's vault. We have no stakes in a wizarding war. What we care for is the security of our bank. So long as you are down here, no treasure has been stolen and no alarm will be raised."

"But before my first year--the first day that I visited Gringotts--"

"You are referring to the attempted robbery of vault 713." Griphook's face was twisted with anger.

"Yes--the Philosopher's Stone--"

The track teed out before them, and Griphook turned down the left tunnel, picking up speed as he turned the corner.

"The vault was empty at the time," the goblin growled.

"I know, but it was in the paper. So surely, someone..."

"There is always great activity in the vaults just before September first," Griphook spat. "The thief was lucky to have been found alive. It so happened that the Malfoys visited their vault that day, and found him wandering, disoriented, in the tunnel. They brought him to the surface in their cart. He was released to Dumbledore as a courtesy. A courtesy that he repaid by informing the Daily Prophet."

There was no mistaking Griphook's tone. The goblin may not have been for Voldemort, but he certainly had no love for Dumbledore.

"He was released to... Dumbledore knew?" Harry exclaimed. "He knew it was Quirrell? Then why--"

"I have never been able to fathom the workings of Dumbledore's mind," Griphook said bitterly. "He employed the thief at a school for children, but informed the papers of the bank's failure... Of course, that is wizard business."

The path they had been traveling stopped abruptly, and Hermione wondered if they hadn't become lost after all. She had expected that there was a bend up ahead that she couldn't see, but now that she was upon it, there seemed no way forward.

But Griphook approached the wall without stopping and seemed to begin to climb right up the side of it. Hermione saw he had grasped the crosspieces of the track and was climbing them as he would a ladder. One by one, she and Harry and Ron began to climb behind him. No one spoke as they ascended the track. The climb was easy at first, but as time wore on, Hermione began to struggle, and by the time path had leveled out again, her arms and calves seemed to burn as the gold had burned her, and she was nearly in tears.

Griphook took a right so sharp that it was nearly a U-turn, and the three teenagers followed. Here, the tunnel continued to rise, but the incline was gradual so that they huffed only slightly as they climbed on through the dark.

Harry's voice broke the silence once more. "Griphook," he said. "Again, I do not mean to sound ungrateful, but... why did you help us? If you don't care about the war, that is. If the reputation of the bank is..."

The goblin did not look back, but continued to march along the tracks. Hermione thought that he must be stiffening up--his strides were jerky and uncoordinated, and his voice was low and tired as he replied. *How old is Griphook?* she wondered.

"Why did I help you?" Griphook said, but it was less a question than a statement. "Because, in the basement of Malfoy Manor, you saved me first. You could have left me there, or sent the elf back to get me once your own safety had been secured, but you sent me to safety first. I owe you a life debt."

They walked on in silence. Gradually, the air seemed to become less dense, and Hermione's breathing eased slightly. They had been walking for several hours, and yet they seemed no closer to the surface. She thought about the map Griphook had drawn for them. Had he left them, had he returned to the main hall in the cart with Bogrod, would they have been able to find their way out? *A life debt.* Wizards tossed the term around, but she had no real conception of what a thing might mean. Was it truly a spell, or was it a sense of honor bred deep in the bone? Did she owe her life to Snape, or he to her? Had the incident with the troll left her forever in Harry's debt, or had Godric's Hollow evened the score? Who could tell where love began and ended, where loyalty was replaced with magic?

"And in the vault," Griphook said quietly, picking up the conversation as if it had never ended as he chose a track that veered off to the left, "you sent me to safety; you did not reveal me as a traitor. You never said my name."

The path began to rise sharply again, though it never turned vertical as it had before. They climbed until Hermione was sure that she could go no further, and she asked if they could stop and rest.

"We have hiked for hours," Griphook said. "We must not stop. If you rest, your muscles will begin to cramp and bind, and you will not be able to go on. It is not much longer. We have made it beyond the dragons."

Another hour fell behind them. 'Not much longer' apparently meant something different to goblins than it did to wizards. Hermione felt her muscles trembling beneath her skin. Blisters had risen and broken on her feet so long before that she had somehow grown used to the pain and the sticky feeling of her socks inside her trainers. In fact, the pain and fatigue seemed to coalesce into a single tuneless hum inside her. The dark, the air around her--it all thrummed with the same ceaseless note.

Griphook turned back suddenly. "A Patronus. We need a Patronus."

Hermione looked up. She had not been aware that she had been staring at her feet, watching them rise and fall before her... for how long? How many kilometers? It was as if she had drifted into a kind of catatonia--lulled by the automatic motions of her body, its senseless pursuit of light and space. She looked at the boys and was surprised to see Ron's face streaked with tears.

"What--Ron?"

"A Patronus!" Griphook said again, and Hermione lifted her wand, but she could not seem to coax the otter into being. She turned to Harry. Surely, Harry could produce the Patronus... his was always so strong and clear... but Harry, too, seemed to be waving his wand fruitlessly.

*"Expecto Patronum! Expecto Patronum!"*

"Quickly now! We are approaching the surface. They've released the Despair!"

Ron did not lift his face or his wand, and Harry's face was constricted with effort. *"Expecto Patronum!"*

Hermione reached down into herself, below the shields she had put in place to take on the persona of Bellatrix Lestrange, below the pain and the darkness of the tunnel, down to where she kept the few hard truths that anchored her to the world. *"Expecto Patronum!"*

It surged out of her as if she had somehow exhaled her soul. Light burst from her wand, and a great hawk soared into the tunnel, so huge in the closeness that the tips of its wings seemed to brush the damp stone walls. The power of the spell seemed to light her from within. She could feel the link between herself and the bird in every cell, every beat of her heart.

"Hermione--what is that?"

"I--I don't know."

"Miss Granger, hold your Patronus steady for a moment. Mr Potter, Mr Weasley, get behind it. The goblins have released a spell of their own design. It is meant to suck out hope, to confuse and befuddle the mind, to turn you away from the exit even as you approach it. We are very near now."

Hermione could feel Harry's eyes on her as the group moved forward in a huddle behind the silvery hawk, but she kept her eyes on the Patronus. When they reached the heavy outer door of the tunnel, Griphook motioned for her to stop.

"I do not think that they will be expecting you--between the tunnels and the Despair, they will think you as good as dead. So you will have the benefit of surprise. However, do not think that because they are wandless that the goblins will not fight you. They will do anything in their power to keep you from leaving Gringotts. You will have to be fast, and you will have to be ruthless."

"What about you?" Harry asked.

"Do not worry about me. Goblins... if they have the choice between fighting you and fighting me, they will choose you."

"Griphook, I must ask one more thing."

Griphook looked at Harry warily.

"When we have escaped--the Lestranges will need to be notified."

Griphook looked mortally offended. He shook his head. "I cannot do that. The bank--I have told you--we do not report breaches--"

"You must! You-Know-Who must realize what has been taken from him. Griphook, please."

"My debt to you has been paid, Harry Potter! I have broken the code of my people. Do not ask me to dishonor them."

"The Dark Lord will show no honor to your people. If he wins, he will wrench the bank from your grasp and plunder its contents. He will banish you to the forests like the centaurs; he will steal your artifacts and call them his."

Griphook looked for a long time at the sword in Harry's hand. "Our artifacts," he said.

Hermione longed to stop this. The goblin's face had taken on a sickly, greenish hue. They had pushed him too hard, made him lead them down endless kilometers of track. Clearly, he was exhausted, defeated, and yet they asked him now to cast aside his deepest loyalties...

"Take the sword," he said finally. "Take the sword and make sure they see it. They will have to report its loss."

"Thank you, Griphook," Hermione said, but he shook his head and whispered, "Now the debt is reversed. You owe me."

She nodded.

"Keep the Patronus. It may confuse them," he said, and Harry raised his wand and blasted the door open.

The great hawk preceded them into the main hall of Gringotts, flapping its gigantic wings. Hermione felt in those fleeting few seconds as if she had never seen so much *space*; the ceiling seemed to rise into the heavens. But her attention was quickly redirected to the goblins who were scattering from behind the long counter, running toward them, their twisted faces angry, their teeth bared.

"Run!" Harry screamed.

She took off for the heavy bronze doors at the end of the hallway, but as she ran there began a deafening sound--a creaking, grinding sound--that seemed to shake the entire building. The walls had begun to slide together as if on runners. For a moment, she caught a glimpse of freedom, a dark slice of inky night as the door fell away, just before the slabs met and settled together. A long, red seam of magic glowed from between the walls for a moment and then faded, leaving nothing but a smooth expanse of white marble. There was no way out.

She slid to a halt and turned, watching, open-mouthed, as goblins seemed to pour into the main hall from all the doors along the corridor. For a split second, she recognized Griphook as he merged with his people, but soon he was indistinguishable, another twisted, angry face among the crowd of goblins that pursued them.

They were quickly surrounded. Hermione's back was pressed against Harry's shoulder, and she could feel Ron's elbow digging into her side. She shot rounds of Stunners from her wand, red light dancing and connecting, but the fallen goblins did not deter those who were still pressing in ever closer. They seemed moments from being subsumed entirely.

Hermione's mind went curiously blank as she fought. Fear became simply a fact as she threw hex after hex. She could hear the explosive sounds of magic coming from the boys' wands, the boom of spells that had missed and ricocheted off the floor, the squelch of a Stunner that had found its mark. But for all their determination, the goblins attacked with a ferocity that she thought rivaled her own. One threw himself forward and latched onto her, knocking her to the marble floor. She could feel the sharp

pointed teeth sinking into her shoulder, but then there was a flash of red light, and the goblin was blasted aside. Hermione's Patronus had dived between her and the screeching enemy, driving them back momentarily, and Ron seized her hand and hauled her to her feet.

"What the fuck?" he panted. "No way out! Fucking millions of them!" He turned back to the crowd. "*Stupefy! Stupefy!*"

Hermione whirled around, looking for Harry. He was brandishing the sword of Gryffindor in a wild, high arc, and the goblins danced away, but not before a piercing scream rose above the din, and she saw dark blood spattering the white marble.

"NO!" Harry bellowed. "No, I didn't mean to! Just get back! Get back!"

This seemed to drive the goblins into a frenzy, and their voices reached a furious pitch. "Thieves! Murderers! Stop them!"

Harry was being submerged in the crush of snarling goblins. Hermione could just see tufts of his hair as he went down. She ran back into the fray as Ron bashed the goblins aside with his wand and his fists, lifting and throwing them, trying to reclaim Harry. Suddenly, the goblins scattered. Hermione looked around for her Patronus, certain that it must have cut a path through the battle once more, but it soared above them, beating its heavy wings against the domed ceiling.

The floor shook beneath her. The goblins chattered and jeered in Gobbledegook. They had retreated into a large circle around Harry, Ron and herself. It was odd; they did not seem to be any nearer to releasing their prisoners, and yet the circle widened as the goblins pulled back further. They looked ready to run at the slightest provocation.

Then, suddenly, the entire world was shaken with sound. A roar so loud that it seemed to throb in Hermione's head emerged from the bowels of Gringotts, and she understood. They had released the dragons.

The building seemed to heave and settle. Hermione could nearly feel the gigantic beasts as they forced their way up from their caverns below the ground, smashing through the tunnels, shaking the very foundations of Gringotts. Shining, knife-sharp fear sliced through the false calm of Hermione's mind. *They would destroy their own bank before they let us escape*, she thought.

The goblins were pressed up against the walls now. They clearly expected the dragons to break through the floor in the center of the hall. Hermione grabbed Harry's hand and began to pull him from the middle of the room. "Dragons," she babbled. "Dragons coming... right through the floor... Got to get away... Come on!" But Harry seemed rooted to the spot. He was gazing at the goblins with sick horror.

"The walls," he said.

"What?"

"The walls. The building's going to come down around us."

Hermione followed his gaze. Harry had not been looking at the goblins after all, but at great, creeping cracks that had begun to emerge in the marble. Showers of dust and rock fell from the ceiling. The grinding noises were beginning to overtake even the roaring of the dragons.

"We'll be buried," he whispered.

Just then, an enormous chasm opened in the center of the hall. Hermione leaped backward, dragging Harry with her. Ron was at the far wall, where the door had been, and she ran toward him, glancing back over her shoulder at the beast emerging from the pit.

The sound was indescribable. Without the layers of rock to muffle it, the roaring filled the hall and rendered it into a huge echo chamber. Hermione clapped her hands over her ears, but it seemed she could feel the vibration of the air in her hands, in her face. She screamed, but could not hear her own voice.

A spiked tail emerged, bashing against the smooth floor, gouging away chunks of marble. The dragon backed into the hall through the hole it had made. Hermione could see its leathery wings and the curve of its spine as it rose. A huge ball of fire rolled along the floor like flaming petrol, and the goblins ran from it, huddling together on the other side of the room. Hermione could not seem to look away.

Suddenly, she felt Ron beating on her arm, and she turned to him, but could not hear the words he screamed. He pointed up, and she saw her own Patronus wiggling through a crack in the wall. *Good*, she thought crazily. *Save yourself*. She shrugged her shoulders at Ron and turned back toward the dragon, but he would not cease shaking her. He was pointing frantically at the wall where the Patronus had disappeared, nearly jumping up and down in his furious excitement.

Hermione tried to focus on him, but the dragon roared again, sending fire licking up the wall by the exchange counter. But this time, instead of dissipating, the fire found fuel and consumed the signs that had been magicked to the wall, moving along to the counter, taking records and chairs, stacks of pounds--anything it could find--into its hungry, growing maw.

Ron grasped her shoulders and turned her physically toward him. "OUT," he mouthed exaggeratedly. He pointed again to where the Patronus had disappeared. "OUT!"

The dragon staggered to its feet, now fully emerged from its chambers below the floor. Its head swung on its gigantic neck, and it seemed to be searching, itself, for a way out. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Harry take aim at the beast with his wand. She could not hear the words that he said, but the dragon stumbled back, enraged. One of its eyes had turned opaque and milky. *The Conjunctivitis Curse*. It roared again, and fire brushed past them, singeing the hems of Hermione's robes.

Half-blind, the dragon lurched furiously toward the wall of the bank and collided with it. The building trembled beneath her feet, and the squealing of stone on stone pierced the din. Ron grabbed her arm once more and leaned in, screaming into her ear at the top of his lungs. "Help it!"

Ron was pointing his wand at the wall behind them, the wall that the dragon fought against, the wall that led out into the street. She could not read the spell on his lips, but she watched as red light connected with the wall and tore away a chunk of rock.

The fire that had begun at the counters still raged and grew. Heat mounted in the main hall, and thick black smoke swirled overhead. If they didn't get out soon, they would smother. Coughing and choking, Hermione raised her wand and joined Ron in trying to blast through the thick outer wall of Gringotts.

"*Defodio! Deprimo! Defodio!*" She ran to and fro, blasting and gouging with her wand until she could see the night sky beyond. *Defodio! Diffindo!*

Ron disappeared for a moment and then returned to her side, dragging Harry behind him. The dragon, maddened by the flashing lights and showers of stone, charged the wall, swinging its enormous tail and scattering goblins left and right.

Huge chunks of rock flew through the air as Gringotts began to collapse in earnest. Hermione ducked and danced to avoid them as she tried to shove Harry and Ron through the crumbling wall.

"Go! Go!" she screamed and ran through after them. She stumbled on the steps leading down into Diagon Alley, and her knees buckled beneath her, taking the brunt of every step as she fell.

"Hermione!"

When they burst through, Hermione had expected to see crowds of people waiting to apprehend them, and she had the wild thought that they needn't have taken the sword of Gryffindor at all--surely, the Ministry was already on the way. But the shops around Gringotts were empty and dark, closed for the night, as if everyone had been in a hurry to return to the safety of their homes. Harry was running toward her, Ron's hand held tight in his, and he grabbed her and began to turn on the spot. She watched the

flailing dragon and the hordes of shrieking goblins melt away as they moved together into the squeezing, binding darkness.

They landed in a heap in an open field beside a lake. Moonlight shown off the water. The quiet and the stillness of their surroundings seemed like madness in the face of her pounding heart and surging adrenaline.

"Are we... are we all alive?" she whispered.

Ron sat up, disentangling himself from the pile of limbs, but Harry did not move.

"Harry!" Hermione said, pulling her left leg out from beneath his heavy body. "Harry!"

Harry's face was drawn and tight, his eyes squeezed shut. As Hermione began to open his robes, searching for the source of his injury, his head rolled from side to side.

"Harry! Harry!" Ron yelled, shaking him.

"*What did they take?*"

It was not Harry's voice that emerged from between his lips, but the high cold sound of Voldemort, and Hermione's blood seemed to stop in her veins. She and Ron both froze, as if Voldemort could look through Harry's eyes and see them.

Harry screamed, a sudden shriek of rage in someone else's voice, and Hermione clutched Ron's arm.

"What should we do?"

"I guess we wait."

The minutes stretched on as Hermione stared anxiously into Harry's face. Finally, his eyes opened.

"Hogwarts," he said, his voice thick and choked. "It's at Hogwarts. He knows. He's gone to check the others. There's not much time."

"What is it?" Ron asked.

"Don't know. He didn't think of it. But he's going to it last. He thinks it's safest because of Snape."

No one moved.

"We have to go! Harry, come on, get up," Ron said.

"Wait!" Hermione said. "We need to find out how to get in."

There was no time, no time to work around the boys. They'd seen the Patronus; she couldn't take that back, and if they put it together now, it would just have to be okay. It would just have to. Because there was only one person who could help them get into Hogwarts.

She whipped the bag over her head and drew from it Phineas Nigellus Black's portrait. "Headmaster Black! Headmaster Black, please!"

"Miss Granger, what a surprise," Black said silkily as half of him entered the portrait. "And with your usual decorum, I see."

"Headmaster Black, there's no time for that. I need to speak with the Headmaster. It's an emergency."

"I'm afraid the Headmaster has stepped out," he said, and she could not tell if he was lying in a fit of pique or if Snape were truly out of the office.

"Please, Headmaster. We're working on Dumbledore's orders--there's something we need in Hogwarts, and we have to get in immediately."

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss Granger," Black began, but he was interrupted by Dumbledore's voice, low and steady, but impossible to ignore.

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said. "I thought there might be one here, though I never could find it. I have always rather suspected that he dropped it off when he came to ask me for a job. But, never mind. The way into Hogwarts, Miss Granger, is through a portrait of my sister in the Hog's Head Inn. I believe it will take you into the Room of Requirement."

"Professor Dumbledore," Harry whispered. His eyes were round and glassy in the moonlight. He looked shattered.

"Harry, my boy. It is good to hear your voice. But make haste! Time is short. I am sure that we will have plenty of time to converse when your task is complete. Oh, and be sure to Apparate directly into the Hog's Head. I do believe there is a curfew in place."

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore," Hermione said, struggling to keep her voice steady. "Thank you, Headmaster Black."

She shoved the portrait back into the bag. Where was Snape? She had needed to hear his voice as much as she had needed to know the way into the school. Would he know that she was coming? She tapped her wand into her palm, striking the invisible golden circlet.

*On the way to Hogwarts.*

Hermione felt as if she were in a trance as Harry ushered her under the Invisibility Cloak. They were going back home.

*On the way to Hogwarts,* she thought. And they spun.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

*Chapter 38 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All fully italicized text comes from JKR's DH. Everything you recognize is hers; I make no money. As usual, my undying gratitude to Shellsnapelover, RedOrchid, and OpalJade for their help and insights. They make everything better. Well, guys, we're finally back at Hogwarts!

---

He had been summoned in the early evening. Darkness had just fallen over the castle, and Snape was beginning his nightly patrol. Since his argument with Dumbledore, he'd been making it a point to be seen around the school, either lurking in the Defense corridor on the second floor or pacing before the Room of Requirement. He knew that it was unlikely that he would find anything of use. The end approached, and soon the imbecilic Carrows and their punishments would be forgotten in the face of battle. Absentmindedly, Snape stroked the front of his robes. Though there was no visible sign of it, nothing to mar the smooth appearance of the fabric where it buttoned over his chest, he could feel, beneath the cloth, the round crystal phial that housed his memories.

There had been little to do since his return to Hogwarts. He had made the memory chain, and it was always with him now, even as he slept. But after creating such a thing, after planning his final goodbyes, it was difficult to sit and wait. Over the long and tedious days, he had arranged the documents necessary to ensure that Hermione would inherit Spinner's End and the meager amount of gold in his vault at Gringotts. He had completed these tasks slowly and methodically as time dragged on, punctuated only by detention requests and meals. It was strange to find so little to do, so little to occupy him, while he waited for the end to come.

When the Mark burned, he had not bothered to alert anyone to his destination, but hurried to the Apparition point and pressed the Mark firmly. He had not sensed any agitation or anger in the summons--it did not seem to be the one he had been waiting for--though he had no idea where he might end up. In a way, it hardly mattered to him. It felt good to have something to do again, something to report.

When the swirling pressure of Apparition ended, Snape found himself looking over a long, manicured green, dotted here and there with fountains and the beginnings of spring flowerbeds. He was high above the ground, and the night winds whipped his cloak open and spread the material like wings.

He glanced down at the heavy, gray stone on which he stood. He had arrived on the topmost balcony of Malfoy Manor, and the Dark Lord stood alone beside him, his own robes dancing in the breeze.

"Severus," he said, and if such a thing were possible, there was a kind of slimy warmth in his tone.

"My Lord."

"You must be wondering why I have brought you here."

"It is a lovely night. I am glad to share this view with you."

The Dark Lord smirked. "You play your role well, Severus. You have always understood your place. And truth be told, I am pleased that you are here. There is something that I wish to show you."

The hairs on the back of Snape's neck stood up. He had brought to a high, exposed place, alone with the Dark Lord, in the home of his rival. What was he going to be shown?

"You know that I have pushed the boundaries of magic much further than any other. You know that I have sought things that others found impossible... perhaps unnatural."

"Indeed, my Lord. Your innovation--"

"Yes, Severus. That's it exactly--my innovation. I have brought you here to show you my latest innovation."

"Excellent." Snape turned the corners of his mouth up in an approximation of a smile. He watched as the Dark Lord stepped up upon the parapet.

He was an impressive sight, of that there could be no question. His smooth, pale face, the glowing red eyes, his robes infused with their own strange life... Snape watched the Dark Lord as he prepared to fly with a mixture of revulsion and awe. He knew what was coming; he had heard the rumours, though he had not seen it himself on the night that they had pursued Potter to the safe house. But it seemed there was something oddly fitting about what the Dark Lord was about to do. He was no longer human; his soul, the man inside him, was damaged beyond repair, magical or otherwise. Perhaps... perhaps he had simply become something else. Something winged and strange.

"Watch me, Severus," he said and stepped off the edge.

He spoke no incantation, and it seemed at first that it was the wind that held him up, or some kind of Hover Charm, but slowly Voldemort began to move. He did not extend his hands before him, but kept them at his sides, and he pointed his toes as he swam through the air, soaring and diving, his robes flapping around him. Snape watched, mesmerized. The air was cool without being cold, and the smell of new grass traveled up from the lawns. He heard the distant chirpings of insects and saw one of Lucius's peacocks as it strutted self-importantly by the gate. The world was exactly as it had been, and yet, the Dark Lord flew. He did not seem to fight the wind so much as *become* the wind.

Finally, he arrived back on the balcony where Snape stood.

"Well, Severus?"

"My Lord," he said. "It was as beautiful as anything I have ever seen."

The Dark Lord gave a twisted little smile. "I believe you, Severus. I knew that you alone could appreciate what I have done."

"Thank you for allowing me to witness it."

"Oh, I intend to do more than that, Severus. I intend to share it with you."

"My Lord?"

"You have been a faithful servant. You have helped me to see what I need to defeat Potter. The boy is weak. His power is nothing compared to my own, but he has been aided by deep magics and coincidence. Now I have the tools to undo him, to crash through any barrier that might try to protect him. The time is drawing closer, I think, for our final confrontation. I am nearly prepared now."

"I am glad to hear it, my Lord."

"It has been a long year, and you have suffered, Severus. I have kept you isolated from me inside the school, and you have done your duty without complaint, though I know how you longed to leave the boundaries of the castle and join me, to aid our cause."

"Yes, my Lord."

"I will keep you immobile no longer. He who can fly is not bound by wizarding laws of transportation. He needs no Portkey, no broomstick, no Floo Powder. Anti-Apparition wards do not trouble him. When you can fly, Severus, nothing can keep you from me. If I summon you, I will know that you are coming, that no petty obstacles will stop you from reaching your destination."

Snape nodded.

"Give me your arm."

Snape held out his left arm. He was afraid, but he gave no sign. The Dark Lord had not touched his Mark since the day he burned it into Snape's arm with his wand, and the pain then... Everything inside him clenched with the effort not to recoil.

Voldemort brushed Snape's sleeve away, revealing the pale flesh, the harsh black lines.

"Lovely, Severus. So clear, even after all these years." He pressed two white, bony fingers against the Mark, but no pain shot through Snape's skin. Instead, the Mark tingled; it felt infused with warmth and a kind of heavy pressure, which seemed to sink into his body until it dissipated.

"A bit of my power, a bit of my skill is inside you now. Now, we cannot be separated. No matter the distance between us... we shall be united."

"I do not deserve such a gift, but I thank you, my Lord," Snape whispered.

"Would you like to try it?"

He did not want to try it. The thing in his arm... it did not hurt, but its presence was unwelcome. To bear a bit of the Dark Lord... it was abhorrent to him, and he longed to scratch the Mark, to dig at it with his fingernails, to root out whatever disgusting, unnatural thing had been placed inside him.

"Try it, Severus. See what freedom feels like."

Reluctantly, Snape stepped up onto the short stone wall. What if the Dark Lord had simply placed a Warming Charm on his arm? What if he intended to watch as Snape fell, as he crashed, broken, into the gardens below? He took a deep breath.

"Jump," Voldemort hissed.

Snape jumped. His stomach rose into his throat, and reflexively, he brought his knees up. Fast--so fast--

But then it seemed the wind took hold of him and straightened his body out again; it felt as if the air itself had begun to lift him, to guide him along its mysterious, invisible currents. He swooped low along the grounds, skimming the surface of a large fish pond and rising again to court the treetops. He doubled back at the end of the property and glided on a westward breeze back to the parapet. His eyes stung and burned from the wind, and his heart beat erratically, but it had been, in fact, like freedom.

"It is good, is it not?"

"It is... magic."

"Well said. Yes, Severus, it is magic. And it is yours now. But there can be no more of that for the time being. Someone approaches."

Snape followed the Dark Lord's gaze through the darkness to the front gates, where a goblin and a short, blond wizard stood. *A goblin*. Was it possible that while he had flown about Malfoy Manor, Hermione had gone to Gringotts? The Dark Lord sailed down from the tower as he had before, but Snape had understood that his instructions were to keep the gift a secret, so he turned into the house and ran through it, clattering down the stairs.

"Severus--what?" Narcissa shrieked when she saw him.

"You have visitors, Narcissa. The Dark Lord has gone to the gate to greet them."

Snape hurried across the lawn with Bellatrix, Lucius and Narcissa on his heels.

He arrived in time to hear the Dark Lord's terrible whisper. *"And they took? Tell me! What did they take?"*

The goblin fell to its knees, wringing its hands and stuttering. *"A... a s-small golden c-cup, m-my Lord, and... and the sword of G-Gr-Gryffindor."*

Voldemort threw his head back and shrieked with rage, like some primal creature howling at the moon. Snape took a few hasty steps backward as Voldemort drew his wand--Snape's eyes widened as he saw it, and his mind hissed, *the Deathstick*--and slashed it through the air, beheading the goblin cleanly. Lucius had Narcissa by the hand and was all but dragging her across the grounds to the house in his haste to escape the Dark Lord's wrath. Only Bellatrix and Snape remained.

Voldemort's eyes seemed to spark and burn in his head. He looked deranged with fury. "Go back to the school," he barked at Snape. "I believe that Harry Potter may attempt to break into Hogwarts tonight. If he does, he will likely go to Ravenclaw Tower. I am sending the Carrows to stand guard there," he said, pressing his mark.

"You do not wish me to go myself?"

"No. I want you... available to me... should the need arise."

Snape thought of his words upon the balcony, and knew for certain why Voldemort had bestowed on him this gift. *When you can fly, Severus, nothing can keep you from me. If I summon you, I will know that are coming, that no petty obstacles will stop you from reaching your destination.*

There was no need to reply, as Voldemort had turned his attention to the witch beside him. As he spun, the last thing Snape saw was Bellatrix as she crumpled to the ground at the Dark Lord's feet.

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He landed just outside the gates of Hogwarts and sprinted across the grounds.

*Potter was coming.*

As he burst into the Main Hall, he heard a crash from several floors above. Likely it was the Carrows, alerted by the Dark Lord and running to their post. Grabbing the connecting staircase before it could slide away from him, he shot up the steps to the seventh floor, tearing past the gargoyle and up the curving stairwell to his office. As he ran, he thought again and again, *Harry Potter, the Dark Lord said. Not Harry Potter and his cohorts, not Harry Potter and the Mudblood. Just Harry Potter. Harry Potter alone? What had happened in Gringotts?*

He threw the door open. "Where is she?" he bellowed.

"Beg pardon?" Phineas Nigellus said, looking mildly interested.

"Have you heard from her? The Dark Lord says that Harry Potter--" Snape stopped suddenly and tore the ring from his finger. The words broke over him like icy water. She was alive. She was alive and on the way to Hogwarts.

"The Granger girl? Yes, she contacted me only a few minutes ago."

Snape balled both hands into fists, digging his nails into his palms. "What did she say?" he asked, his voice quiet and terrible.

"She said they were on the way to Hogwarts. And Headmaster Dumbledore," Black inclined his head deferentially to the painting beside him, "told her to get in through the Room of Requirement."

Snape turned and looked at Dumbledore, who was staring back serenely from his portrait.

"Harry Potter has business in the castle, tonight, Severus. It is imperative that you--"

"You doddering old fool! I know what business Harry Potter has in this castle. Where is it?"

"Where is what?"

"Must I spell it all out? There is no time for this. Where is the Horcrux? How can I help them?"

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed. "I do not know where the Horcrux is, Severus."

"Then you are of no use to me," Snape said. He crossed to the fireplace, waved his wand to open the Floo connection, and grabbed the jar of Floo Powder, throwing a prodigious quantity into the flames. "Minerva!" he yelled.

Behind him, in the office, he could hear Dumbledore's voice shouting, "Harry's mission must remain a secret--and you must not reveal yourself, Severus! You endanger any that you tell!"

There was no answer. He stared into Minerva McGonagall's sitting room, but there was no sign of her. He supposed that she was sleeping. "Minerva!"

She emerged from a door across from the fireplace, her hair loose and disheveled, tying her tartan dressing gown tightly.

"Severus, what on the earth--"

"Minerva, I have reason to believe that Harry Potter and his friends will be returning to the school tonight. The Dark Lord is aware of it and has sent the Carrows to Ravenclaw Tower to watch for him."

"Ravenclaw Tower? But why would Potter go to--"

"I do not know, but the Dark Lord believes it will be the case. I must ask you to go there immediately. Protect Potter from the Carrows if you find him. Try to stop them from using their Marks. It may buy us some time."

"But, Severus, if the Dark Lord thinks that Potter and the others will be on the grounds..."

"Yes, he will come. I have little doubt but that he will come and take Potter by force if he can. But do not alert the other Professors unless it seems these things will come to pass--if it can be forestalled... my cover must not be broken."

"I understand. I will leave now."

She made to turn toward the door, but he said, "Be careful, Minerva. The Carrows will be giddy with their own importance."

"I think I can handle those two gibbering fools, Severus."

He felt a rush of affection for his prim, old colleague and silently wished for her safety. "Very well. I will meet up with you as soon as possible."

He pulled back from the flames and went to his desk. From the top drawer, he pulled the sheaf of parchment with his last will and testament printed on it in his small, spiky script. He flipped through the pages and then pressed them to the desktop. He debated placing a Notice-Me Charm on it and then decided against it. Even if it sat here until a new Headmaster were installed, it would be found eventually. No one would be able to resist seeing the traitor Severus Snape's last words.

He picked up a stack of student records from the desk and began to refile them in the second drawer. Oddly, it seemed important to him that things be in order. Whoever came looking for evidence of his life, of his term as the Headmaster of Hogwarts... he wanted them to know that he had done the job efficiently, that he had not left loose ends.

"Severus," Dumbledore said, but Snape ignored him. He picked up a book and reshelfed it.

"I will not ask you how long you have known, but I will ask this: have you remembered your duty? Have you made plans to pass along my message to Harry?"

Snape finally looked up, fixing the portrait with a dead, black stare. "I have endured your insufferable chatter daily through this endless year. I have held my tongue as you belittled my wife, and I have followed your orders though you doomed me to death. I have stood for your betrayal, Dumbledore, for your schemes and your secrets, and now the time has come for me to play my final part. For the love of all that is holy, let me go in peace. I will bear your message to Potter, but I insist you get out of my sight."

"Where would you have me go?" Dumbledore was pale, but his eyes twinkled as if the two of them were sharing a long-agreed upon game.

"Into any portrait fool enough to have you. If you hurry, perhaps you can get good seats for the battle," Snape said bitterly. "Goodbye, Dumbledore."

Snape sat down at his desk. He did not turn to see if Dumbledore had indeed left his portrait, but the room had gone silent. He pressed his hand to the bottle beneath his robes and began, once more, to wait.

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A man who looked unnervingly like Dumbledore gone to seed rose abruptly from behind the bar as Harry, Ron and Hermione Apparated with pop into the Hog's Head.

"Fools!" he hissed. "Upstairs, now. I'll be lucky if there isn't a pack of Death Eaters on your tail. Go!"

The three of them stumbled up the rickety wooden steps. It was nearly impossible to climb three abreast, and Hermione knew that their feet were exposed, but they ascended the stairs as quickly as they were able.

"Who was that?" Harry whispered. He looked as if he had seen a ghost. Hermione pulled the cloak from over their heads and stuffed it into her bag.

"Aberforth, of course," she said.

"Who's Aberforth?" Ron asked.

"Dumbledore's brother," Harry answered.

"So that's why there's a portrait of--"

Hermione pointed at a painting that hung above a small fireplace in the center of the back wall. A young girl looked out at them calmly, a funny half-smile upon her lips. It

was hard to imagine that Dumbledore himself must once have been so young, that he could have had a sister with shy eyes exactly the same color as her brothers'.

"Hello," Hermione said politely, but the girl in the portrait did not respond.

"Should we just go?" Ron asked.

"No, Ron. That would be even ruder than the fact that we just endangered him by popping into the middle of his bar. And besides, we don't know how the portrait works. Dumbledore said the way was through it... but I've never heard of wizards being able to enter portraits."

Harry continued to stare, slightly slack-jawed, at Ariana Dumbledore.

Finally, they heard the creaking of the wooden staircase. The three of them stepped closer together, and Hermione slowly drew her wand from her pocket.

"You risk my life by barreling into this bar, Miss Granger, and now you're going to hex me?" Aberforth said as he hobbled into the room, one of his grizzled eyebrows raised.

Hermione dropped her wand hand apologetically. "I'm sorry, sir. I just wasn't sure it was you. How did you know my name?"

Aberforth shuffled to a chair by the hearth and sat down.

"How do I know your name?" he huffed. "Your picture's up all over this town, isn't it? Undesirable Number Two. All three of you. Rumour has it you escaped Malfoy Manor."

Harry looked stricken. "Hermione, Ron... I'm sorry. I never meant--"

"Don't be an idiot," Ron said. "We always knew this would happen. Besides, now I've finally done something my brothers haven't."

Hermione looked fondly at Ron, but she turned when Aberforth began to speak.

"You'll have to spend the night," he said tiredly. "I can feed you, and you can stay here until daybreak, when the curfew lifts. I don't know why the hell you've come, but you need to get as far away from here as possible. You're damned lucky no one saw you."

"We can't do that," Harry said.

"Beg pardon?"

"We've got to go to Hogwarts. There's something there we have to find. There isn't much time."

"The only thing you're going to find at Hogwarts, Mr Potter, is a sorry end. Snape's there, in case you've forgotten. He killed my fool of a brother. I'm sure he'd be only too happy to do you as well."

"Mr Dumbledore... I'm terribly sorry about your brother. But before he died, he left me a job. Something I've got to do, and we need to get--"

Aberforth crossed his legs and leaned back in the chair. *Did he, now? Nice job, I hope? Pleasant? Easy? Sort of thing you'd expect an unqualified wizard kid and his friends to be able to do without overstretching themselves?"*

"*You don't understand,*" said Harry.

"*Oh, don't I?"* said Aberforth quietly. "*You don't think I understood my own brother?"*"

"Your brother..." Harry seemed to want to yell, but thought better of it. Calmly he went on, "He knew how to destroy the Dark Lord. He told me--he said it had to be me; he said I had to--"

"Really? How fascinating. *And did he tell you everything, was he honest with you?"*

Harry paused for a long time. "I knew the danger," he said, but his eyes looked wary. Hermione could hardly breathe. This was not the time for Harry's confidence in Dumbledore to fail. But she looked at Aberforth with a kind of gratitude, all the same. Here was someone who knew what she did, who knew how ruthlessly Dumbledore had used them, how he had handpicked them and groomed them for their tasks. She looked at Harry. Had she been chosen for him? Chosen to be Undesirable Number Two, perhaps for her wandwork and her studious nature? Did it matter? Would she love him less if she had?

"*I knew my brother, Potter. He learned secrecy at our mother's knee. Secrets and lies, that's how we grew up, and Albus... he was a natural.*"

"It doesn't matter," Ron said, and both Harry and Aberforth turned to him, clearly startled.

"What?" Harry said.

"Whether he tricked us. Whether we knew everything or not. Did he make me sit next to you in that compartment on the train, that first day? Did he have to tell me that it doesn't matter that Hermione is Muggle-born? You can't trick people into loving each other, into knowing what's right. We want to fight. Now, we need a way into Hogwarts, and Dumbledore says it's through that portrait there. Are you going to help us or not?"

Hermione looked at Ron, whose face had turned an alarming purplish color. His fists were balled up, and he looked mortified. She did not think she had ever loved him so fiercely.

"It's madness you're talking, madness to fight him. You'll kill yourselves. What are the lot of you? Seventeen? You think because you've managed to hide this long that you'll have a chance against him? My brother filled your heads with nonsense. The war is over. We've lost."

"*No, it isn't.*" Harry said. "*Your brother knew how to finish You-Know-Who, and he passed the knowledge on to me. I'm going to keep going until I succeed--or I die. Don't think I don't know how this might end. I've known it for years. We need to get into Hogwarts. If you won't help us, we'll wait until morning and find our own way in.*"

Aberforth gave a gusty sigh. "You think you know what death is, at seventeen? What love is, for that matter? You say my brother knew how to defeat You-Know-Who. Why didn't he do it, then? Why'd he leave it to a bunch of kids? Got himself killed, that's what he did. Same as you will." He rose and walked to the chimneypiece. "God forgive me for this. Ariana, *you know what to do.*"

The girl in the portrait turned away from them, still wearing her enigmatic smile, and strode away, not out of her frame, but somehow deeper inside it, as if she were walking down a long corridor behind her.

"What--" Ron began, but his question was drowned out by Hermione's excited shriek and Harry's exclamation. "Neville!"

Suddenly the portrait *swung forward on the wall like a little door, and the entrance to a real tunnel was revealed*. Before it, framed in the blackness, crouched Neville Longbottom, his hands outstretched, his hair shaggy, and his face cut and bruised.

"We've waited so long," he said, and his voice bore tinges of great excitement and sadness, both. "Come on, then. Come on, where we can see you."

Hermione held up her hands, and Neville took them. Ron boosted her up over the fireplace, and she crawled into the tunnel. Then, Ron and Harry hoisted themselves up. Hermione watched as Harry turned back and stuck a hand out of the portrait hole. "Thank you," he said.

"Don't thank me. I've sent you to your doom is what I've done. No better than my brother, in the end, I suppose. Take care, the lot of you. If you survive, it'll be one less thing on my head."

"I'll do my best," Harry said and shook Aberforth's hand.

Neville had begun climbing up a set of ancient looking stone steps. Hermione followed. *Neville, what's happened to you? What the hell is going on at Hogwarts?*

Neville looked back at her and then kept climbing. "It started out all right," he said, and there was a world-weariness to his tone that Hermione did not recognize. "I mean, it was bad, don't get me wrong. Lots of people didn't come back at all--Dean, you three, Justin Finch-Fletchley... most of the Muggle-borns."

They kept climbing as Neville spoke. "But things started out pretty normal. It was weird without you, of course, and a lot of times, we heard rumours about what was going on outside, but you know... there were classes, and meals, Quidditch games, even. The normal stuff. The Carrows were teaching Defense and Muggle Studies, which we all knew was a joke... but it was okay. Punishments were maybe even easier than they used to be. It all went through Snape, see? Anything we were caught doing--they couldn't punish us. Not the Carrows, not even the regular teachers. Snape took care of all that. When Ginny and I tried to take the sword of Gryffindor--I thought we'd be dead for sure, but Snape sent us to work with Hagrid. People started saying he'd gone soft or that maybe, you know, that he was sorry for what he did. I don't know. But then, after Christmas, he wasn't around very much. I guess the Carrows got tired of waiting for punishments that never came, and they... well. They started doing things their own way."

"Why didn't you go to Snape?" Hermione said. "If he was better, if he was supposed to be--"

"Go to Snape? And do what? Tell him his Death Eater friends were being too hard on us? Come on. And like I said, he wasn't around. Amycus Carrow... he started teaching the Cruciatus. You know, the curse Bellatrix used on my parents? Started using it on us for punishment, and some of the Slytherins... well, let's just say house rivalries have reached a new height."

"Neville..." Harry said. It was clear from his tone that he could not bear to hear it, that he was asking Neville to stop. But Neville, now that he was talking, seemed intent on telling them exactly what had been going on in their absence. Hermione wondered if he thought they had simply been in hiding.

"We didn't give up. Right up until we moved into the Room of Requirement, we were still fighting. Little things, I guess, like we ~~sneak out at night and put graffiti on the walls: Dumbledore's Army, Still Recruiting, stuff like that.~~ It drove them crazy."

"But if you were being punished--if they were hurting you, then why--"

"Because we had to. Don't you understand that? It was all that was left. You were gone, and people needed hope. After Christmas, dozens of people stayed home. Luna was captured, and we lost Ginny at Easter--they were winning. We had to show that we weren't giving up."

"Neville--we weren't... we weren't running, if that's what you thought."

He sighed. "I know that. I've always known it. If I didn't, maybe I would have given up, too. Just stayed home, or gone into hiding myself. But things are bad, here, okay. Things... just don't be surprised." He walked up to a little door and pushed it open.

"*Look who it is! Didn't I tell you?* he called as he pushed Hermione through the portrait hole. There was a little more vigor in his voice than before. "They came back! I told you they'd come back."

Hermione was seized by so many hands that she felt almost afraid, though the touches were friendly, joyful even. Parvati pulled her into a crushing hug, and when they parted, there were tears in both girls' eyes.

Hermione turned and saw Lavender sobbing into Ron's shoulder. His eyes were closed, and he rubbed her back in small, tight circles. Harry and Seamus were pounding each others' arms.

Finally, she had a chance to look around her. Through her tears, she saw that the Room looked as she had never seen it. Hammocks hung from the ceiling, and the banners of all four houses decorated the walls. There were squashy looking armchairs and wireless in the corner. It was like a child's vision of Hogwarts, a child who had been anticipating his letter since he had been old enough to know what it would mean.

"What is this place?" Hermione breathed.

"It's the Room of Requirement, of course," Neville said. "It's our hideout. We had to have someplace to go. Someplace where they couldn't get in, so we made our own Hogwarts."

Neville suddenly clapped his hands. It was clear to Hermione by the way everyone snapped to attention that this was all Neville's doing, that he was in charge here. He had spearheaded the fight and the retreat while they had been gone.

"So, what's the plan, Harry?"

"The plan?"

"Yeah, the plan. If you're back, it means we're fighting, right? We're fighting back. And that's good--we've had our chance to rest and heal, and we're ready. Just tell us what you need."

"Look, Neville, I think you've misunderstood. We--there's something we need at Hogwarts, something we need to do... we didn't come back to stay."

"I don't understand. Our contacts outside said... we heard you had broken out of Gringotts, we heard..."

Harry nodded.

"But you're not here to fight?"

"No, listen. Please, try to understand. Before we can fight, there are certain things we have to do--it won't make any difference to fight if we don't." Harry's eyes were pleading.

"So tell us what you're here to do. We'll help you."

"I can't," Harry said miserably.

Hermione thought of Aberforth's words, *raised on secrets and lies*... She thought of Professor McGonagall, of Luna, of Mr Ollivander. She thought of Dobby. There was death in telling, yes, but there was power, too. Power in friendships that could not be broken, power in love, in loyalty, in rightness. She thought of Ron with his fists balled up, speaking words the likes of which she had never heard him use. She thought of the way he and Harry had looked when they returned to the tent after destroying the

locket, the energy that had surged between them, and how it had felt when she had tugged him back through the tent flap.

"He already knows we know," she whispered to Harry. "Tell them."

Harry turned to her, disbelieving. "Hermione... tell them?"

"You don't have to say what it means. Just say what we're looking for."

"Okay," he said reluctantly. "Okay." But just then the portrait burst open once more, and Fred, George and Ginny Weasley spilled into the room.

It was nothing like what had happened before. No one rushed over with glad cries, no one beat on anyone else's back. Hermione watched as Harry saw her, as his face seemed to open and close and open again, as he fought against what was coming. Ginny seemed frozen at the entry. She was pale, but her cheeks burned fiery pink. She took a step forward.

Harry blinked slowly, as if he thought she would disappear. Then, he, too, stepped forward, and Hermione had to look away as Harry swept her into his arms and kissed her. The pain, both the pain that had just ended and the pain that was just beginning between them, seemed to burn her eyes.

When they broke apart, Hermione heard Ginny say, "What's the plan?"

"Okay," Harry said. He had Ginny's hand in a death grip, and he did not let go as he addressed the room. *There's something we need to find. Something--something that'll help us overthrow You-Know-Who. It's here at Hogwarts, but we don't know where. It might have belonged to Ravenclaw. Has anyone heard of an object like that? Has anyone ever come across something with her eagle on it, for instance?*

Luna and Dean were climbing through portrait hole, and the sight of Luna seemed to confirm her resolve to tell the others.

"Something of Ravenclaw's?" Luna said, staring serenely around the room as if she'd been there all along. "Well, there's her lost diadem."

"What's that?"

"It's like a little crown," Luna said. "She's wearing it in her statue in our common room. I can show you, if you like."

Harry looked searchingly at Ron and Hermione. Ron shrugged.

"There's only room for two under the Cloak, Harry," Hermione said. "You'll need Luna to get into Ravenclaw Tower. We'll stay here and get the others organized... you know, in case."

Harry looked undecided for a moment; he glanced down at his hand where it clutched Ginny's. "Go," Ginny said quietly. "I'll still be here when you get back."

But as she watched them disappear under the Invisibility Cloak, Hermione wanted to call them back. Why was she sending them away from her when they should be sticking together? "Come right back," she whispered to no one.

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Snape was Disillusioned, standing outside the entrance to Ravenclaw Tower. He watched as Luna Lovegood's hand appeared from nowhere and knocked on the door. He heard the door's question and Luna's answer and saw a sliver of the Ravenclaw common room as they passed invisibly through the doorway.

He watched as Minerva removed her own Disillusionment Charm, revealing the same wild hair and tartan dressing gown that she had worn when he asked her to watch Ravenclaw Tower. He smirked slightly. How long had they both stood here, each unaware of the other? Minerva crept forward and pressed her ear to the door. Suddenly the Mark burned with ferocious intensity, and he could not contain the hiss that escaped his lips. Minerva whirled around, wand raised, and he whispered, "She has summoned him. Hide yourself. Go in with the other."

Minerva ducked behind a nearby suit of armour and replaced the Disillusionment Charm. Snape stood, nearly blinded by the pain, and he felt the Dark Lord's thundering response surging through his blood. *I am coming.*

Amycus Carrow ran up the hallway and began to beat mercilessly on the door. *Alecto? Alecto? Are you there? Have you got him? Open the door!*

It was all happening now, all unfolding before him, as he watched in silence. Potter had come, and the idiot Alecto Carrow had captured him. Once again, Snape thought that Potter should be thanking Merlin that Hermione had accompanied him on this journey. Snape longed to Stun Amycus and burst into the room, but he remained motionless. If the Dark Lord were to question anyone here... everything would have to seem in order. Minerva became visible again, this time from further up the hall, and she approached angrily.

Together she and Amycus entered the room, and Snape leaned back against the wall. He was strung high and tight with nerves; each voice, each footstep had seemed as loud as thunder, and yet he was powerless to do anything but wait. Waiting, waiting... endless waiting for things he could not stop or control. It was maddening.

He heard a bang, raised voices, and then nothing. Nothing. What was happening? Snape nearly trembled with the desire to act, to do one memorable or heroic thing. He wanted to kill the Carrows, find the Horcrux, anything... anything to temper the helpless rage that rose inside of him.

When McGonagall emerged and sent her Patronuses galloping down the hallways, he could wait no longer, and he followed her as she ran down the hall. Were Potter and the Lovegood girl with her? Had they been injured in the struggle in the Tower? As soon as they reached the landing, he paused and removed the charm, stepping toward her loudly enough to cause Minerva to whirl on him once more.

"Snape," she growled, her face screwed into a credible impression of hatred. A bit of hope rose in him.

"Where are the Carrows?" he asked quietly.

"Wherever you told them to be, I expect," she said, her voice icy.

"I was under the impression that Alecto had apprehended an intruder."

"As if Alecto Carrow could apprehend her own left foot," she retorted.

Snape glanced at the space next to her. He could not see them, but they must have escaped safely. His heart rate slowed by a notch. He looked into Minerva's unyielding eyes.

"Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva? Because if you have, I must insist!"

With a sweep of her wand, she seemed to seize the fire from a nearby torch and Transfigure it into a flaming Griffin. But as the huge, beaked head lunged toward him, he swished his wand in return, and the Griffin became a rearing serpent, its hood spread wide. Yes, he thought to himself, *the old house rivalry serves again.* He was preparing his next counter-spell, a fine little charm that would turn her lasso of ruby colored flames into a shower of Slytherin green bees... And was it possible that he was enjoying this?

But the other professors were running up the corridor. *"Minerva!"* Flitwick shouted.

Snape leaped backward, looking over her shoulder, and a tongue of flame licked the hem of his robes. Minerva snatched it back with a twitch of her wand, and he put out the fire with his hands. Her face was white and wild looking.

"GO, Snape!" she screamed. "Leave this castle! Get far away from this place!"

Snape needed no further warning. He turned on his heel, throwing a Shield Charm behind him, and took off for the classrooms at the end of the hallway. The shield was quickly disabled; he could hear pounding feet behind him, and the sound of Minerva's voice yelling, "Let him run, then! We'll be well rid of the coward!"

He reached the first classroom, threw the door shut behind him and warded it. He dashed to the window, shoved it upward, and jumped.

The wind caught his robes as he fell, and he felt them billow out around him like heavy wings before his body seemed to merge with the wind. He rose steadily, circling Ravenclaw Tower and heading west. Windows were beginning to flood with light all over the castle. The teachers were waking the students.

He kept close to the school, drinking in the heavy stone of the archways, of the walls, and he thought it was a wonder that he could stay in the air, he felt so saturated, so weighted with memory. Here was the Charms classroom where he had learned to make a feather fly as he did now, so very long ago. Here, the Arthimancy corridor, where he had once set off a string of dung bombs and been given three weeks detention scrubbing the dungeon floors. He flew on, peering into windows until he came to the battlements of the Astronomy tower where Dumbledore had fallen, ended by Snape's own spell.

Then he swung out toward the lake, glimpsing the bench where Hermione had sat in the snow, the tree where he had once been tormented, past the Quidditch pitch and greenhouses, past the Whomping Willow. As he flew he stared and stared, as if he could never get enough *seeing*, enough remembering of this place that had been his home and would never be his home again. As he glided over Hagrid's hut, he descended, landing on his feet and running for the Forbidden Forest, where he could already see hooded figures congregating. The Death Eaters were here already. The battle would begin in moments.

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Hermione waited anxiously in the corridor, not caring anymore who might see her. There had been tremendous movement in the castle; she had heard the pounding of hundreds of feet on the staircases, mingled shouts and tears, orders given in familiar voices. Something was happening, but Harry was not back yet. Ginny had come out into the hallway with her. They paced silently without looking at each other.

When Harry came dashing up the corridor with Luna on his heels and the Invisibility Cloak balled up in his arms, it was hard to let Ginny go to him first. She had the fleeting thought that it would always be that way, that Ginny would never understand that her connection to Harry ran deeper than blood now, but her mind quickly offered, *Unless he dies, and then you will never have to explain.*

"Open the door wide," Harry yelled. "Get everyone out of the way. We're coming through!"

"What?" Hermione asked.

"Evacuating--sending the students out through the Hog's Head," he said breathlessly. "The Slytherins are on the way--tell everyone no dueling! We just want to get the underage out safely!"

Hermione leaned her back against the door, holding it open, and Ginny ran into the room and began shouting orders. After a few moments, she could see Professor Slughorn leading his students down the hallway. It had been almost a year since she'd last seen him, and she stared at him with eyes that had longed for the familiar for too long. Even his walrus-like mustache felt comforting. "On the way back, of course, my dear," he said. "Just have to help these students to Apparate--none of them old enough to have a license, you know."

She found she did not care whether it was the truth or not. Students filed past her, trooping through the room and into the portrait hole. Millicent Bulstrode, Tracy Davis, Malcolm Baddock. Faces she had known for years. No one met her eyes.

Behind the Slytherins came the Ravenclaws, and with each fresh wave of students, Hermione was struck anew with how young they all looked. Had she ever been so young? Was she now? She felt she must memorize each face, remember each person with whom she had ever shared a table at the library, beside whom she had sat at a Quidditch game or a meal. Lisa Turpin, Mandy Brocklehurst, Stewart Ackerley. The procession went on and on. Flitwick passed her and gave a little squeak of recognition. She smiled as he entered the room, ordering his students into the tunnel.

But when Professor McGonagall approached, Hermione could hold back tears no longer. Her face crumpled, and she shook as she stood against the heavy door of the Room.

"Miss Granger," McGonagall said sternly as she stopped at the door to guide the Gryffindors through. "Get a hold of yourself." But when Hermione looked into her face, she could see that the old woman was no less affected, and she slipped her hand into her professor's and squeezed.

"Did he..." she said under her breath. "Did he get out?"

"He did," McGonagall said tartly, not quite looking at her and giving a loud sniff. "And now if you'll excuse me, I have to attend to my students."

Hermione could not see most of the Hufflepuffs as they shuffled through the room, as she was half blind with tears and relief.

"Okay!" Harry's voice shouted. "Those who are fighting need to return to the Great Hall with the professors!"

Suddenly, it seemed the tide had reversed and people flooded out of the room, filling the hallways, pushing and whooping. Hermione could see Fred and George's ginger heads above the crowd as they leaped above the others; Remus Lupin; Kingsley Shacklebolt; Horace Slughorn, who had indeed returned; Fleur and Bill; Michael Corner; Cho Chang; Neville, his face twisted with determination... it stabbed her heart to see them all, all these people who had not given up, all these people prepared to fight, to die for this. Blaise Zabini pushed past, Dean and Luna, even Percy Weasley, and she was torn by the urge to rush after them, to take her place among those determined to live, and the need to stay and complete the task that lay before them.

Harry, Ron and Ginny emerged last from the Room.

"I know where it is," Harry said quietly. "As soon as I saw the statue, I remembered. I've seen it before. Ginny, you've got to go downstairs now."

"No! I'm staying with you."

Harry shook his head sadly. "Ginny, we've been through this. What I'm doing--I have to do it alone. Go downstairs and fight with your family."

"You *are* my family, you stupid prat!" Ginny said, her eyes blazing.

Harry reached up and seized her face in his hands. Ron turned pink, and Hermione studiously looked at her shoes.

"I know that. Ginny, I love you, and you're my family, and that's why you have to get away from here. I can't do this if it puts you in danger, and *have to do it*. Do you understand? I have to."

There was silence for a moment and then Ginny looked at him with a twisted little smile on her lips. "Go on, then," she said. "You get it done. Get it done and then you come right back for me. Do you understand me, Harry Potter? You come right back for me."

Harry leaned forward and pressed his forehead against hers. "I'm coming back. I swear to you."

Ginny said nothing else but took off down the hallway, her hair flying in long red ropes behind her.

Ron looked curiously at Harry, and Hermione knew that he wondered if it had been a good idea to promise something that none of them felt sure of. She remembered the day after Ron had returned to the tent, when Harry had explained what had happened with the Horcrux... *I'm going to get back to her, Hermione. I'm going to* She knew why he had promised. She would have done the same. It was as much a promise to himself as a promise to Ginny. A commitment to keep going, to keep being, to keep fighting. No matter what.

"The Horcrux is in the Room of Hidden Things. It's on a statue wearing a wig. I put it there when I hid Snape's potions book," Harry said.

Hermione's heart stuttered. But she had seen that, too! She knew exactly where it was.

"Do you have the sword?"

Hermione pulled it from her bag and handed it to Harry. The three of them walked into the hallway and shut the door on the little refuge that Neville had made for their army.

"I need to go where everything is hidden," Harry said three times as he paced before the wall across from the tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy.

A door appeared in the expanse of stone, and Hermione took the handle and pulled it open.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chapter 39 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: All italicized text belongs to JKR. These are her characters, and I make no money.

Very big thanks to Shellsnapelover, RedOrchid, and OpalJade, the most insightful beta-team around. I'm infinitely in your debt, and the story is richer for your thoughts. Thank you.

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The door to the Room of Requirement stood open, and the three of them looked at each other for a moment. This would be the last Horcrux before Nagini. Once they had done this, there would be no choice but to face him. Ron broke their gaze first and entered the Room, and Harry had just stepped across the threshold when Voldemort's voice boomed out around them, as if he had been hiding in the Room, as if they had unleashed him just by opening the door.

*"I know that you are preparing to fight. Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood."*

Hermione closed her eyes. It was now. He had come.

*"Give me Harry Potter, and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded. You have until midnight."*

Harry checked his watch. "Fifteen minutes," he said. "We have fifteen minutes."

He crossed into the Room, and Hermione followed. It was almost exactly as she remembered it, save the fact that one path seemed even more traveled than before. Chairs had been upended, and a thick gooey substance mixed with black powder covered the floor. Hermione followed Harry down the cleared path, until she saw the mangled cabinet with its door standing open. This was not the way. She turned back and picked her way through the rubble until she saw the graffitied bench. There. That was where she had climbed over, where she had stood frozen while Snape had distracted Draco. She stepped onto the bench once more, feeling time settling around her like a cloak. It had been a year, a year since she had last been here. Where was that girl, that student, who had come here looking for her lover? What had happened to her? She had the sudden, senseless thought that perhaps her old self was in this room somewhere, beneath a pile of tattered robes, hiding still.

The bust stood before her, and she walked to it calmly and plucked the diadem from its head. She turned it over in her hands. *Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure. They had found it. This was it. Wit beyond measure.* Hermione thought of her old self again, lying at the base of this very statue, studying a potions book. Was it possible that the legend of this thing were true? That the person who wore it was somehow enhanced? She had nearly finished settling the thing into her hair when she realized that she was crowning herself with a bit of Voldemort's soul, and she whipped it off again. She thought of Dumbledore's hand. What had she almost done? Was there some kind of enchantment on the thing? She had to get rid of it quickly.

"I have it!" she yelled, edging around a heavy wooden table covered with books and bottles. "I found it!"

Ron was in the center of the room when she reached it, but Harry had not come back. "Where is he?" she asked. The Horcrux was clutched tight in her fist.

"Dunno. I haven't seen him since we first got in. Harry?"

Hermione's mind was suddenly filled with the image of Harry climbing into the cabinet's open door, of Harry escaping and leaving them there. "Harry!"

She rushed down the open path to the cabinet. Harry's back was to her, and he had the sword of Gryffindor raised to shoulder height. "Harry!" she said, but he did not turn toward her.

"Ungh!" There was a splintering, crunching sound as the sword made contact with the wood of the cabinet. Harry raised it again. "Ungh!" He grunted with the effort, wrenching the blade from the wood and slamming it down again. The cabinet door hung by a hinge for a moment and then clattered to the floor.

Hermione approached him cautiously. "Harry, please. Please. We have the Horcrux. There's not much time."

"Fuck them!" Harry screamed as he drove the sword into the cabinet again. "Death Eaters in Hogwarts! Dumbledore..."

"I know. I know, please, Harry, but it's happening again, and we've got to stop it now. Give me the sword."

He did not hand it to her, but raised it in both fists above his head and stabbed the cabinet, as if he intended to pierce its heart. "Gaaaaah!" he screamed and sank to his knees before the cabinet's gaping mouth. Silence rang through the room. Ron shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably, seeming not to know where to look. Hermione wondered who Harry had pictured as he had rammed the sword home. Voldemort? Draco? Or someone else?

"If we win," she began.

"If we win, he'll still be dead."

"I know. We couldn't change it then, and we can't change it now. But we can do what he asked of us. We can still do that."

Harry did not move.

"I'm going to take the sword now, Harry," Hermione said gently. She stepped gingerly around him and took the hilt in both fists, stowing the diadem under her arm. She wiggled the blade back and forth until she could pry it from the wooden wound.

"C'mon, mate. Hermione's right. Let's get rid of this thing."

Harry's shoulders shook slightly, but he made no move to get up.

"It's okay. I'll do this one," Hermione said. She lay the silver circlet on the stone floor and raised the sword. It felt odd--theatric--in her hands. How high was she supposed to lift it? How hard did she have to hit? She had never wielded any weapon but her wand. But as her muscles tensed to strike, a high, cold voice permeated the silence. It was not the same as it had been when they had opened the door; it did not seem to come from everywhere, but from the diadem on the floor.

"Hermione Granger," the thing hissed. "I know you."

Ron met her eyes and shook his head frantically. "No," he said. "No, Hermione! It did this to me, too. It doesn't know anything--just stab it!"

"Oh, Miss Granger... I am so sorry to be the one to tell you." The diadem paused and chuckled almost sadly for a moment. "He's already dead. I killed him myself... less than a half an hour ago. If you find him now, you may feel a hint of warmth yet, in his skin. But perhaps not. He told me, just before he died... he told me to tell you..."

"Hermione--NO!" Harry shouted as she reached for the diadem.

"He told me to tell you he never loved you at all... He told me to tell you that he was mine until the very end... my spy, Miss Granger, not yours."

Hermione screamed as Harry wrenched the sword from her hands.

"He begged me to let him live..."

"Kill it!" Her voice tore through her throat as if it were still lodged in her chest somewhere, ripping everything free as it poured from her mouth. "Kill it!"

Harry stood pale and shocked, looking at her with wide, disbelieving eyes. "Hermione? *Fuck*, no, Hermione..." He shook his head as if to deny what was crossing over his face, through his mind. "It was Snape? It was Snape all this time?"

"I wish I could tell you his death had been painless, Miss Granger, but I'm afraid..."

"Harry, *please!* You don't understand--"

"He killed Dumbledore!" Harry roared.

"Harry, please listen! They planned it! Planned it between them--Dumbledore made him--he thought you would take the wand from Snape--Harry, I swear it--Dumbledore would tell you the same!"

Harry still stared at her, furious, uncomprehending. "This doesn't... I don't... SNAPE? How much does he know, Hermione? *How much have you told him?*"

"I... he... H-Harry, he already knew. Dumbledore's portrait... He brought us that sword--it was *his* Patronus in the forest, *his* *doe!* And in Malfoy Manor--you said yourself someone was helping us--*he* Stupefied Draco; he put the Shield Charm on you!"

"I'm afraid I had to hurt him rather badly... Have you ever heard him scream, Miss Granger? Have you heard him beg for mercy?"

Hermione grabbed the sword from Harry's boneless fingers. He made no move to stop her. She had no thoughts about how to do it now, but fell to her knees beside the cackling Horcrux and plunged the blade into the thickest part of the metal, feeling it give beneath the pressure, feeling a kind of sickening softness as she pierced the heart of the thing. It gave a low, winding moan as it died, and Harry took several stumbling steps backward clutching his scar, looking horrified.

His eyes were glassy and strange behind his glasses. His hand had not left his scar, and he seemed torn between the pleading voice at his feet and the voice that must be ringing through his head.

"He got us Bellatrix's key, Harry. He saved my life--all our lives. You have to trust me. This is me, Hermione... Harry, you know I would never betray you. Never. You said yourself there was something keeping me alive... Harry, please." She dropped her eyes to the floor. Why was this happening? Why now?

She heard the thin whistle of breath being let out through clenched teeth, and she turned to look at Ron. His brow was pinched, and his face was guarded, wary. He looked at her as if she were a curious animal he had never seen before, one that might be dangerous.

"Bloody hell, Hermione. Snape?"

She turned her face away from him, from both of them. *Snape*, they would keep saying, both of them, refusing to see, refusing to believe, just as she had known they would. So, the Horcrux would win, even in its death. It had found, perhaps when she settled the damned thing on her head, the one thing that would tear them apart, that would make them leave her.

Harry's voice, when it came, was quiet and wondering. "Hermione..."

She raised her head and met his eyes.

"Harry, please. I love him."

Harry's eyes locked with hers, and she wished that she had had time to learn Legilimency, that she could force her memories into his mind, that she could make him see

Snape as she saw him and show him how relentlessly he had fought on Harry's behalf... how he had come back from the bowels of hell to fight for Harry.

"Trust me," she whispered, and something did cross over Harry's face, but she could not tell what it was.

"Hermione... Voldemort has sent for him. He's sent Lucius Malfoy to fetch Snape. He says there is some... service... he requires of him." There was warning in Harry's voice, but Hermione could not tell if he was warning her of what was to come or warning her of Snape's treachery.

"Where?" was all she could manage.

"The Shrieking Shack."

Hermione was on her feet in seconds, leaping over a suit of armour that had fallen in her path and running for the door.

"Hermione, wait!"

When she pulled the door open, it was if it were Hogwarts and not the Room of Requirement that could magically transform. The battle had begun while they had fought their demons in the Room of Hidden Things, and it seemed the Death Eaters had already breached the enchantments of the school. As she ran down the hallway, she had to dodge crumbling stone and blasts of light from wands she could not see. She held her wand out in front of her and charged through the castle, veering among pairs of duelers. She jostled a startled grunt out of Professor Trelawney as she passed and ducked beneath an orange curse she could not identify. She heard running footsteps behind her as she approached the first staircase, but she would not be stopped by friends or enemies.

"*Glisseo!*" she screamed and threw herself onto the smooth expanse of marble that the staircase had become, sliding quickly toward the floor below. A broad, hooded Death Eater stood at the foot of the steps, and she hit him with a Blasting Curse as she slid and watched with curiously emotionless eyes as he was thrown backward. Her stride did not break as she reached the bottom; she launched herself directly to her feet and tore down the hallway. She saw Fred and Percy dueling a man who, beneath his mask, looked remarkably like the Minister of Magic, and as she passed he screamed, "The Muddblood!" but she heard nothing further as her feet carried her faster and faster toward the next staircase.

There was an explosion beneath her, and the floor began to tremble and give way. She turned and doubled back down the hallway. There was another staircase on the east wing of this floor, between a bathroom and the Muggle Studies classroom. Hermione focused only on where she was going. She did not look at the faces she passed, nor the bodies of those who lay crumpled in the corners. She could not afford to look, not afford to stop. Snape was on the way to the Shrieking Shack, and she would get there in time...

In time to what? It did not matter. It was simply one more thing not to think about. She heard her name with some distant part of her mind, but it did not trouble her as she ran. Part of the floor had collapsed here as well, but she would *not* be stuck on the sixth floor. The staircase she was running toward was trying to swing free, away from the wreckage, but it was hung up on a hunk of stone. She swung herself up over the balustrade and onto the steps, blasting aside the offending rock. The staircase shuddered and creaked as it tore itself free from the landing and swung her around to the opposite side of the castle, connecting to another staircase that seemed to have been trying desperately to find a mate. Down, down she ran, and once she reached the third floor, she was in the midst of a battle more furious than she had ever seen. People were swarming everywhere, some cloaked, some not, and even the statuary seemed to have come to life to join the battle. An armoured knight clanged down the hallway, swinging an enormous axe, and she was shoved aside by a stone gargoyle who ran snarling past her and sank its teeth into the knee of a masked figure who was shooting hexes at several retreating students. She forced herself not to look at their faces. Only two more floors to go now.

But the ground floor made the third floor look like dueling class. She was unable to dodge a Slashing Curse that flew by and tore through the sleeve of her robe and into her arm. She heard tortured screaming and saw Greyback's hunched form bent over a writhing figure, and she blasted him away, but the body remained on the ground ... a body wearing black robes and trainers and... no... not now. She would not focus on that now. Professor McGonagall ran by, her long hair loose and flying, her lips drawn back in a soundless scream as she shepherded a team of desks through the Main Hall. An unmasked Death Eater--that idiot Travers--appeared suddenly in a gap before her, and she Petrified him before he took aim at Lavender Brown, who was running with all her might to some spot behind Hermione, her face wide open with a strange mixture of fear and relief. She tried not to look, not to care, but there was Remus Lupin, his chest thrown out, and his hair blown back, looking so much more proud and purposeful than he had ever seemed to her before as he dueled Lucius Malfoy.

*Lucius Malfoy.* Why was he here? Harry said that he had gone to fetch Snape. Suddenly, Malfoy saw her, and the lazy sneer that he had worn as he traded curses with Remus disappeared. He turned to her with a face filled with self-righteous fury, and she knew he must have been badly punished after their escape from Malfoy Manor. He did not look like a man who wanted to fight--he looked like a man who wanted to rip her limb from limb and piss on the remains.

"*Incarcerous,*" she shrieked, and her spell collided with his in midair and sent showering sparks flying everywhere that hit her arms and face and burned like acid.

He brushed at his face for a moment and ran toward her, and she made a split second decision.

"*Sectumsempra!*"

He fell to the ground before her, clutching his face as blood poured from between his fingers, staining his long blond hair. "My face! My face, you fucking cunt; I'm going to--"

"Lucius!" Narcissa screamed from several yards away, and Hermione turned and Petrified her, watching as she toppled to the ground. Someone stepped on her and nearly fell as he ran past.

Lupin Stupefied Malfoy. "Hermione!" he yelled, but there was no time for that, and she took off once more for the huge wooden doors at the end of the hall. So close now. Soon she would be on the open ground.

"Hermione, *get down!*" That voice was unmistakable. That was Ron Weasley in a full-on panic, and she hit the ground flat, her face pressed against the stone, her eyes squeezed shut. She half-heard, half-felt the scuttling of thousands of feet as the spiders ploughed over her. The rough hairs of their legs scratched her face and neck, and she longed to scream, to flail, to beat and punch them away from her, but as long as they were moving and taking no notice of her, she would try to keep still. Finally, the clicking wave of spiders passed, and she felt Ron's broad hands on the back of her robes, lifting her onto her feet.

"What the bloody hell are you doing, running from us? That was me you socked in the gut in the third floor corridor, in case you were---" Suddenly, he snatched her backward as the stained glass windows in the Main Hall imploded. Glass shot through the air like hundreds of tiny darts, and she and Ron were both bleeding freely. She could see fire through the gaping holes where the windows had been.

Hermione tried to pull free of Ron's grasp, to run for the doors once more.

"Just wait for me and Harry for Merlin's sake!" he bellowed, but she felt her robes tear, and she shot away from him, leaving him with a handful of her sleeve. She tugged at the heavy wooden doors at the main entrance, but they would not open. However the Death Eaters had gotten into the castle, it had not been in the traditional way. Hermione leaped through the jagged remains of a window that had once depicted Salazar Slytherin. She was out.

Hermione ran harder than she had ever run in her life. Her chest heaved, and her sides were on fire with cramps but she pushed on, past the centaurs firing arrows at strange, creeping creatures she had never seen before, past the giants with their monstrous clubs, past shrieking figures all in black, past, past... until the grounds were engulfed in a different kind of darkness, a cold and sucking darkness that threatened to freeze her in place. Dementors. She tried to keep on, tried to push through the dangling black robes that whispered in the wind, whispered horrifying tales of death and madness and endless dark, tales of pain and blood and slithering things, moving through her mind, making her breath whistle in her throat.

"*Expecto Patronum*," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. *Expecto Patronum*."

Nothing came--not even a silvery wisp from her wand tip. Tears built behind her eyes--her husband was out there in the dark, dying? Dead? And she could not reach him; she could not go any further. She would lay here on the ground and let them take her, and he would never know that she had tried, tried to get there...

Then a shining silver hare bounded through the air in front of her, driving the Dementors back. Moments later a Jack Russell terrier joined the hare, and finally, a gigantic stag charged through, using its horns to lift the Dementors and throw them aside.

"Hermione, would you wait? Charging into a pack of Dementors is not--"

She turned and half-heartedly raised her wand. She could not stop the desperation, the tears in her voice. "I can't wait--I can't! You don't understand!"

Harry stepped up to face her. "No, I don't understand," he yelled. "I don't understand why you didn't tell me. But I have just as much interest in getting to Voldemort as you do, Hermione. We have to kill that snake. And as for Snape..." He paused and looked as if he were choking on the words. "You have never given me any reason--*any reason*--to doubt you. And I won't start now."

Hermione stood eye to eye with Harry. Though the words he had spoken were ones of peace, the tension between them remained. Hermione was nearly quivering with her need to run, to hit someone, *to get to Snape*.

"Luna," Ron said quietly.

"Oh, I know. You have to go on alone. Just--Hermione--"

Hermione turned to look at her friend and inspiration dawned. "Luna, you know! You tell them!"

"They don't need telling, Hermione. They just need you to let them go with you."

Ron took Hermione's hand and for a moment she wanted to yank it back, but she yielded when she felt him tugging her forward, tugging her toward the Whomping Willow. They began to run, and she leaned into the wind, pressing forward with all the strength she had left. Harry joined them quickly, and his stag cantered ahead of them like a beacon in the dark.

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Snape had hung back, lingering in the trees, watching the siege on Hogwarts. He had watched as the Death Eaters dismantled the wards protecting school as easily as if they had simply walked up, knocked on the doors and requested entry. They had smashed through the windows, blasted away a huge portion of the west wing of the ground floor and poured in through the ragged hole in the stone. He had seen the castle lit from within with fire like a giant blazing wound against the landscape and seen the frenzied movement of the battle inside.

He did not fight. It was not his destiny to die in battle, to reveal his true allegiance to those who made a final stand. His duty was to go to Voldemort when he was called, to make him believe that he had taken what was not Snape's to give him.

From behind him came the creatures of the deep, dark places. Hags and vampires, banshees and Dementors, floating, slithering, creeping onto the grounds, and the trolls, the giants, charging out of the hills, swinging their mighty clubs. Hogwarts was as good as lost. Who fought for the Light inside? A few ancient professors, the motley Order, and a handful of seventh years.

As he stood there, it occurred to him that this, too, could be laid at his feet. The Dark Lord attacked only to force them to give up Potter. Potter, a child, an ordinary child, marked for this by the rambling of a demented old woman. Had he not reported it to the Dark Lord, had he never revealed the contents of the prophecy, he would not be standing here, breathing the stench of death as he watched his home laid to waste.

So he would go, yes. He would go and give his life, meager compensation for the destruction he had caused. As he watched the burning of Hogwarts, he thought of Hermione, still inside, he presumed, though he had not heard a word from her since she had told him they were coming. Still inside, prepared, as he was, to give her life to save Potter because of what he had done. If there were any hope left to be had, if he had any right to hope, he hoped that she would die quickly and painlessly, that he might find her on the other side. That she might still love him if he did.

Lucius came toward him, his blond hair startling against the heavy, smoky night. As soon as he saw him, Snape knew the time had come. He touched his robes a final time; the bottle was still tucked securely inside. He would go now and do what had to be done. He left the cover of the trees.

"Lucius," he said.

"Snape. The Dark Lord requests your presence."

"Snape, is it now? Funny, I haven't felt--"

"He sent me to fetch you. He says he wants you immediately in the Shrieking Shack."

"I see."

"What have you been doing, Snape? Afraid to fight? Hiding in the--"

"The Dark Lord has plans for me that do not concern you, Lucius. Your job, apparently, is to be the errand boy."

Lucius raised his wand.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that if I were you. Didn't you come to tell me that our Lord requires me? It wouldn't do if I were... detained."

"Go on, then," Lucius growled. "Go to him, if you are not afraid."

Snape took two running steps and launched himself into the air. He could not stop himself from looking back at Lucius Malfoy, who stood slack-jawed on the ground, watching Snape's ascent into the sky. The smoke choked him, and he struggled to rise above it, to reach the clear night above the blanket of death. The stars lit his way over the Quidditch pitch, over the spiked gates of Hogwarts, now lying decimated on the ground. He flew over Hogsmeade to the Shrieking Shack, where he circled and landed inside the magical gates that protected the structure. He knocked three times upon the boarded door, and it fell away.

The Dark Lord stood at the top of the stairs. "Come, Severus," he said.

Snape climbed the stairs, acutely aware of each breath, each step, each beat of his heart as he ascended.

"Come and see."

Snape followed him to the back wall of the shack, which had been transformed into a one-way window. From here, the Dark Lord had watched his battle. Beside the window-wall, Nagini rested in a magical bubble, coiling and uncoiling in the starry sphere. *But keeps it safe beside him under magical protection...he thought. Then it will be time...*

"It is almost beautiful, almost tragic, is it not? Their foolish bravery." The Dark Lord shook his head as if at the antics of a beloved child. "They have no chance, and yet they struggle on. Why do they do it? Why do they think there is more honor in death than in life? When they could have..." he waved his hand to indicate the whole of Hogsmeade... Scotland... the world, "everything."

"They have had their heads filled with Dumbledore's nonsense, my Lord."

"Ah, Dumbledore. And yet, he was mine, too. Mine when I chose to ask for him. I thought that when they saw how easily he fell that they would realize, that they would come to me."

"You do not need fools, my Lord."

"No, perhaps not. Perhaps not, Severus. You have not been a fool."

"My Lord."

"It is true. Of all my followers, you have never troubled me with foolishness. You have grace, Severus. Wit. Talent."

"Your praise is staggering, my Lord. I do not--"

The Dark Lord smiled his broken smile. "You do. And that is why I regret what must happen."

"My Lord? What must happen?"

"This wand, Severus. This wand does not work for me."

Suddenly, Snape's skin was aflame with a different kind of awareness. Hermione was in the building. Hermione was here. He tried to glance around the room without attracting the Dark Lord's attention. Was she under the Cloak? Surely, she would not interfere, would not risk herself--she knew what must happen; she had heard Dumbledore--

"My Lord, I do not mean to contradict you, but the wand... Look at all you have done here. You have flown with that wand."

"No, Severus. In my hands, the wand is ordinary. Reluctant, even. I can coax from it this meager magic, but it is not the magic I need to kill Harry Potter."

He did not want to do this with Hermione present. This was not how it was supposed to happen. He had expected Potter--Potter to come to kill the snake, to take the memories--

"I think I know why that is, Severus."

"My Lord?"

"Do you know it, Severus? Do *you* know why it is?"

"No, my Lord. I... my Lord, Potter is weak--the child is weak; he has always been so! Let me go and find him myself. There will be no more mishaps. I will bring him to you myself and then we will see whose magic is--"

And now she would see him beg, which made him feel like screaming at the injustice of it all. The memories were to go to Potter--it was his final promise to Dumbledore, and if he did not carry it out then what was the point of dying in this disgusting place?

"No, Severus, do not dishonor yourself. You have been brave and loyal; you have done your duties without complaint. *You are a clever man*, as I said, and I think you know why I have called you here. "

"My Lord--"

"I have made Nagini a beautiful enclosure, yes?"

Snape's mind reeled. Where was the Dark Lord leading him? Did he know that Snape knew about the Horcruxes? "Nagini... yes," he repeated senselessly.

"I think Potter wants to kill my snake, Severus. My beloved familiar."

"Why would Potter want to kill Nagini, my Lord?"

"Because he childishly thinks it will give him power over me. But what he does not know is that, in a moment, even Nagini will be expendable. In a moment, I will have the power of Death's wand, the Wand of Destiny, the Deathstick. In a moment, I will take the mastery from you, Severus, as you took it from Dumbledore, and there will be nothing and no one that can stop me. *It cannot be any other way,*" said Voldemort. *"I must master the wand, Severus. Master the wand, and I master Potter at last."*

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Harry's arms were wrapped tightly around her, and Ron's hands covered her mouth. She fought viciously against them, driving her teeth into the fleshy pad beneath Ron's thumb, jabbing her elbow into Harry's ribs, kicking furiously at his knees, but the boys held her grimly and silently. A crate had been pushed against the entrance to the tunnel, but most of the room was still visible, and they watched in horror as Voldemort used the Elder Wand to reposition Nagini's strange, shining sphere. It descended over Snape's head and shoulders, and the snake wound around him almost affectionately, as if she knew her Master's favorite servant well, rubbing her smooth, triangular head against his cheek.

Voldemort hissed in parseltongue, and Harry's arms tightened around Hermione until she thought her ribs would crack, and she knew what must have been said.

"Goodbye, Severus," Voldemort said coldly, and there came a scream from within the bubble that would haunt her dreams for the rest of her life, as Nagini sank her fangs into Snape's throat. Hermione's knees buckled; it was only Harry's arms that held her upright now. She watched, unable to look away, as her husband crumpled to the floor, as his blood and some strange silvery substance ran in rivulets toward her through the dust and the cobwebs. Voldemort flicked the wand once more and strode from the room, Nagini's cage bobbing after him.

Harry and Ron kept her imprisoned a moment longer. When the sound of Voldemort's footfalls had died away, they released her, and she hit the crate with the full force of her body, slamming it out of the way and running to Snape's side. She sank to her knees, rolling him over and pressing the heel of her hand against his throat. She could feel his blood sliding thick and warm under the useless pressure of her palm; she could feel the spurting heat of it as his heart beat out the last of its life.

"Severus, no. Severus, no," she said as if the words were a talisman that could drive it all away. "Severus, no."

His hand scrabbled uselessly at his chest. *Perhaps he felt constricted, perhaps if he could breathe...* her mind gibbered, and she took the neck of his high-collared robes and gave an almighty yank, spilling the buttons across the wooden floor, hearing them dance and roll, mixed with the sound of her own chanting. "Severus, no. Severus, please, no."

"Bottle," he choked wetly. "Potter," and blood was leaking from the corners of his mouth now, and in a moment, she would have to know what she could not bear to know

now, and that was that her husband had already passed the point at which she could save him, that all she could do was stare into his eyes as he died.

"Bottle?"

His hand rose again, more feebly this time, and she began to feel inside his robes, to run her hands frantically over his chest until she found it, the remnants of a small bottle, not much bigger than three of her fingers.

"Potter," he said again, this time with a strangled gargling sound that made her want to shake him. *Stop this, Severus, you're frightening me. Stop this right now, she thought. Put this blood back where it belongs and sit up this instant, or I will never speak to you again.*

She looked frantically at Harry, her eyes pleading. "Please--please, whatever it is, take it--take it and go. He wants you to have it." She pulled out her wand and conjured a small crystal bottle, no different from the one that lay broken in Snape's robes.

Harry's fingers brushed hers as he took the bottle from her hand. He did not flinch at the blood that smeared his fingertips and for that she wanted to thank him, but she could say nothing but, "Take it and go--go, please, and do whatever it is he needs."

Ron stood in the corner, his back against the wall, looking pale and horrified. "Hermione, we don't want to leave you..."

"Go," she repeated.

Harry bent and began to siphon the silvery substance into the bottle. "It's pensieve silver," he muttered, perhaps to himself, as he worked.

"Pensieve silver," she repeated dumbly.

"Look... at... me," Snape whispered, and she whirled to look into her husband's eyes. She felt him slip into her mind, and she wanted to tell him *No, stop, save your energy, Severus, save yourself*, but she was unable to break his gaze, to look away from the blackest of black eyes that had held her so powerless and naked in life.

*I love you, Hermione.*

She screamed then, for she knew that he would never have said that--never, never have said that if he thought there was any chance, and her scream seemed to break the connection, to echo through both their minds and rebound around the little room in which they were now alone. Harry and Ron had left them.

Her hands flew to her own robes, and she ripped them open in an odd mimic of his. She saw his eyes widen as she pulled the phial from its pocket, the pocket where it had rested against her chest, soaking up the beats of her heart.

"No," he breathed, but when she looked into his eyes to weigh the meaning there, she found them blank and flat. The Snape of him, the spark of him, the life of him... was gone.

There were no words, no thoughts in her head as she dug the cork from the phial with her fingernails. She thought of nothing. She thought of endless expanses of sky, of a freshly painted white wall, the calm surface of the Black Lake. Just as he had taught her, she pushed everything below the heavy blanket of her mind as she tipped the phial to his lips and poured the potion into his mouth. She pressed her hand against the huge, ragged wound on his neck, lest the potion somehow escape him through it, and she waited so long that she began to wonder if the bottle had contained anything at all, anything but a hope meant to keep her going.

She stared into his pale face, made paler by blood loss than she had ever seen it, memorizing the heavy arch of his brow, the slope and curve of his nose, the sharp planes of his cheekbones. His thin lips with their oddly deep cupid's bow, the fine black hair that lay caked and plastered to his neck with blood.

She raised her wand and conjured a cloth and some water, just as she had so long ago in his rooms when she had cared for him, and she began to dab gently at his skin, peeling the locks of his hair away and cleansing the wound underneath. She could not explain why she did this, only that she had to do something, because otherwise, she would sit there until the end of time waiting for him to wake up.

*Wake up.* A dry sob wracked her frame as the foolishness of what she had been doing rolled over her. She was waiting for a dead man to wake up. Suddenly, everything she knew about magic seemed like a long and rather silly fantasy. A witch? She fancied herself a witch? She waved her magic wand and things appeared out of the air? A teaspoon of liquid could call a man back from the dead? Was she really here at all, or was she five years old, asleep in the rocker on her parents' back porch, dreaming fevered dreams in the sun? Tears would not come, but pain was there in abundance, waiting below the surface, eager to make an appearance, and she shook as it overtook her.

"Severus," she screamed. "Severus, Goddammit!"

But it was not Snape's voice, but Voldemort's, that answered her. She leaped to her feet as the sound echoed around her, convinced that it was coming from within the shack itself. She held her wand aloft as she spun, looking for the source of the high, cold voice that boomed inside her head.

*"You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery. Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste. Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately. You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured."*

Hermione walked to the clear wall that faced the castle and looked out. In the distance, the fires still raged and piles of lumpy shapes, which she took to be bodies, littered the grounds. Nothing moved. For a moment, it seemed to her that she must be the last living person in the world.

*"I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour."*

She turned back to Snape, and her heart leaped into her throat with fear and joy at the sight of him. He was sitting up, his neck smooth and whole once more, and he held the empty bottle of Vita Secundus in his hand. She had raised the dead.

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The first breath felt like the deepest yawn he'd ever known. Air rushed into his lungs, and the sensation was so perversely pleasurable that he did yawn, just to feel swollen with it, to feel the stretching of his shirt over his chest and the end of the panicked screaming of a million nerve endings inside him. The air tasted of dust, of mould, sharp and delicious, and he breathed until the rushing in his ears stopped, and he began to be aware of a faint light.

He had thought his eyes were closed until he blinked, until his eyelids seem to catch upon the parched surfaces of his eyes. Stinging tears pooled beneath his lids, easing their passage, and he lay quietly while his body carried out the simple task of adjusting to the dimness.

Voldemort's voice echoed around him, which seemed strangely fitting. *Voldemort is, was and ever shall be*, he thought in some bizarre childhood association, *the beginning and the ending.*

The Dark Lord spoke to Harry Potter, and that was good. That meant that things had gone according to plan. Potter lived... Potter would get the message; he would go to Voldemort... within an hour, yes. It would be over within the hour.

But something lingered around the edges. A black and worrisome thing. Something was not right here; some part of the plan had failed. Where was he? He knew, somehow, that the Dark Lord was not present, and yet someone was. Something... There were hazy memories--the snake, pain... horrible stinging, a crushing sensation in his chest... the struggle to hold on to sense, to tell Hermione... Tentatively, he lifted his hand to his throat and felt not the bloody, flapping remains of his neck, but his own skin, inviolate, untouched.

Hermione.

He turned his head, the muscles moving easily now, and he saw her in the window, but did not speak, instead running his hands over the sticky floor around him, feeling for the slim glass phial that would confirm the sick, cold assurance that flooded his veins like new blood. She had used Potter's potion on him.

When his fingers closed on the phial, he allowed himself to sit up. He stared at the empty glass, no bigger than his little finger, and yet, what had been held within was powerful enough to have destroyed everything. He lived. He lived while Potter remained in mortal danger. He lived, and *for what purpose?* He was useless. The Dark Lord believed him dead; he could not spy. And even if Potter were to succeed, the life he'd known had been destroyed, his home in the castle forsaken. The Order would throw him into Azkaban or worse. There was nothing left for him here. Why had she done this?

"Severus--" she whispered. He could hear the tentative joy in her voice, the hesitant elation.

"What have you done?" he said without looking at her.

"Severus, thank God. I thought it wasn't working; I thought maybe it was all in my mind, that--"

Rage rose in him. This was supposed to have been his chance. This, the final atonement! He should have escaped hell for what he had sacrificed; he should have been restored to himself. And then, then he might have deserved to have her love; he might have found her on the other side--there might have been some chance. But now...

*"What have you done?"*

She shut her mouth with a nearly audible snap, and her eyes grew round and frightened as he rose to his feet.

Now she would live or die in the battle and go on without him either way. There was no place for him here--nothing. If he lived, a sentence perhaps, a punishment, a trial, or hiding. A life without magic, and he could not, he *could not* bear that. Or death--a coward's death--running after her into the darkness, or taking his own life here on this dirty floor, undoing whatever salvation he might have earned.

Why did she still look at him with those awestruck eyes? Couldn't she see what she had consigned him to? A continuation of hell... these endless years, the waiting... He was supposed to have given his life to save Potter's and earned his rest, earned the end of pain.

She reached out her hands, taunting him with life and love and freedom and things that he would never have now, *never*, because of what she had done. And he longed to wound her, to cut her, to rage and slice with his tongue, to watch the hope in her eyes dissolve as it dissolved in his heart the longer it resumed its senseless beating. But he could not seem to find the strength, and so he gave her a long look meant to carry the weight of her betrayal.

"I trusted you," he said. "That potion was for Potter, and I trusted you." And with that, he spun away from her and into a future he could not imagine.

## Chapter Forty

*Chapter 40 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: The last of DH, my friends. At last. Everything you recognize, and all fully italicized text, belongs to JKR. My heartfelt thanks to Shellsnapelover, OpalJade and Lulabelle72, whose input got me through the harrowing journey of this chapter.

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There was a humming in her ears. Nothing else. Her eyes swept over the small, dirty room in which she stood; they lit briefly on the peeling wallpaper; on the thick film of dust on the floor, mingled in places with dark, drying blood; on the crate that lay upended by the entrance to the tunnel; but truly, she saw nothing. There was nothing inside her.

She did not cry. It seemed that all her emotions were trapped--shut forever beneath the wall she had erected in her mind as Snape had died. Her head felt heavy, her movements slow and stupid. She thought she might like to sleep.

She turned and looked out of the window-wall. Hogwarts still burned like a giant's funeral pyre, but no rage, no sorrow touched her. *I will have to go back there*, she thought.

Slowly, she took one step and then another. She braced herself as she crossed the center of the room, sure that once her feet made contact with Snape's blood that the dam would burst inside her, but nothing happened. It was just a floor. Just shoe leather. *Walking is nothing but controlled falling*, her mind offered nonsensically. Where had she read that?

She edged through the opening into the passageway and descended the stairs, listening to the sound of her heels slapping against the stone. She had to duck slightly as she proceeded through the tunnel, and she watched the ground as it passed beneath her. When she reached the end, she absently levitated a branch to quiet the Willow and crawled through the hole to the strangely silent grounds of Hogwarts. *Everyone must be inside*, she thought. Then, *Dispose of your dead with dignity*.

The castle loomed before her, and she felt the first stirrings of something, some unnamed emotion in her, as she registered, for what felt like the first time, the damage to the building that had felt timeless and indestructible. Part of the west wing had been blown apart, and she walked toward the ruins automatically, skirting the fires, picking her way around the chunks of stone that littered the grass. When she reached the opening, she pressed her hand against the outer wall, almost as if she were feeling for a pulse, or verifying that what she saw was real. Hogwarts, hurt. Hogwarts, violated.

She could not bear to climb into the castle as the Death Eaters had done, and so she turned and walked from that place, following the walls of the castle until she reached

the entrance to the Main Hall. The door was still locked firmly, and she tried several charms with her wand, trying to gain entrance properly. It seemed very necessary to her that things be done properly.

But finally, she had to accept that the door would not admit her. She walked to the window through which she had made her escape and cleared the remaining glass from it with her wand. Gingerly, she stepped over the sill and into Hogwarts.

She could hear the low murmur of voices, muffled cries of distress and pain, plans being laid, shouts of relief as family members found each other. She lingered at the door of the Great Hall, watching. She did not want to step inside; she did not want anyone to see her. This place... it felt... too much. Too bright with feeling. People would talk to her; they would touch her, and that seemed abhorrent and wrong. She did not want to speak or to touch. She did not want any of this--any of it. A man she did not know stepped aside, and she saw Lupin laying on the ground--Lupin! Lupin, whose tiny son had only just been born; Lupin, who had had no chance to imagine a world in which he might not be hated, but who had fought for one, all the same. Lupin, dead? If Lupin was dead then anyone could be dead. Anyone at all. There was no order to this, no reasoning. How could she be alive if Lupin were dead?

She saw the Weasleys, a clutch of ginger heads, all bent over something that she could not see. She saw Ginny double over as if struck, saw Ron pull her into his arms. She looked from face to face. Who was missing? Arthur, Molly, George, Ginny, Ron, Percy, Charlie, Fleur and Bill... for a moment, she could not think of it; it danced outside the edges of her mind. What had happened to cause Mr Weasley's face to look like that? Human faces were not *made* to look like that. Was it Harry? Where was--

Her head rolled back on her neck, and she sank against the wall, feeling her knees give beneath her. Fred. It was fucking Fred Weasley, and here were the tears that had hidden from her; here was the pain that threatened to tear her in two. And for the first time, Hermione knew that no matter what she had said, no matter what she had thought she believed, she had never really imagined that any of them would die. How could they die when they were right? How could people die when she *knew* them? And she saw, suddenly, that she should never have been trusted with the Vita Secundus, for if she had some now she would surely give it to Fred, anything, anything to make Mr Weasley's face stop looking like that, anything to be able to stop imagining what George would look like when he rose up without his twin beside him for the first time.

No one heard the scream that tore through her because it did not escape. It was too big to escape, and instead, it rebounded inside her until she thought it would burst her wide open. She shut her eyes against the people in the room, the people whose faces had, only an hour before, filled her with strength and purpose. Everything was lost. Everything.

If time had passed, she did not know how much. Ron's hands found hers, and her eyes snapped open to stare into his blue ones. They were red-rimmed and puffy, but filled with the determination that she had lost. It hurt to look at them, to see the hope there still. *Your brother is dead*, she wanted to shout at him. *Why are you looking at me that way?*

"Hermione, Harry's just gone through. He thinks I didn't see him; he thinks he's going alone. Come on."

He pulled her to her feet and thrust the sword of Gryffindor into her hands. He seemed to choke for a moment, to sputter, and then he said, "Idiot went without this."

She followed him blindly back out of the castle and onto the lawn. How many endless marches would she make across these grounds tonight? How much would she be forced to witness?

"Ron," she said. She wanted to tell him about the Vita, to tell him that there had been a chance, but that now there was none, that they were following Harry to his death, but she could not make herself speak the words.

"He has the mastery, Hermione," Ron said, seeming to sense her thoughts, "and he knows what he's doing. He knows that--"

"Did he see? Did he see in there? Lupin, Colin, Padma, *your fucking brother, Ronald?*"

"Yeah, he saw. He saw on his way to the Headmaster's office. He knows, Hermione. Come on."

*The Headmaster's office.* She gripped Ron's arm. "He's going to give himself up," she whispered. "The Pensieve silver... Ron, Dumbledore told Snape, he made him promise to tell Harry--" Her face crumpled. "Harry's a Horcrux. The scar is a Horcrux. Dumbledore told Snape that Harry would have to sacrifice himself, that he would have to--" Her voice rose in pitch, hysterical, until it broke off, and she could go no further.

Ron stood there looking at her in the moonlight. "That's why he went alone."

She said nothing. Ron opened his mouth, and she expected him to demand angrily how long she had known, why she hadn't told them.

"We have to get the others."

"What?"

"I'm not going to let him die alone, Hermione. We have to get the others. If the wand doesn't work--" Ron paused. "If the wand doesn't work, I want the last thing that he sees--"

Hermione turned away. Ron's face was contorted, vicious with grief, and she could not look at it.

"I want him to know that we finished it. That we finished the job."

She nodded, mute, and Ron sprinted across the grounds toward the castle. In moments, the front door burst open at last, and those who remained inside Hogwarts spilled forth. Ron ran ahead of them with Ginny just behind him, and in her face, Hermione saw a terrible purpose, and she knew for just a fraction of a second that that was what she must have looked like as she charged the Dementors, as she ran for her husband.

As the others approached--Kingsley, Tonks, Molly Weasley, Blaise and Neville and Luna and Flitwick, Charlie, Dean, Seamus and Dedalus Diggle, Sturgis Podmore, and Oliver Wood... as they charged the Forbidden Forest, Hermione turned and ran in herself. She did not stop to wonder how she would find Harry, but pushed ahead, slashing a path through the underbrush with the sword in her hand.

The forest was alive with voices; it was difficult to orient herself, to feel as if she were pursuing anything. But the centaurs charged past with their bows drawn, and Hermione followed them instinctively. If there was something foreign in this forest, the centaurs would know where. They ran past the den where the Acromantulas lived, past Grawp's hideout--and then the herd drew up suddenly outside a clearing, and Hermione skidded to a halt behind them. The others pressed in beside her, and she could smell fear and sweat and blood in the darkness; she could hear screams of fury and terror, Hagrid's booming war-cry--and above them all, Harry's voice.

"Stay back! All of you, stay back!"

"No," Voldemort said, and his voice did not so much rise over the din, but cut right through it. "Let them come. Let them see, Harry Potter. Let them watch their hero die at my hands."

Ron pushed past the centaurs and into the circle where the Death Eaters stood robed and masked, and Hermione followed him, the sword held aloft, but Voldemort passed them seemingly without interest. He scanned the restless, frightened crowd with his eyes until he located his target. Then he raised his left hand and twitched his fingers in a summoning gesture. Professor Trelawney moved toward him as if she were being pulled along invisible tracks; her face was pale and flinching.

"You," Voldemort said.

She shook her head in a kind of horrified denial.

"Yes, you. Tell me, Professor. Is this the boy you predicted could defeat me?" He swept his arm back in a flourish, indicating Harry who stood tall and terrified in the center of the clearing. His face burned with a sick kind of resignation tinged with fury.

"I cannot hear you," Voldemort said, and Hermione turned back to the drama that the Dark Lord was enacting. "I said, is this the boy you predicted would defeat me?"

Professor Trelawney did not speak. Her lips were pressed into a thin, white line, and she quaked where she stood. Hermione wondered briefly if the professor had known whom she had meant when she made the prophecy, if she, in fact, remembered making it at all.

Voldemort flicked his wand impatiently, and Professor Trelawney reeled backward. "Lord Voldemort grows weary of your games," he said. "Answer me."

Behind her glasses, Trelawney's eyes grew even wider than usual, but her mouth stayed firmly shut. Her right hand rose and rubbed at her chest, as if to cover a place where she had been struck.

"Answer me," Voldemort boomed, but still, the old woman said nothing. Tears coursed down her cheeks, but her lips remained closed.

"Ha," Voldemort exhaled angrily. "It matters not. You were protected all these years by Dumbledore, Sybill Trelawney. Lord Voldemort has waited a very long time to kill you. I wonder what it must have been like to live in my castle this year, *Professor*, knowing that at any moment, I could come for you. But then, of course," the Dark Lord chuckled mirthlessly, "I am forgetting your vaunted abilities. I suppose you 'knew' this day was coming. *Avada Kedavra*."

Professor Trelawney crumpled to the ground as the blast of green light hit her. It seemed to have been what the crowd on both sides of the Dark Lord had been waiting for. Those who had stood silent and spellbound as Voldemort had spoken suddenly surged forward, and duels sprung up around Hermione the likes of which she had never seen. Death was in the air, and shots of green light danced all around her. Hermione fought with the sword in one hand and her wand clutched tightly in the other. She parried and struck at a slim, cloaked Death Eater whose spells seemed to shoot without ceasing from her wand, singeing the ground before Hermione as she leaped and danced away from them.

They fought silently, bitterly. Hermione's Burning Curse connected with the woman's left shoulder, and she hissed and fell back. Hermione whirled in place, surveying the battle. She was jostled to one side by Ginny, who was backing up in huge, powerful strides as she dueled Bellatrix Lestrange. Bellatrix was overtaking her, and Hermione prepared to shoot her from the side when the mad witch toppled suddenly to the ground, hit by a flash of light from a source Hermione could not see.

"Gah!" Ginny's tone was frightening, almost bloodthirsty. "I'll finish the next one myself, thank you!" she cried and turned to help Luna, who was fighting Fenrir Greyback. Luna's wand twirled beautifully in her hands, sending out showers of brilliant blue sparks that seemed to sting and confuse him, and he stopped fighting for a moment to paw at them. Ginny took the opportunity to hit him squarely in the chest with a Stunner so intense that Hermione was fairly certain that she had killed him.

"For Bill, you sick fuck," Ginny screamed, and Hermione knew then that they had reached the end, that even those she knew best would shoot to kill.

All the manners of war had fallen away, and Hermione felt no regret about Stunning Dolohov from behind as he approached Ron, and she stepped hard on his face, which stared unseeing at the sky, feeling his nose crunch beneath her heel as she moved to take on Travers. But Ron barreled in front of her, knocking her off balance, and she was barely able to swing the sword out of the way before she landed on it. The wind whooped out of her as her chest hit the ground, and she watched with horrified fascination as Ron pursued Draco Malfoy into the writhing crowd. But her attention was diverted by a sight that made her blood seem to stand still in her veins. Voldemort, who had stood untouched, surrounded by a Shield that was seemingly impenetrable, was releasing Nagini from her sphere. The snake slid, almost undetectable, over the cool, leafy ground, and though Hermione could not hear him over the noise of the battle, she felt certain that he had just chosen his weapon, that he spoke to the snake in parseltongue, that the words were the same as those he had spoken with Snape in the shack.

She did not leap to her feet, but rose silently, smoothly. She stepped quietly through the leaves, moving parallel to the enormous snake as it wound between the pairs of duelers. Harry was locked in combat with Rastaban Lestrange, who was trying desperately to Incarcerate him, and around them on the ground lay the remnants of dozens of magical ropes, looking like snakes themselves. Nagini crept soundlessly toward Harry, and Hermione did the same, circling the pair until she had a clear shot at the snake. She could not fail. She had given up the potion, Harry's potion, and now his life was hers to guard, hers to protect. She would not let the snake strike twice.

As Nagini began to rear, spreading her giant hood, Hermione blasted Harry to the ground. She raised the sword of Gryffindor over her right shoulder as if it were a bat and dropped her wand, taking the hilt firmly in both hands. She swung the sword with every ounce of her strength, connecting with the snake's head with such force that she staggered backward as it was sliced cleanly from its body, spiraling up through the air and landing at her feet. She plunged the sword through the head, spearing it to the ground and looked up, lightheaded with adrenaline, to see Harry climbing back to his feet.

He looked at her wide-eyed for a moment as he handed her her wand and then he turned, and both of their gazes instantly focused on the Dark Lord.

Voldemort glided toward them, and those who dueled around him stepped out of his way as though they were all performing an intricately choreographed dance. Harry raised his wand.

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Snape stood Disillusioned, frozen in place, his wand hand dropped to his side. He had left the Shrieking Shack with no real idea of where he was going, but had arrived immediately in the Forbidden Forest, drawn it seemed, as always, by the Dark Lord's call. Potter had passed by him, so close he could have reached out and touched the boy, and for a moment, he'd had the urge to do so, to assure himself that, as yet, he was alive, that there might still be some chance. Potter's skin was pale, his mother's eyes rimmed in dark, bruised shockflesh. And yet, James' heavy jaw was set determinedly in his face, and he walked on steadily to meet his fate.

As Potter drew closer to the clearing where the Dark Lord stood, Snape had followed, refusing to consider what he had left behind, only knowing with every fiber of his being that he was about to witness the confrontation he had spent his life preparing for. And then suddenly, the forest had been alive with thundering footsteps, and he had watched, amazed, as the remnants of the Order, the defenders of Hogwarts, charged past him, and he was caught up in the surge of bodies that pressed in, prepared to fight, determined still to try to turn the tide. When the battle had begun, he'd raised his wand as well, though there was no place for him here, no side that would count him as a friend. He'd fought brutally, ruthlessly, Stunning the Death Eaters from behind, double teaming them with members of the Order who would never know that he had been there. As the hexes flew from his wand, he knew that, Disillusioned or not, there was a great likelihood that he would take a curse himself. The forest fairly churned with warriors, and the spells flew wildly, unchecked. It did not matter. What mattered was that he fought, that he would die fighting. He would not hide somewhere, waiting, like a coward. He would see it finished.

When Hermione raised the sword and slew the snake, he knew. He knew that the end had come, that the Dark Lord was ready to unveil his final weapon.

He edged almost imperceptibly back toward the trees. He needed a vantage point from which to watch this final confrontation, a place from which to act, if necessary, without being noticed or hindered by those who surrounded him. He twitched his wand subtly in his fist and cast a Distracting Charm over himself as an added precaution, and slipped between Lucius Malfoy and Arthur Weasley, who stood, improbably, side-by-side, their duel forgotten, their attention focused on the two wizards who had begun to circle one another like angry dogs.

"So the Mudblood has killed my snake," the Dark Lord said, almost conversationally, and the noises of battle began to hush and die away as Voldemort spoke in a chillingly quiet voice. "The Mudblood has killed my snake, and you think that gives you some sort of power over me, don't you, Harry Potter?"

Potter turned from the Dark Lord for a moment and addressed the crowd, most particularly, it seemed to Snape, the knot of Gryffindors who stood just outside the circle that he and Voldemort were making. "*I don't want anyone to try to help. It's got to be like this. It's got to be me.*" He turned back to Voldemort and spoke quietly, but in the silence, his voice rang out like a clarion call. "They're all gone now," Potter said. "All your *Horcruxes*." He spat the word out as if it were something distasteful. "You're just a man again, Tom Riddle, just as mortal as I am."

Potter's words struck him cold with fear. Did the boy not know? Had he not received the message, or had he disregarded it? Every muscle in Snape's body tensed as he watched the boy carefully for some sign. His wand was raised--*raised!*--though Snape had told him, had given him Dumbledore's very words--

"Ah, but you are mistaken. I do not need the Horcruxes for immortality, Harry Potter. Less than an hour ago, I secured a weapon even more powerful than those I had already. But perhaps you already know of it. Perhaps it is familiar." He held his wand aloft, and Snape's eyes went to it almost against his will. The Elder Wand, Dumbledore's wand, gleamed dark and long in the moonlight. Several members of the Order gasped, recognizing it, Snape presumed, though they could not understand its significance.

Potter said nothing but continued to pace, and Snape thought he saw something like worry pass over the Dark Lord's face.

"Do you fail to recognize Dumbledore's wand? The wand of the man who protected you, who ensured that you would live to see this day? I have taken your master's wand, Harry Potter, and your master's life, and there is no one to protect you now." Voldemort swept the wand over his body. "Shields will not be necessary any longer. This wand completes my power. Nothing can harm me."

Potter stopped. His hands fell to his sides. His tone was casual, almost light, but Snape could see that he shook violently, though he tried to hide it. "That's very impressive. But are you certain that wand belongs to you? Absolutely certain?"

The Dark Lord's face seemed to twist with triumph. "I told you, Potter, or weren't you listening? I took the mastery of this wand tonight. Severus Snape lies dead in the Shrieking Shack. I took the wand from Dumbledore and its allegiance from the man who killed him. The wand is mine."

"I see," Potter said. "I only ask because it seems to me that you have not always been very clear about what belongs to you."

Voldemort waved the wand impatiently, as if batting away a fly. "I am growing tired of you, Harry Potter. Tired of you and your silly games and insinuations. What is this latest bit of nonsense?"

"The man from whom you took that wand--the man that you believe you killed--"

Snape could not breathe. Did Potter know he lived? Had Hermione told him what she had done?

*"I brought about the death of Albus Dumbledore!"*

"Did you? Or did Dumbledore plan his own death, plan it with a man you thought belonged to you?"

Voldemort's pale skin was pink-tinged with rage. He was nearly vibrating with the need to strike. "Lies," he hissed.

"Snape wasn't yours!" Potter roared, and to the man they discussed, a man who had managed to reach the edge of the clearing, it seemed as if they spoke of someone he had never heard of, a stranger. "Snape was a spy--Dumbledore's spy!"

Voldemort chuckled. "So he told you, Potter. Of course he told you that. But Severus Snape was my servant. Until the very end, he brought me news of your whereabouts, of your silly plans..."

"Did he now? Did he tell you that on Dumbledore's orders, he brought me the sword that killed your Horcruxes? Did he happen to mention that he helped us escape from Malfoy--"

*"It matters not!"* Voldemort said angrily. "What difference does it make who Snape belonged to? He is dead. They are dead, both of them, Snape and Dumbledore, and *am alive*. Alive and in control of the Elder Wand, the Deathstick--Death's own wand."

"Kill me, then."

There was a general shriek of protest from those fighting for the Light. Hermione had caught the Weasley girl around the waist and was holding the half-sobbing, half-struggling figure tightly.

"Go ahead and kill me if you think you can." Potter's hands hung limp at his sides.

The Dark Lord hesitated for only a fraction of a second, but his face was solemn and wary as he shouted, *Avada Kedavra!*

Green light shot from the Elder Wand, and Potter fell to the ground. Snape's eyes did not leave the Dark Lord's ugly, snakelike face as it happened, and he saw in it the fear that the child had been right after all, that something would prevent him from triumphing at last, but as Potter's body crumpled, Voldemort's face burned incandescent with pleasure, with victory.

The crowd seemed to wait for a moment, as if they could not understand what had taken place. Order members and Death Eaters alike leaned forward for a better glimpse of the broken body of Harry Potter. A scream pierced the night, more harrowing than anything that he had ever heard, the sound of hope extinguished, of pain everlasting, and he looked into his young wife's face and saw a blankness there that terrified him, saw her release the Weasley girl, whose scream went on and on like death's very knell, saw Hermione fall to her knees beside Potter.

What he felt, he could not name. There were no words for the end of reason, the end of options, the end. He stood as numb and shocked as if he himself had been hit with the curse, and yet why should that be, when they had known all along that Ollivander could be wrong, that it was possible the mastery would not be enough? The Dark Lord had used the Killing Curse, as he had so many years ago, as he had so many night's in Snape's own dreams. The Killing Curse, against which the Vita Secundus would have been no match, and his sacrifice rendered impotent.

His eyes strayed involuntarily to Hermione once more. She looked as if she had been... disconnected... and though he refused to acknowledge the thought, for the briefest second he thought knew why she had done what she had, that perhaps she had known this moment was coming and could not have borne it any other way.

The Death Eaters began to turn on the Order once more, and Snape saw Nymphadora Tonks fall under the Killing Curse, and the look on her face as she tumbled to the ground was almost grateful. But Voldemort raised his thin, pale arms above his head and called for silence.

"Step back," he said. "Do not strike. I do not wish to spill any more magical blood tonight. Let them see their hero, this child they trusted. Let them look upon him now and see that it is over. I have won."

The Death Eaters drew back, and for a moment, no one stepped forward. The defenders of Hogwarts stood frozen with shock while Hermione lay her head against Potter's shoulder as if preparing to lie down and die beside him. He watched as she closed her eyes. Snape felt perversely grateful when finally, Molly Weasley came forward, knelt, and gathered Hermione into her arms, lifting her away from Potter and rocking her, while her own daughter sobbed against her father's chest. What he saw, he could not process, and he knew that the Dark Lord looked upon it with contempt. Small comforts in the face of defeat. Love that did not end, but followed its keepers down into the abyss.

When Potter rose, when he picked up his wand from where it lay beside him, Snape thought perhaps he had gone mad. Perhaps fear and grief had turned on him and taken the last of his mind. But when Potter raised his wand and struck, when the green flash bore down upon the Dark Lord, Snape felt the curse whip through him as well, and the sensation was oddly akin to pain, although perhaps it was more accurately the shock of pain ending, the lifting of a pain so familiar that he had begun to mistake it for the feeling of being alive.

He did not look into the screeching crowd, but lifted his left sleeve to reveal his arm, which was so smooth and white that it seemed to glow in the darkness. Something rose in his throat and seemed to cut off his ability to breathe. He blinked and blinked, and tears fell upon his skin, but he did not feel them. It was gone. It was gone at last. For a moment, he badly wished that he could run into the clearing and show her, that he could feel her small, soft hands running over skin that would never burn again, would never call him to witness or perform unspeakable things.

When he looked back at the scene before him, chaos reigned. The Order, for once, had not paused to celebrate, but had charged the Death Eaters, Disarming, Stupefying and Binding them, and in their eyes he saw the kind of righteous fury that the Order had so rarely possessed in battle--with their Stunners and their manners--but it seemed to him just then that they intended to exact a very severe punishment for the shock they had just suffered, that there would be hell to pay for the moments in which Potter had seemed to lie dead on the forest floor. The air filled with the popping of Apparition as the masked who lived took flight, and Snape took one last look at the body of his erstwhile master, his insane face expressionless, the red eyes blank and dead. It was over.

He scanned the crowd for Hermione, but he did not see her. She had proceeded into this new world without him, gone where he could not go. It was her future now, and he tried to be grateful for that, but found that he could not. Victory stung differently than defeat, but they both carried with them the promise of worlds in which he could take no part, and as the stragglers reconvened to make their plans, he spun away to the only place left that would receive him.

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When Harry's eyes had opened, Hermione had not believed it. Her mind--though it was the mind of a woman whose childhood had been populated with miracles--was simply unprepared for the appearance of two resurrections in a so short a span of time, and she had stared, fascinated by the image her traumatized mind had produced, until the image raised its wand, shouted *Avada Kedavra* and ended it all.

When Kingsley had given his orders and charged into the circle, Hermione had not run to apprehend the Death Eaters, but clung to Harry as if he were made of smoke, as if he might disintegrate and blow away if she did not keep a firm hold on him. She knew that Ron was beside her because he kept chanting, "It worked, it worked, it worked," but she had no sense of what those words might mean, of how these things had come to pass, and she stood there dumbly, her hands wrapped around Harry's arm. Ginny was there, and she was vaguely sorry that she could not leave them alone, but it was very important that she keep watch over Harry because that was her job. His life was her responsibility now--because she had failed to follow orders; she had given the life she owed him to someone else.

Gentle hands covered hers and began to peel her fingers from Harry's bicep, but she shook her head violently and dug in, prepared to hold on no matter what happened, no matter how they tortured her.

"One, then? Just one?" Ron said, and reluctantly she allowed him to take one of her hands.

"That's all," she told him seriously, and he nodded back equally solemnly.

"Harry," Ron said.

Hermione watched as her boys' eyes met and filled with tears, and Harry's free arm rose to wind around Ron's neck, and she was crushed between them. A strange sound escaped Ron's lips and rang in her ears as the three of them stood there, shocked senseless and terrified by victory, unable to let each other go.

Her tears fell freely then, and privately, she thought it was possible that she would never stop crying, that she would never bring herself to leave the cage of Ron's and Harry's arms, that she would live a lifetime here in their embrace. Victory was not sweet, but thick and tangy as blood, sharp as a sword. She held on to Harry and Ron in a death grip and would not let go, not even when they turned her gently and began to walk back to the castle.

## Chapter Forty-One

*Chapter 41 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Sorry for the delay on this one, dear readers. I was at Portus, living and breathing fandom--an incredible experience, but one which put me behind. I hope to stay on track for the rest of the summer. As usual, everything belongs to JKR, and I make no money. And my thanks go to OpalJade, RedOrchid and Shellsnapeluver. You ladies are the absolute best.

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The thing that struck him most as he stood alone in the dark *wassameness*. The utter sameness of Spinner's End. The world outside had vomited up its own insides; it was as foreign as a glamour; but here, the same dust motes swirled as if in a vacuum. Here, there was no need to light his wand, as he could navigate these rooms blinded, sleeping, drunk... dead. This place was like a curse that would not lift, like his own skin. It was home. He had come home at last.

Three steps to the couch, and he heard the creaking of ancient springs as he sank into the musty cushions. What on earth was he doing here, in this house he had never wished to return to? His mind answered quickly, angrily. *Because there was no where else to go.* The war was over; Potter had survived, and both his masters were dead, and yet instead of having limitless options, he found he had none.

Limitless options. Snape snorted slightly in the darkness. What would limitless options even mean? Had he been returned to the boy he had been at eighteen, before the night that had knelt before the Dark Lord in Malfoy Manor? Was he now poised once more upon the cold stone floor, his robes in a fragrant pool of silk around him, his left arm lifted like a gift? Had he been given the chance to snatch it back and run?

Snape laid his wand in his lap and folded back his left sleeve, allowing himself to touch skin that had been forbidden to him for twenty years, skin that was his own again. The brush of his fingers against his own flesh was as intimate, as electric, as masturbation. He closed his eyes and savored the tickle of his fingertips against sparse, short hairs. His own again.

And then, not his own at all. Snape dropped his hand and raised his wand once more, silently summoning his mother's pressed glass decanter, heavy and cheap in his hands. The options before him were much the same as they had been at eighteen: to be drunk or not to be drunk. He twitched his fingers, and a dusty glass flew across the room to smack into his palm. He poured generously and did not bother to sip politely at the amber liquid in his glass, nor to wipe his chin when he had finished swallowing it down in heavy, burning gulps. The war was over. He was alive. He poured again.

He rose and crossed the room to the front window, his steps sure, even in the dark, easily avoiding the hulking monstrosity of his father's leather recliner. He drew back the

drapes. The street was nearly opaque with darkness; a few distant lights shimmered off shallow pools of water on the pavement, reflecting back more black and starless sky. He scanned for moment, found no one, and raised his glass once more. Hiding. He was hiding.

Snape's neck began to feel tight and heavy; there was pressure behind his eyes which he associated with the onset of inebriation. He had been a man for whom it was far more dangerous to drink in company than it was to drink in private, and he had had so few moments of true privacy in the last twenty years as to have nearly forgotten the feeling. Aloneness, yes. He had often been alone, in fact, more often than not. But privacy... to know that no one would call for him suddenly in the night, that he would pass as many hours here as he chose, uninterrupted... that no one would delve into his mind to seek those things which might have been loosened by drink... He was nearly as horrified by the idea as he was relieved.

He did not want to be in hiding. He had been a spy--had been, his mind protested*had been?*--but almost always he had worked under scrutiny. He had never hidden from his duty, never hidden from the Dark Lord. It felt wrong to be tucked into this dingy house, so safe, so impotent, so *nothing*. He had the urge to run into the street, to Apparate into the middle of Diagon Alley. *I am still here*, he thought nonsensically.

Which he could do; he could. Let them take him. What difference did it make? Had he stayed in the clearing, he would have been rounded up with the rest of the Death Eaters and shipped off to Azkaban. And yet, the punishment he'd wanted could not be delivered by a bunch of deluded Aurors or even the Dementors. What he had wanted had been justice, rightness, a sense that he had evened the scales of the world somehow, something he doubted very much that he would find before the Wizengamot. Hermione's voice echoed from some distant place in his mind. *Sir, I want the records for your trial.* His trial. They would parade him before a courtroom and force him to tell all his secrets. Everything he would have given his life to protect would be displayed before their eager eyes. Severus Snape, the Death Eater, right where they wanted him at last. The thought made him physically ill. And yet the alternative was to lurk here as if he were guilty, as if he hadn't risked all he had to bring down the Dark Lord. What would become of him? Would he live here in silence the rest of his days? His eyes drifted to the street once more, and he took a long pull of the firewhisky, swirling the sharp and spicy liquid around in his mouth, feeling it burn and numb his tongue.

When would he admit what he was looking for? There was only one person in the world tonight who could appear in the middle of that soot blackened street, only one person in the world who would know where to look and could find this house if she did. And every flash of light looked like her wand to him, and every leaf that twitched on every tree was a lock of her hair. He gulped again. Fucking hope. Fucking senseless fucking hope, burning like some idiotic bluebell flame inside of him.

"For what?" he said aloud, almost frightened by the sound of his own voice, so harsh in the stillness. Hope that she might come here, that she might agree to stay with him? And then what? Would he keep her and starve her of light and company until she was withered and small and manageable? Until she hated him, and he her? Until he died? Or he could force her through the horror of a full trial before the Wizengamot. He could watch as they took her down with him, tainted her with the stain of his past, humiliated her. *Don't come here, Hermione*, he thought, and right on the heels of it, *Please come. I don't want to do this alone.*

Fury flooded his already overextended nerves. This was Albus's doing, what he would surely call his *gift* to Snape if he stood here now. He had never needed, never wanted, any partner. He had always been perfectly capable of working alone and now... now there was an emptiness inside him that had no right to be there. He'd been hobbled as completely as if he'd been cut off at the knees, and this was all *Albus's fucking fault*. Why should he stand here at this window and hope for senseless things?

The glass was warm in his hand now, and it felt smooth and familiar against his palm. He raised it to his lips and then suddenly flung it across the room, listening to its wet crash as it shattered against the bookcase. That was good. That was satisfying. He raised his wand and slashed wildly at the far wall, not caring what he hit, simply wanting to *destroy*. These walls, the fucking horrible walls with their stained and peeling paper, the cabbage roses his mother had chosen in some twisted, misguided attempt at *homemaking*--these walls were closing in on him again, and he was trapped here, hiding here, just like a child, like a fucking helpless child again. He had duped the Dark Lord and lived to tell the tale, but he was twelve years old again, hiding from the boys in the street who would find him and hurt him and beat him and throw him in Azkaban and say that what he had done was nothing, *nothing*.

His scream of rage began in the word *fuck* and trailed into a senseless, rasping sound of defeat, punctuated by the thump and crash of books flying off shelves, wood splintering, the tinkle of glass breaking and plaster crumbling.

She could not leave him here, he thought, as if he had not been the one to leave her in the Shack. She could not leave him here to rot, like some rubbish no longer needed. She could not have brought him back for *this*. He lifted his wand once more and drew it along his forearm where the Mark had been, needing to feel the familiar pain there, needing to feel something that meant something, not just the drunken anguish of a man who had lived past his own usefulness. His blood beaded along the seam he had drawn, but the pain did not calm him; it was not the pain he sought, and he sank onto the couch again and drew his nails along his neck where Nagini's fangs had torn it. Too smooth, too whole, too perfect--and he felt his pulse beating raggedly beneath his fingertips, his blood rushing on and on and on like time, like endless time.

He picked up the decanter and drank from it, his teeth clicking against the heavy lip.

"Come for me, Hermione," he whispered, just before the alcohol accomplished what shock and exhaustion could not do alone; and sinking into a pool of his own blood-stiffened and sweat-stinking robes, he gave in to sleep.

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Hermione sat at the long, rough-hewn table in the Weasleys' kitchen, a short glass of firewhisky untouched before her. She had barely spoken since the clearing. Harry and Ron had led her back to the castle and up to the Headmaster's office in silence, and her hands had gripped their robes until her knuckles had gone white and her fingernails had dug neat half moons into her palms through the fabric. She opened one fist and stared blankly into it. They were there still.

Her memories of the castle started and ended abruptly, with large bits missing, as if they had been cut away. There were times, she knew, when she had closed her eyes and let the boys lead her, but there were times when, try as she might, she simply could not remember, as if her brain had rebelled against the images that assaulted it and refused to register. Her impressions of their trek through the ruined castle came only in flashes--the utter destruction of the Charms corridor, the body of a sixth year Ravenclaw outside the girls' bathroom on the third floor, several dead house-elves outside the wall leading to the Headmaster's tower, their bodies pressed up against the stone as if they had tried to prevent the Death Eaters from entering what had once been Dumbledore's domain.

Harry had bent when they'd reached the elves, and seemingly unable to bring himself to touch them, he had levitated them gently to the side where they could be watched over by the injured gargoyles.

He had opened his mouth, and she had known that he was about to ask for her help, and so she reached out and placed her palm gently over the gargoyle's cracked stone skull. The wall behind it melted away, revealing the twisting staircase that led to the Headmaster's office.

"How did you do that?" She heard Ron behind her. "We've never been able to--"

She did not answer, but stepped gingerly over the rubble and into the stairwell.

"This was Professor Snape's office," Harry had whispered from behind her, and she had not turned to see the look on Ronald's face as Harry went on, "His wards recognize her. It was part of their vows."

So he knew, she had thought. Snape had told him.

"Their *what?*" Ron said, not bothering to whisper.

Hermione had said nothing, forcing Harry to explain. "Their wedding vows. Dumbledore married them at the beginning of our sixth year. For me. So Professor Snape would have a way to help me. So someone would know that Snape wasn't a traitor."

"Dumbledore..." Ron had sputtered. "He... You were *married* to Snape?"

"I *am* married to Snape," she hissed. Here her memory threatened to blacken, but she held on fiercely with her mind, trying to keep the edges sharp and focused.

Harry had stopped on the stairs and turned to her with a look she had never before seen, a look so full of pain and pity that it took her a few moments to realize that it was meant for her. "Dumbledore told me once that the dead we love... they never truly leave us, Hermione."

"That's very kind of you, Harry," she'd said, fighting down the strange and unreasonable urge to strike him. If he truly thought her husband was dead, then why didn't he leave her alone? Why would he drag her up here to look at his things, to stand in his office? "But Severus is alive. If he weren't, I wouldn't be able to do this."

Fear had left her nearly stricken as she reached for the doorknob, suddenly certain that it would not turn at all, that somehow Snape had died as she had ascended the stairs, and *this* would be how she found out. But the metal warmed in her palm and gave in easily to her touch. The ownership of the office had not passed on. She'd paused in the doorway, letting Harry and Ron enter first and then stepped in and looked silently around her. She had never seen this office after Dumbledore had died, never known it as her husband's. There was nothing in it that she recognized as Snape's. The couch, the rug, the straight-backed chair that had stood by his fireplace--none of those things were in the strange, circular room. The walls were bare but for the Headmasters' gallery, and the desk stood clean of everything but the heavy stone Pensieve and a single roll of parchment. It was the office of no one, of a man who had erased himself.

Hermione shifted in her seat in the Weasleys' kitchen and fingered her glass. She did not want to remember what it had been like to look into the Pensieve. She had not wanted to do it; she had all but refused to do it, but Harry had insisted, still thinking, perhaps, that she had deluded herself that Snape lived, insisting she see his final goodbye to her. For that was what it had been. He had passed his message to Harry, passed the knowledge of what must be done and the proof of his innocence that Harry could not help but believe, coming as it had, from Dumbledore's own mouth, but the end of Snape's memories had unmistakably been for her. And as she had watched, she began to confirm something that she had known in her heart, something that she had never wanted to hear, and yet it seemed as clear there in retrospect as if he were whispering it in her ear. *I am so tired, Hermione. I just want this to be over.* And then had come their wedding, his colossal risk in hiding her parents, the accident the night they had moved Harry... it had been like watching the year rewind and played again too quickly for her to keep up, and she was assaulted with fear all over again, even though she knew the ending, awestruck by the incredible strain they had lived under. And at last there came the night he had brought them the sword. As she'd stood again in the filthy tent and watched him kiss her, she had known for certain, and it was for her then as if he had stood in the room with her, she could see his lovely, worn face that clearly. He had tried to tell her. He had *meant* to die.

She could not remember how she had ended up in the Burrow, or how long they might have sat in the Headmaster's office, waiting, presumably, for Dumbledore, who never came. But she remembered noise, voices, the passing of so many faces that seemed only vaguely familiar. She remembered Mrs Weasley's tearful admonishments that she had to eat, she *had* to eat, and perhaps she had, though all she tasted in her mouth were her own bitter tears. She remembered Harry, who had sat here silently beside her for a time, though he was gone now, to bed, she supposed, or Merlin alone knew where. His mourning was private now, as hers was, and she glanced up at the Weasleys' clock on which all the hands but Fred's rested on *home*, as they had not for two long years.

What had she done? Dear God, what had she done?

"Hermione."

She shot back from the table, nearly upending her chair and glass. Her eyes searched the room frantically until they landed on Mr Weasley, who leaned brokenly against the doorframe. In his hand, he held a roll of parchment, and his eyes were sharp and bright with sorrow.

"I didn't mean to frighten you."

"It's all right. I'm sorry, Mr Weasley. I'll go if you want to be--"

"No, stay. Sit. You don't seem very interested in that drink. Would you like some tea?"

"I'm fine, really. I was just thinking. I... I'm tired, but I can't--"

"Neither can I. Why don't we just stay here and keep each other company for a bit," he said, setting a kettle on the stove and lighting it with his wand. He laid the parchment on the counter.

"Are you sure you don't want to be alone?" she asked.

Mr Weasley chuckled, but it was a sad sound, empty of mirth. "I haven't been alone in twenty eight years, Hermione. I wouldn't know what to do if I were."

She forced herself to smile at him. Her cheeks were stiff with dried tears. He was a good man, Mr Weasley. A kind man and a brave one. But she had no idea how to sit here with him at his kitchen table with that clock looking down on them, reminding them both of the man she had not saved and the man she had.

"Hermione, Harry told us what... what had been asked of you."

Her head snapped up, and she looked into his eyes warily.

"From what he said... it was--no don't look at me like that. I'm trying to understand--Harry said that the two of you... that you had come to an understanding."

She nodded slightly, but said nothing.

"I haven't come to pry about your relationship with Severus. Tonight is not the night, and I have been married long enough to know that the workings of a marriage are not always explicable from the outside. If you found strength in what you had to do, Hermione, then we should all be grateful for that. If you both found strength in it."

Her lips began to tremble, and she pressed them together. She had not thought it was possible to cry any more tears tonight; she had thought that she had been purged of every ounce of moisture inside of her.

"Mr Weasley, I'm--"

"Shhh. Shhh." He came over and stood beside her, took her hands into his own and pulled her to her feet. "Shhh, Hermione, our brave girl. It's all right." He folded her into his arms and rocked her back and forth gently.

"I'm sorry, Mr Weasley. I'm so sorry. I did the wrong thing. I did the wrong thing, and I'm so sorry."

Mr Weasley stepped back and looked very seriously into her face. "Do you think I would have done better, that any of us would have? The burden of that potion was too much for any person, Hermione. We are not gods, far from it, and not a single person would have made a decision that was different from yours. If I had had it," his voice broke slightly, "Fred would be alive. And if Andromeda had had it, Tonks. And if Tonks, Remus. No one could have done differently than you did, and if they tell you they would have, they are lying. We save what we love, Hermione. We can't help ourselves. That's why that potion is so difficult to brew, why Dumbledore should have never asked poor Severus to make it in the first place. The responsibility is far too great. Look at me."

She tried; she tried to look at him, but his tear-stained face stung her already writhing heart, and she feared she might vomit.

"Hermione, if Severus had had the potion and had been faced with your choice, he would have saved you instead of Harry."

She shook her head violently. "He wouldn't. You don't know him. He would never have been so--"

"So what? So human? Harry told me he came after you at Godric's Hollow, at Malfoy Manor *He came after you*. You know full well what would have happened if he'd been discovered. He'd have been killed. Tortured and killed, most likely, and Dumbledore's plans would have been ruined."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut.

"Have you seen his will?"

They flew back open. "His will?"

"Harry said he thought you weren't listening when he told you. He left a will, Hermione, in the Headmaster's office. I went back for it as soon as Harry told me that you... that Severus is alive. I was afraid that it might be used to track him."

"Track him?"

"Sit. Please."

Mr Weasley guided her back into her chair and returned to the stove. He poured them each a cup of tea and levitated hers to the table. Then, he picked up the parchment and sat down across from her. She looked at him questioningly. It seemed by the air of solemnity around him that he was coming to the point of whatever it was he had come here to tell her, and her heart beat erratically in her chest.

"People are not," he paused, stopped and looked as if he were trying to collect himself. "People are in pain," he said heavily. "The cost of the war has been... very great."

Hermione swept a tear from the end of her nose.

"I am afraid that Severus is, that he will be--I don't know how to say this. I am afraid that people will not see what he did, Hermione, that they will not see his sacrifice and his loyalty, but the fact that he married a very young girl, a student of his."

She opened her mouth to protest but he cut her off.

"Willing or not. I'm afraid that Dumbledore's death was so sudden, so demoralizing to the wizarding community, that people will see only that Severus killed Dumbledore, not the reasons there may have been--that there were--behind it. They will see him as a Death Eater, a tame one, one they can catch and put in Azkaban and feel safer at night for it."

"But he--Mr Weasley--"

"I know. I know that. But you knew that this would come. From what Harry said, Dumbledore told you at the outset that he expected there to be a trial. I just want you to be prepared for what may be said, for the possible outcome--"

She nodded mutely. Mr Weasley slid the parchment across the table to her, and she began to unroll it.

*I, Severus Snape, of Spinner's End, Manchester, hereby make, publish and declare this to be my last will and testament...*

"Am I right in thinking that Spinner's End is under the Fidelius Charm?"

Spinner's End. He was in Spinner's End. Why hadn't she realized it before? She nearly darted to her feet. But before she could, a second thought trickled through her like lead. Mr Weasley had said the words--he knew--

"It is... or it was. How--"

*I do give and bequeath to my spouse, Hermione Jean Granger Snape, all my personal effects and all my personal property...*

"Because of his will. He's written it on parchment, Hermione, and left it where it could be found. I don't know how many people have seen it already, but I took it to make sure there won't be any more."

"Harry knows."

"Yes, Harry knows, and I suspect that Ron does as well. Aside from you and me, I do not have knowledge of any others, but there could be..."

*...including my home, bank account, and all the rest of the property which I may own at the time of my death, real or personal, tangible and intangible, of whatsoever nature and where ever situated...*

Hermione threw the parchment aside. "But only I should have been able to get into the Headmaster's office if he lives! How did you get in there?" Her voice was grating, hysterical.

Mr Weasley's brow furrowed. "I don't know. The wall to the stairwell was open when I got there. Perhaps the gargoyle died. Or was killed."

"But the door to the office--Mr Weasley, forgive me, but I have to go. I have to go right now."

Hermione leaped from her seat, and Mr Weasley rose as well.

"No--I have to go alone. He won't--"

"I understand. I just want to tell you to be careful. If you find him... tell him to stay at Spinner's End as long as the Fidelius Charm holds. Get in touch with Kingsley Shacklebolt as quickly as you can, Hermione. Tomorrow morning, if possible. Try to secure him some kind of amnesty. Take Harry with you."

"I will. Thank you."

He nodded. "One last thing, before you go."

She paused in mid-turn.

"There will always be room for you here, Hermione. Always. But if you can, I would stay with him. If a court is to find him innocent, I think it will be very important that your faith in him seem very strong. That your marriage seem--"

"I understand."

"Go, then. And check in with us as soon as you can. Keep me informed."

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It had begun to rain outside, and Hermione's robes became heavy with water as she trudged down the darkened street, her wand held aloft. *The last house*, she thought. *The last house on Spinner's End*. There were no lights to guide her way, and she peered at the houses she passed, rows of shabby brick buildings attached end to end, each more dilapidated than the last. Many of the windows she passed were boarded, and yet she felt quite exposed, very much *watched*, as she walked along the cobblestone road, as if the windows were hooded eyes that kept her surreptitiously in view. When she reached the final house, she knew that she had found him, for her skin nearly sparked and glowed with magic, with his presence.

She rapped twice upon the door but received no answer, and she hesitated as she reached for the doorknob. There was no lock that could keep her out if she chose to enter here, but she was afraid of what she might find inside, though she would not give name to the possibilities. The knob turned in her hand, and she stepped into the darkness.

"Severus," she whispered. "Severus?"

There was nothing. She lit her wand, shocked and immediately alarmed by what she could see of the sitting room in the feeble glow. The walls were decimated; books were scattered over the floor and a chair lay overturned beside the small fireplace. Had someone preceded her here?

"Severus!"

She strode past the sofa into the room where she spun around, taking in the shattered mirror, the bookcase hanging crookedly from the door, the sharp scent of alcohol in the air. Her wand light fell upon the ground, and she was horrified to see blood smeared upon the boards. Blood and whisky and...

*There*. There upon the couch, he lay, one arm thrown over his face and the other hanging over the side. In a moment, she was on her knees in the muck, taking the dangling arm in her hands, tracing his wound with her fingertips. Shallow, superficial. Thank God. Perhaps he had cut himself with the glass, she told herself, though she could tell by the feel of it that it had come from a wand. She used her own to seal it, despite the fact that it was little more than a scratch. She felt as if someone had hollowed out her stomach with a large flat blade.

"Severus."

He twitched in his sleep, and she smoothed his matted hair away from his face. She sat gingerly beside him on the sofa in the small space left where his knees had drawn up. With her wand, she mended what she could of the sitting room, erasing the evidence of whatever battle he had fought there.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

She thought of Mr Weasley's words. *They will see him as a Death Eater, a tame one, one they can catch and put in Azkaban and feel safer at night for it*. Anger flared in her. The man before her was many things, but he was never tame. How odd that that should be the part that enraged her most, the idea that her husband was something that could be caged. And yet, what had she asked of him except to live in this box of a house, to be paraded before a court and prodded at like an animal? She stared into his sleeping face, so tight and drawn still, making it seem clear that he had fought sleep even as he had succumbed.

"Severus," she said quietly, and part of her felt relieved when he did not stir. "Whatever is coming, I will not leave you. Whatever they say, whatever they try to do to you, I won't allow it. I swear to you."

She wormed her way onto the sofa beside him. Never opening his eyes, Snape shifted to accommodate her. The fit would have been impossible for two people less exhausted than they were. One of Hermione's legs hung off the side, and the other was pinned between his knees. His arms wrapped around her, pulling her robes tight across her stomach, and her face was crushed into his neck, where every breath brought the smell of the battle, but she did not shift or try to move him. Tonight, she would take what comfort she could, whether it was willingly given or not.

## Chapter Forty-Two

*Chapter 42 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. I make no money. Thanks to Shellsnapelover, RedOrchid, and OpalJade, my lovely betas.

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The first thing that Snape was aware of was sunlight, streaming through the opened drapes and seeming to pierce right through his eyelids to the center of his throbbing skull. Next was the fact that his mouth tasted like the inside of toilet, and third was that he had absolutely no feeling at all in his left arm. He shifted slightly and opened his eyes.

*Hermione.*

Hermione lay heavily atop his arm, pinning it to the couch, and her left leg was trapped between his. Her face was obscured by his own chin and her hair, but it was clear from what he could see that she was dirty, that she was injured, and that she was, against all odds, safe. He closed his eyes again.

As for what she was doing here, it was painfully obvious. She was here for the same reason he was: because there was no where else to go. Her family home had been destroyed; as yet, her parents, if they lived, were still in Australia with no memory of her whatsoever; Hogwarts was ravaged, and he doubted very much that the wife of Severus Snape had been welcomed at the Burrow with open arms. His monstrosity of a childhood home had become a safe house for the displaced. What had he told her? *If all is lost...* He fought down the strange emotion that surged through him. For Hermione, all was certainly fucking lost.

He felt her stir, felt her humid breath against his skin.

"Severus," she said.

Suddenly, his mind burned with a thousand questions—*Who knows? What have you told them? Do they know where you are? Are they coming?*—and he wished he could step back to the moment just before she had woken, when he might have got the chance to sort out what he wanted to say.

"What is your plan?" he asked.

"My plan?"

"Your plan," he said with exaggerated crispness. "You certainly seemed to have a plan for the end of the war. Now that things have sorted themselves out to your satisfaction, I assume there is some next step? Some further hoop the rest of us will be made to jump through?"

She rose, peeling herself from his embrace and freeing his arm, which began to protest loudly. She turned and looked at him steadily. It seemed he could see her face closing up.

"Are you drunk?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's a fair question, Severus. I arrived to find you bleeding and unconscious, the house in shambles, and whisky all over the floor. Now you are speaking to me as if I had somehow arranged the entire war to suit some peculiar whim of mine. Are you drunk?"

"I am not."

"I see."

"You do realize--"

"What a mess I've made of things? Yes, that much is perfectly clear, thank you."

She turned away from him, smoothed her hands over her tattered robes and picked up her ratty looking bag from the floor beside the couch.

"Where are you going?" he asked sharply.

"Arthur Weasley suggested that I meet with Kingsley Shacklebolt first thing this morning."

"Arthur Weasley? You're now taking orders from--"

"Arthur Weasley retrieved your will from the Headmaster's office, which is the reason we're both sitting here and not in Azkaban," she replied. "Why you would write your address on a piece of parchment and leave it lying around for Merlin alone knows whom to find is beyond--"

"Because I was supposed to be dead. And you could not very well have inherited a house that the Aurors were not able to comb top to bottom first."

"You were supposed to be dead," she repeated, almost conversationally, though there was something icy in her tone. "And the house was meant to be my compensation?"

"Hermione," he began, but she shook her head, forbidding him to finish.

"What do you expect from Shacklebolt?" He was disgusted by the tinge of fear in his voice.

"Amnesty, if I can get it."

He snorted. "Unlikely."

"Then what would you suggest? That we run? That we spend the rest of our lives in hiding?"

"I will not run."

"I didn't think so," she said, turning toward the door.

"I take it Shacklebolt is heading up the new Ministry?"

"That was the Order's plan... in the event that we won."

"I see." It was a meaningless detail--what did he care who took over the Ministry?--and yet it was strange not to know it, not to be intimately familiar with their plans. He reached out and took hold of the sleeve of her robe, turning her back toward him.

"Please do not think that I underestimate your role in the war," he said formally. "But I think that even for you, the Ministry will be unwilling to--"

"I'm taking Harry," she said.

He withdrew his hand. Something cold and tingling seemed to wash down his back. She was right, of course. If anything were to come of her plan, it would happen because of Potter, but still, he shuddered in nearly abject horror. The idea of Potter pleading his case to the Ministry... None of this was supposed to be happening.

"Have you spoken to Albus?" he asked quietly.

"No," she said, and he saw the old echo of her rage at Dumbledore in her eyes. "He did not make himself available last night."

"That might be a prudent next step."

She nodded and took two steps toward the door, but turned back toward him before her hand reached the knob.

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Can I come back?"

How could she stand there and look at him that way, her posture so rigid, but her eyes so large and imploring? Would she make him spell it out?

"I will set up a room for you."

The set of her shoulders eased very slightly. "I'm coming back," she said then, firmly, like a promise, and opened the door. He watched as she Apparated away and then stared into the empty street for some time before he shut the door again.

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When she arrived outside the Burrow, Harry was sitting beneath a wide and crooked tree, his head leaning against the trunk, eyes closed. Ginny sat beside him with her head on his shoulder, staring into the field beyond the house. There didn't seem to be anyone else around. The Burrow looked stooped and shuttered, as if it bore the weight of the grief of its inhabitants, and there seemed something barren about the yard, even with Harry and Ginny in it. They looked like the sole survivors of a plague that had taken everything from the sky to the grass.

As she approached, Ginny nudged Harry and got to her feet, swiping the dirt from her denims and then reaching her hands out for Hermione to take.

"Dad told us you'd come. We've been waiting out here since this morning. I was getting worried."

"Why did you wait out here?"

Ginny looked shiftily at Harry. "I... well. Because Mum needs quiet."

Harry rose and joined them, shrugging uncomfortably as he approached. "Not everyone is going to understand, Hermione. Not right away."

"But you do?" she said, searching Ginny's eyes.

"This is what I know," Ginny said, and suddenly there was the fierceness of battle in her face. "Snape worked for Harry. You worked for Harry. Harry says you love each other. That's enough for me."

Hermione looked away. If she continued to look at Ginny, she might cry again, and she was mightily tired of crying.

"I have to see Kingsley," she said.

"I know," Harry said. "I'm ready."

"I should pick up the will first," Hermione said. "I left it last night."

"Dad Vanished it," Ginny said. "He said it was much too dangerous to keep. He said to tell Kingsley he'll explain later."

"All right," Hermione said, but a distant alarm sounded in the back of her mind.

Harry kissed Ginny swiftly behind her ear and took Hermione's hand. It felt... it felt like every time they'd Apparated together for the last year.

"The phone booth?" he said.

"Yes."

She led, as she always had. And they were gone.

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Hermione was unreasonably frightened as the phone booth descended into the Ministry. The last time they had entered this building, they had very nearly been unable to escape. And even though she knew that rogue Death Eaters would not likely be congregating at the Ministry of Magic, she couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding, that they were embarking on something very, very foolish.

When the phone booth ground to a halt, Hermione stepped out first. She intended to register at Security and proceed to Level One, but before she had taken more than a few steps through the Atrium, a voice called, "Harry! Hermione!" and she turned on her heel. Magical flashbulbs exploded into her face.

"Is it true that you spent last year destroying Horcruxes?"

"What was it like being on the run?"

"Were you afraid to face Voldemort?"

Harry grabbed Hermione's hand and started to run for the lift, but Kingsley was already stepping out of it. Hermione wondered fleetingly if he had slept at all since the final battle. His face looked pouchy and gray with fatigue, and his smile, though it gave the semblance of warmth, was oddly flat and emotionless. He raised both arms as if he intended to embrace them.

"I received word that you were on the way in," he said. "so I came down to meet you. Our heroes! Where's Ronald? At home getting some much needed rest, yes? Shall we do a round for the press, then?"

Harry looked extremely uneasy, and Hermione felt sure that the look was mirrored in her face as Kingsley slung an arm over each of their shoulders.

"Smile, now. Say, 'We won!'"

Harry's face remained impassive. Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"Come on," Kingsley said under his breath, squeezing their shoulders. "People need hope. Smile."

Hermione smiled tightly, and the flashbulbs began once more.

"Kingsley, we wondered if we could have a word," she said after the third round of photos had been taken.

"Yes!" he said loudly. "Yes, of course. Anything for you two. Come along and see my new office. I'll tell you all about the changes we're making."

He led them forcefully into the lift. When the doors closed, he sighed. "Sorry about all that," he said wearily. "We're trying to inspire good faith in the populace by making the changes at the Ministry very transparent. Basically, it boils down to being surrounded by press night and day."

"But it's barely been twenty four hours," Hermione said.

Kingsley looked at her with drowsy, hooded eyes. "In twenty four hours, I have been named Minister of Magic, replaced most of my department heads, authorized the Aurors to begin the capture and containment of the remaining Death Eaters, scheduled six Wizengamot trials, posthumously deposed Severus Snape of his position at Hogwarts, given ten interviews, and disposed of the body of the erstwhile Lord Voldemort."

"The body of Lord Voldemort?" Harry said faintly.

"Well, we couldn't very well leave it there in the woods. Merlin knows what those Death Eaters might try. I've been trying to locate Snape's body as well. Actually, I thought you two might have seen something that would help."

"Yes, well, it's Snape we're here about," Hermione said.

"Level One. Office of the Minister," a pleasant woman's voice said as the lift stopped.

"Excellent," Kingsley replied, steering them down the hallway and into a large room decorated heavily in lush purples and yellows. Kingsley, it seemed, had also had time to do a bit of redecoration. He seemed to notice her looking.

"People will notice a change in the way things look more quickly than they will notice my policy changes," he said quietly. "Sad, but true. So we give them changes, give

them pictures of changes. If it brings people hope, then it's worth it. Besides, it's just a bit of charm work."

She nodded, but said nothing.

"Have a seat."

Hermione sat in a velvet overstuffed chair in an alarming shade of chartreuse. "You said you deposed Snape. When?"

"Early this morning. Just a few hours after the... final battle."

"May I ask why?"

"I assume you are referring to the contents of Harry's speech? I admit, I am intrigued. It was true, then? I wondered if you were simply trying to discomfit Lord Voldemort."

"It was true," Harry said.

"I see. Well, I would have had to depose him anyway, I'm sorry to say, simply because of the bureaucracy of naming a new Headmaster. The Board of Directors needs access to Headmaster's office so that they can begin rebuilding the school. And Snape's death just would have added a whole new layer of red tape. This way, I hope to be able to reopen Hogwarts for the new school year."

"Leaving alone the fact that *you* should not be reopening Hogwarts, that the Ministry should be leaving Hogwarts well alone--" Hermione began hotly.

"Hermione," Harry said in a faintly warning tone.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Kingsley," she said, not feeling remotely sorry. She felt like a wound spring, like a drawn bow. "There's a great deal you don't know about Snape, and I shouldn't be acting as if you *should* know it. He did his job remarkably well."

"Would you care to begin at the beginning?" Kingsley said, dreadfully calmly, levitating several cups and a brown Betty across the room to his desk.

"I will answer your questions," Hermione said. "But I have several of my own. Would you mind terribly if I went first?"

"By all means," Kingsley easily, pouring tea. Hermione took hers, but found herself unable, or unwilling, to drink it.

"So Hogwarts currently has no Headmaster?" she said.

"Not at present, no. Minerva is, of course, serving as Deputy Headmistress until a Headmaster can be appointed."

"And the office?"

"Yes, well, as I said, we had to render the office accessible. It would have taken several months to go through the paperwork without removing Snape. But much of the magic of Hogwarts is centered in that office. And... to be honest, we were anxious to speak with Dumbledore."

"Dumbledore has a portrait right here in the Ministry, does he not?"

Kingsley colored slightly. "He has not visited it recently."

"I see. But anyone can enter the office?"

"Is there something you require from the Headmaster's office?"

"No. I'm just curious to know who has been able to access it, and what might have been removed."

"I have no record of who has been in the office since it was opened. But I will tell you that we removed some personal items of Snape's. They're being held on Level Two for examination."

Level Two. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement. "Such as?" Hermione held her breath.

"There was a Pensieve full of silver on the desk. Beyond that, I'm not certain."

For a moment, everything in the room seemed to glow with a white hot corona, and she struggled to breathe.

"Have you looked in the Pensieve?" Harry asked.

"Not personally," Kingsley said. "Probably some of the Aurors--"

Hermione looked frantically at Harry, who was gazing back at her steadily, as if telling her to bide her time. Her pulse beat so loudly in her ears that she could barely hear Harry as he spoke. How was it possible that she'd left the Pensieve memories behind?

"The Pensieve contains the proof that Professor Snape worked for our side," Harry said. "We're here to make sure that his contribution to the war effort is recognized."

Kingsley cleared his throat. "Well. Yes, of course. I--"

"Dumbledore ordered Professor Snape to kill him," Hermione said. "It preserved Professor Snape's role as a spy and kept him in position to take over Hogwarts. To protect the students."

"As I said, we've been very anxious to speak to Albus--"

"Professor Dumbledore was able to use his portrait to continue to advise Snape how to help us," Harry said. "He brought us the sword of Gryffindor; he followed us to Malfoy Manor; he--"

"Harry, what is it that you want me to do? So Snape was on our side. All right. I'll give him a posthumous Order of Merlin. Is that what you are--"

"I want guaranteed full amnesty from prosecution for him," Hermione said.

"Hermione, forgive me if I don't follow your train of thought. How would we prosecute a dead man?"

Hermione's chin rose, and her shoulders squared slightly. "Professor Snape is alive," she said.

Kingsley's hand twitched on the desk, but he remained otherwise impassive. "Well, that would explain why we could not locate a body. Would you care to tell me how that came about?"

"I saved his life."

"I see." Kingsley leaned forward slightly and rested his elbows on his desk. The fatigue was still present in his face, but his eyes had regained some of their dark sparkle. "Where is he?" he asked casually.

"I'm not prepared to reveal that at this time," Hermione said. "Not before you guarantee me--"

"Hermione, this place is crawling with press. You know that. You want me to guarantee Snape full amnesty--based on what? Your word alone? The moment I walk out of this door, I will have to justify my actions to a public I am trying to convince to trust me."

"Doing the right thing seems to me to be a good way to get them to trust you. You weren't so reluctant to act when you thought Snape was dead."

"Don't be patronizing. You know as well as I do that the public will forgive a dead man much more quickly than they will a live one."

"Why are you suddenly so concerned with 'the public'? This is not about the public, Kingsley. This is about a man who was willing to give his life for this cause, who risked himself daily, a man who does not deserve to be paraded through a courtroom to justify--"

"If Snape is innocent, then a day in court is the best thing for him," Kingsley snapped. "Let the evidence speak for him, let him be cleared out in the open where people can see and believe for themselves. In the long run he'd be much safer, much better off that way."

Hermione started to rise from her chair, but Harry held up his hand. "And before then? How would you guarantee his safety until a trial could be arranged?" he asked.

Kingsley shifted uncomfortably. "I know that you don't want to hear this, but we've made a great number of changes to Azkaban. We've dispatched with the Dementors, of course; The Department of Mysteries has provided--"

"Under no circumstances will I allow Professor Snape to be sent to Azkaban like a common criminal," Hermione hissed.

"Azkaban is not an option," Harry said firmly. "I jeopardized his safety when I revealed him as a spy. Regardless of what changes you have made in Azkaban, I cannot be convinced that he would be safe there among the other Death Eaters."

Kingsley looked at Harry consideringly. Hermione knew that he was weighing Harry's power against his own, deciding how much the support of The Boy Who Lived would mean to his administration. Hermione was consumed by a fury so all encompassing that she could hardly see. Harry sat easily in his chair, but his face was intractable. She was certain that he knew exactly what he was doing, and it infuriated her that he hadn't told her. She wanted to yell; she wanted to throw things and make demands, and yet Harry sat there, calm and sure of himself. This was her battle, she thought unreasonably. Harry had won his war. Now it was time for her to do *her* job.

"As I was saying, the Department of Mysteries has provided us with the means to curtail magic. Far more effective than simply taking a wand--as, of course, a wand can always be stolen or otherwise acquired--the bracelet that they have developed renders the wearer essentially a Squib until it is removed. Now, if he were to agree, and the Ministry informed of his whereabouts, I might be willing to agree to simple confinement until such time as-- "

"You can't possibly be suggesting robbing Professor Snape of his magic."

"The bracelet is not permanent, Hermione. It simply provides assurance to the Ministry that the wearer will not commit further magical offenses nor try to escape punishment."

"He'd be a sitting duck, Kingsley! You'd leave him utterly defenseless during a time when people are in great pain, when people will be looking for a scapegoat--before he's had a chance to defend himself."

"Be reasonable!" Kingsley said, slapping his hand against his desk with obvious frustration. "You refuse Azkaban as an option--where, I might point out, there are guards--but you find house arrest just as objectionable? What could I possibly offer that would satisfy you?"

"Could he be under the Fidelius Charm?" Harry interjected.

"Pardon?"

"Snape's location. Could he be under the Fidelius Charm? Provided you knew the secret, of course?"

"Harry!"

Harry did not respond to her protest. Her fingers dug into the plush of the chair in which she sat.

Kingsley spoke slowly. "If he agreed to wear the bracelet, and the Ministry knew--"

"Not the Ministry. If *you* knew the secret."

He pursed his lips. "If he agreed to wear the bracelet, and/ knew the secret... then yes. I would consent to his dwelling under the Fidelius Charm. For his safety."

"How soon could you schedule a trial?"

"There are a great number of Death Eaters to be tried, as I'm sure you realize. We have several families in custody, several high profile families. I think--"

"And if he agreed to testify against those families? Would he receive priority?"

"Harry!" Hermione said again. "You cannot speak for Snape. You cannot make promises for him."

"Are you in contact with Snape, Hermione?" Kingsley asked.

"I--I may have access to him."

"Then I suggest you consult with him about his options. The terms of my offer are these: if Snape would be willing to testify against the other Death Eaters, then in exchange, I will offer him the privilege of remaining in a Fidelius location, under the nullifying bracelet and proper monitoring charms, with priority given to his trial date. The terms of this contract will expire in two hours. And Hermione, I want it noted before we make this official that if Snape were to run in that time period, I would hold you accountable. I am taking an enormous risk here. It should go without saying that I would not do it for anyone else."

They had her boxed. Harry and Kingsley had danced around her until she could no longer feel the ties that bound her, could not see from whose lips they had come. She had charged in here with no real plan except to make them see his *rightness*, and now she would be unable to leave without being followed unless she accepted this travesty of a deal. She remembered Snape's face in the morning light of Spinner's End, so set, so *resigned*. And she would have to return to tell him that she was failing, that she had already failed to protect him.

Kingsley held out his hand.

"Will you, Hermione Granger, present the details of my offer to Severus Snape and return here within two hour's time to deliver his answer?"

She hesitated. She would not have their home invaded; she would not allow them to take him to Azkaban. That much would be preserved. She took his hand. Magic

surged from his fingertips to hers. He released her hand and pressed his palm to a piece of parchment. When he lifted it, she could see the words of their agreement glowing for a moment before they settled into ordinary black.

"Very well," he said, handing her the parchment.

"Thank you, Minister," she said dully.

Two hours.

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Snape was sitting on the sofa when she arrived. He did not turn to look at her as she opened the door, and all she was able to see of him was the curtain of his hair where it fell over his face. Whether he was awake or sleeping, calm or furious, she did not know.

"Well?" he said.

Hermione felt light-headed. She walked toward the couch on legs that had no feeling. She had no plans for how to tell him what had happened, no more than she had had plans to convince Kingsley to do her bidding. It seemed that every step she'd taken since she left the Ministry served to remind her of how deeply unprepared she was for this. Always, there had been guidance. Always, instruction. Snape himself had taught her to survive the year with his plans and his lessons, and Dumbledore had overseen it from his office, leading them down the path he thought best, and though she thought upon him with disgust, she was starkly terrified of this world in which no adult stepped in to see that things came out properly, that justice was done.

The man sitting before her on the couch could be imprisoned, could--God forbid--be killed, because she had no idea what she was doing, because at long last, Hermione Granger was in over her head, and no one was pulling the strings.

"I take it things did not go as you had hoped," Snape said. His tone was neither smug nor defeated, but matter of fact.

"Severus--"

He still faced resolutely away from her.

"Are there Aurors outside, Hermione?"

"Severus, please."

"Or do they expect me to turn myself in?"

She thrust the parchment at him. He read it silently, his hair still shielding his expression from her eyes.

"They want my magic."

Her face began to crumple. "I swear to you, I did the best I could. I--"

"You believe the best of people. It has always been your weakness," he said, and his voice never rose nor changed in pitch. "Still, I don't know how you could have done any better. For my help, they will swallow the bitterness of being unable to throw me in Azkaban immediately. Though they will console themselves with the knowledge that only a simple trial stands between me and my inevitable fate. And they will find their pleasure when I am on the stand and at their mercy."

"No."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. Which part of my logic do you find erroneous?"

"I will not allow that to happen."

"No? Well, I hardly see what you will do to stop it. Do you have a quill?"

For a moment, she wanted to beg him not to sign it, to tell him that they could just leave; they could run. It wouldn't be so bad. They could travel--they'd both known life as Muggles; it wasn't impossible. But when he glanced up at her, his face perfectly impassive, his black eyes seeming only to question why she had not produced the quill, she felt determination of a very different kind. This face, the one that looked at her now--if they ran, that would be all she would ever see. Just the blankness that hid all hope and shame beneath the surface. They could go to Antarctica, and still, it would never be far enough. He would still look at her with *endurance*, and that she could not bear.

She pulled a battered quill from her bag and handed it to him. He would sign, and she would learn to fight for him. She would fight, and she would keep fighting until she saw his face, his real face, again.

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When she returned to the Ministry, she found herself in the center of what seemed a sea of exploding lights. Voices screamed her name, and Kingsley did not appear from the lift to help her through them. Covering her head with her hands, she fought her way through the photographers and journalists. When the doors of the lift shut behind her, she collapsed against the mirrored back wall and looked into her own face, the face that would now, no doubt, be plastered across the front page of the Daily Prophet.

To her own eyes, she was barely recognizable. Dark circles like bruised thumbprints sat beneath her eyes, and her cheeks were hollow and sharp looking. She was smeared, still, with dirt and blood, and her hair was matted and tangled. *Wouldn't Mum be proud*, she thought bitterly, as she stepped into the hallway of Level One.

Kingsley stood outside his office, his arms folded over his chest. She tried to smile as she approached him. Harry had been right to temper her this afternoon. Making an enemy of Kingsley Shacklebolt was not going to do her any favors. She held the parchment out to him.

"He agreed," she said simply. "And he's written his address on the parchment. Would you like to come and put the bracelet on yourself?"

Kingsley took the parchment and tucked it into the inner pocket of his robes without looking at it. His face was unreadable, and she began to feel a twinge of deep unease.

"I would," he said. "But first I would like you to step into my office."

He gestured for her to have a seat in the chair that she had sat in earlier, but this time he sat in the chair opposite it, crossing his legs and tenting his hands in what was a probably accidental but extremely accurate imitation of Dumbledore. He looked at her steadily for a moment.

"Kingsley? Is something wrong?"

He pulled his wand from his pocket, and just as she registered alarm, he *Accio'd* a newspaper from his desk.

"Perhaps you could take a look at this and explain to me what it means," he said.

Folding back the parchment with trembling hands, she began to read.

*Severus Snape: More than Just Murder Going on at Hogwarts*

*By Rita Skeeter*

*The wizarding world is still reeling from the Battle of Hogwarts and the defeat of the Dark Lord Voldemort, but at the Ministry of Magic, it's business as usual. Or, perhaps I should say, business as unusual. The newly appointed Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, hasn't had a chance to sleep yet--there have been too many matters requiring his urgent attention.*

*"First, of course, we need to rid the Ministry of those who were working for Voldemort. Equally high on the list of priorities is to capture the Death Eaters that are still at large."*

*These may seem like obvious first steps, but Minister Shacklebolt has other pressing issues on his mind.*

*"Hogwarts suffered terrible destruction during the battle. Magical education--with a strong Muggle Studies and Tolerance Awareness curriculum--is of the utmost importance to this administration, and we are hard at work to ensure that Hogwarts will be ready to open on time for the new school year. The education of young, impressionable minds is paramount to preventing a recurrence of this kind of struggle."*

*According to Minister Shacklebolt, removing Severus Snape from the office of Headmaster was the key to beginning the kinds of reforms he wants to see at Hogwarts.*

*Much of wizarding society was shocked, last August, by the news that Severus Snape had been appointed Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Mere months after Snape murdered the previous Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, he was installed by the Board of Directors--now believed to have been under the control of the Death Eaters--as Headmaster of the esteemed school.*

*Several students have already stepped forward to give us a glimpse of what life was like at Hogwarts under Snape's regime.*

*"I've got loads of scars," says seventh-year Hufflepuff, Ernie McMillan. "Snape was in charge of all the punishments. Professors whipped us, or used the Cruciatus Curse on us when we 'misbehaved.' Really, we were just speaking out against the restrictions. Snape ran things with an iron fist--there were no extracurricular activities, no Hogsmeade weekends, and curfews every night. All the owl post coming into the school was inspected. I couldn't even get a birthday present from my mum without having the box torn apart. But we never stopped fighting back."*

*Ernie, like many brave Hogwarts students, stayed to fight in the final battle.*

*"I'd like to have taken a shot at Snape myself," he says. "Give him a taste of his own magic."*

*But Snape's medieval disciplinary tactics might be the least of Hogwarts parents' worries. When I visited Hogwarts during the hours following the final battle, I wanted to see for myself the lair of the most dangerous Headmaster in the school's history.*

*Though the office had been thoroughly cleaned of Dark artifacts by the Aurors before my arrival, I was able to speak to former Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black about the Death Eater who ruled Hogwarts for a year.*

*"I've just been released from the Headmaster's Oath," Black was quick to tell me. "Until now, I have been magically bound not to report anything concerning the Severus Snape's time as Headmaster."*

*But now that Minister Shacklebolt has deposed the former Headmaster, Black is free to speak about the things he witnessed in the Headmaster's office.*

*Among his chilling revelations was the fact that Severus Snape may have used his position to marry Hermione Granger, former Gryffindor prefect and best friend of Harry Potter.*

*"They were married right here in the office," Black told me. "No further than you are from me now. Back while she was still a student. But after she left, they remained in touch. They were in close contact throughout the year."*

*While shocking that Snape would dare take such liberties with a student under his care, this startling new information raises questions of the former Miss Granger's loyalties. Long vaunted as the brains behind Harry Potter, one is now left to wonder whose side this witch was really on.*

*No doubt, more information on this inappropriate alliance will be revealed in the days to come. Daily Prophet readers may be assured that I will leave no stone unturned in my pursuit of the truth about the enigmatic murderer of Hogwarts.*

*Slowly she raised her eyes to Kingsley's. The look he was giving her was nearly predatory.*

*"Sir," she said. "Can we begin at the beginning?"*

## Chapter Forty-Three

*Chapter 43 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Sorry for the delay, my dear readers. Real life has had it out for me these last two weeks. All the usual things apply: anything you recognize belongs to JKR; I make no money. Thank you to RedOrchid, Shellsnapelover, and OpalJade for their support, honesty, and excellent betaing skills.

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The offices on Level Two were little more than cubicles, the desks improbably close together as if they had all been fitted into the space by means of an Extension Charm.

Kingsley had ordered the Aurors from the office, which now had an abandoned, cluttered feel. The walls bore moving pictures of faces she knew intimately--her own, of course, and Harry's, Ron's, Lupin's face and Kingsley's. But hastily stuck over them were the most recent targets of the Ministry: all three Malfoys, the Lestranges, Dolohov, Yaxley and Travers, Avery and Goyle. What surprised her most was the number of women's faces: Maia Selwynn, read one tag; Delphine Rosier, another. Marigold Parkinson. Peregrine LeStrange. She had rarely seen the female Death Eaters unmasked. It unnerved her, though she could not say why.

Snape's face was noticeably absent, but she drew no comfort from that. He was supposed to be dead.

Kingsley had been inside the Pensieve for nearly a quarter of an hour. Hermione waited, using her wand to poke at several pieces of parchment that sat beside the Pensieve. Detention requests. What had they thought they would find? Voldemort's secret battle plans?

When Kingsley raised his face from the stone bowl, Hermione's eyes darted immediately to his. He did not return her gaze for a long moment; instead he looked at the floor without speaking.

Finally, he whispered, "Shit."

"Pardon?"

"Shit, Hermione. Shit. The last time I saw Snape, we were leaving the Dursley's. Watching that--it was like telling me not to trust myself, not to believe even what I saw with my own eyes. You were *married* then."

A tiny flame of hope ignited in the back of her mind. "Yes."

"How did you live through that? Knowing you might hit him yourself that night?"

"I didn't start firing in earnest until I knew where he was. But he never knew which Harry was me. He didn't want to know. I can't imagine what it must have been like for him."

Kingsley shook his head and raised a hand to his face, shielding his eyes. "Shit," he said again, quietly.

She stood in silence. To prod him seemed dangerous.

"Your parents," he said. "I'll send Aurors right away."

Hermione felt as if he had just neatly scooped away a piece of her heart. She had trained herself so carefully never to think of her parents, never to long for them, and as much as she wanted them now, she could not imagine explaining what was happening to them, explaining what she had become. "Thank you."

"And Dumbledore... Merlin, *Dumbledore* put you up to this?"

She fought to keep her expression neutral. "Dumbledore put Severus up to a great number of things. Some of which turned out to be better ideas than others."

"Explain to me about the wand. Voldemort seemed quite sure he had taken Dumbledore's wand from Snape. Did Dumbledore entrust it to Snape?"

Hermione felt that she was on very uncertain ground. Keeping the truth from Kingsley had not worked to her favor thus far, but now that she had tentatively regained his trust, she was afraid to lose it again by questioning Dumbledore's plans.

"Dumbledore... had a very powerful wand. Lord Voldemort believed it to be unbeatable."

"Yes, I got that much."

"He intended Severus to gain the power of the wand by killing him. And he meant Severus to pass the wand to Harry."

"I'm sorry; I'm not following."

"Dumbledore intended Harry to take the wand from Severus. But the plan went awry. Draco Malfoy disarmed Dumbledore before Severus killed him, and he gained the wand's allegiance by accident."

Kingsley sighed. "This is quite a tale."

"I'm sure if you wait long enough, Dumbledore will turn up in one of his portraits to confirm it."

"I'm not calling you a liar, Hermione."

She nodded stiffly.

"But Harry ended up with the wand nonetheless? And that is why he survived the Killing Curse a second time?"

"Severus and I learned of the wand at roughly the same time. And at that point, it had become clear that Draco had taken--"

"Wait, you're saying that neither of you knew about the wand?"

Hermione looked at him steadily. "Harry would have had to kill Severus to take the wand. Obviously, this was something that Dumbledore was a bit reticent to tell us."

"Shit," Kingsley said again.

"Yes. That was why we went to Malfoy Manor. If Harry had not overpowered Malfoy--"

"Yes, I see."

"Anyway, as I said, at that point we thought it best to start comparing notes, and we realized that Harry would have to defeat Draco."

"I apologize for interrupting you again, Hermione, but are you implying that until that point you and Snape were still ignorant of one another's plans?"

"Mostly. Severus figured out what we were doing just before Christmas. Dumbledore thought it would be safer if our knowledge were limited... in case either of us were captured."

"So you just had to trust him?" Kingsley said incredulously.

"Do you feel I made the wrong decision?"

"No... of course not. It's just..."

Hermione raised her chin, and her eyes went hard. "He has never failed me."

Kingsley sank heavily into a desk chair and motioned Hermione into one so close that their knees nearly touched.

"So you and Snape conspired to get the power of Dumbledore's wand for Harry."

"Yes."

"And that worked." It was almost a question.

"Yes, thank God."

"And Snape? You said you saved his life?"

"I had Vita Secundus."

"You had Vita Secundus?" Kingsley all but shouted. "And dare I ask where you acquired such a thing? I suppose you are going to tell me that Dumbledore buried it in the woods in Wales and left you a map in his will that--"

Hermione snorted. "I see you've spoken with Harry."

"I Flooded him just after the paper arrived, Hermione. You could hardly expect me to--"

"And our stories match, don't they?"

"Hermione..."

"I could not have made up such a preposterous thing if I tried. But I'm curious now. You didn't know it was Vita Secundus?"

"Harry could not remember the name of the potion," Kingsley said sheepishly. "I thought it might have been some kind of antivenin."

"Severus began brewing the Vita during my third year at school. I carried it with me night and day for over a year."

"He expected you to save him?"

"Of course not. He's furious with me for saving him. He expected me to save Harry."

Kingsley swiveled his chair, turning away from her. He leaned his head against the back of the chair and shut his eyes.

"How will I spin this?" he murmured, almost to himself. "How in Merlin's name am I going to spin this?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Oh, it's not just that Snape was a loyal Order member," Kingsley said wearily, "or that he is alive, though those two things will be difficult enough. But now you want me to tell the world that Dumbledore planned for Harry Potter to kill Snape, that he--"

"I'm not asking you to tell the world anything," Hermione said. "Let us be, Kingsley. Announce that he's innocent and let us be."

"I can't do that, and you know it, Hermione. I have to put him on trial."

"Why?"

"Because no one will ever believe in me if my first act is to begin freeing members of the other side. They'll assume I've been corrupted somehow or Imperiused. They'll say that Snape bought me off, or that I was a traitor to the Light."

"So you're willing to put your job above Severus's life?"

"Do not deliberately misunderstand me. Of course this is about more than my job. It's Snape's life! Don't you hear what you're saying? How long do you think he'll last out there if people don't hear the truth? I'd have killed him myself during the final battle. And I'd have sent him to Azkaban if I'd caught him afterward. And now this article..."

A harsh silence filled the room.

"Thank you for your honesty," Hermione said in a chillingly soft voice.

Kingsley sighed again. "I'm saying that you need allies, and you need them now. Who else knew? Is there anyone who can verify your story?"

Hermione thought. Dumbledore had trapped them so neatly in their loyalty to him. She had kept her silence and so had Severus. Who would come forward now?

"Professor McGonagall," she said at last. "Luna Lovegood. And I think that Mr Ollivander may have known more than he let on. Dobby knew, but he..."

Kingsley turned his head and looked at her sadly. Though he did not say it, Hermione could read the look on his face as clearly as if he had *an old woman, a strange child, and a dead house elf*.

"It will take me two weeks to get him in front of the Wizengamot. I want to personally see every witch or wizard that may support you. I want statements before they are contacted by the press. Though it may be too late for that."

"All right."

Kingsley rose suddenly. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

He drew the parchment from the inner pocket of his robes and peered at it for a moment. "To... Spinner's End."

It was a strange kind of victory. Nothing had changed.

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The sight of Shacklebolt in Spinner's End would have been almost amusing in its wrongness if Snape had not felt such utter dread at his appearance. He was simply too large, too colourful, for the cramped and dingy surroundings, and everything about him seemed suddenly ludicrous, exaggerated. His voice was too loud; his movements too sudden. *Mother, the Minister has come to call*, Snape thought with bitter amusement. Shacklebolt, to his credit, seemed to sense how unwelcome he was, how the house itself seemed to reject him, and he fumbled slightly as he pulled the heavy gray bracelet from his robes.

Snape did not speak when the wizard clamped the circlet over his thin, pale wrist. There was no pain, no telltale burning as his magic left him. It felt like nothing. And yet suddenly he felt weighted in way that was unfamiliar, as if he were now sharing his body with something dead and cumbersome. He flexed his fingers silently.

"I'd like your wand," Shacklebolt said.

"You said he didn't have to give up his wand," Hermione interjected, and instantly, Snape felt sickened by the pleading in her tone. When would she learn never to show them weakness? "You said the bracelet would render the wand useless."

"Priori Incantatem," Shacklebolt said solemnly. "I can set a team of Aurors to documenting your spell casting. It might help."

The set of Snape's mouth did not change, but he raised both eyebrows as he handed over the long, thin wand. It was like giving away his own hand.

"Severus, you don't have to--" Hermione began, but he turned from her and shrugged, walking to the window.

"What does it matter? It's useless to me."

He saw her slump from the corner of his eye. Truly, it would be better not to have to look at it, not to forget for a moment and pick it up, to cast *lumos* that would bring no light. No one spoke for a long minute.

"I will send the Minister's owl with the details of the trial," Shacklebolt said. "You may feel free to send it on your own errands before you return it to me."

Snape said nothing for so long that Hermione was forced to reply. "Thank you," she said.

Shacklebolt turned toward the door, and she followed him. Snape looked on with a kind of strange detachment.

"Hermione, I don't mean to sound critical," Shacklebolt said, "but think about what I said about appearances." He gave her a look that seemed to take in her filthy robes and skin and then he glanced pointedly at Snape.

She nodded curtly.

"And do not forget, when you leave here, that the press will be watching you."

"Yes, sir," she said, and he looked vaguely stung, as surely Hermione had meant him to feel.

"I'll be in touch."

Snape watched through the window as Shacklebolt hastened from the house and Apparated from the top step. He heard the snick of the door closing and her footsteps as she entered the room. He knew what she required; he could feel it in the way her eyes seemed to burn into the back of his neck, but he could think of no words with which to reassure her. She had done well, it was true. She had done, probably, the best that could have been done, but she had a wand and he did not, and he simply felt too tired to comfort her.

"Severus, they know," she said, startling him.

"I beg your pardon?"

"There was an article in the Daily Prophet. Our... our marriage has been leaked."

Slowly, slowly he turned toward her. "Which one of them was it? That couldn't keep his mouth shut?"

"It was Headmaster Black, actually," she said archly.

*Fucking Phineas Nigellus Black* Snape wondered vaguely if it would be possible to cock things up worse than they were. Strangely, he felt little emotion at her declaration. Everything felt like a smooth and open road in his mind. A long, flat path leading nowhere. She looked at him intensely, openly, and he felt the oddest urge to thwart her.

"Your room is up the stairs on the left," he muttered.

She blinked twice and then turned and ascended the steps. But he heard her *listening*. He knew the creak of those steps so completely that he knew when she paused on the fifth stair, waiting for some sound or motion from him, and he would not give it to her.

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The room was tiny, tinier even than the kitchen below, and spare. A slim cot covered in a thin blue blanket stood against the back wall, accompanied by an end table and a small chest of drawers. There was a chair in the corner, slightly smaller than was standard, and that was when she knew. She was in Severus's childhood bedroom. He had sent her here like a guest, like a guest in some portion of his life that she could never touch.

She set her bag on the chair and began to pull things out of it, partly to fill this room with *herself*, to make some indelible mark upon the blankness, and partly because she had held her tongue until she thought that she might bite right through it, and there was someone she wanted to see.

Items were crammed into the bag at random. She pulled out Harry's spare denims, two Transfiguration books, a copper cooking pot. She hefted a large, tattered box from the bag and set it atop the dresser, knowing what she would find next and feeling both desperate and afraid to remove it. She pulled the bag's mouth wide and yanked from it Phineas Black's portrait.

"Headmaster Black," she barked.

The canvas remained steadfastly black.

"Headmaster Black, I know that you can hear me."

For a moment it seemed that the paint rippled, but no pale and pointed wizard appeared.

"Coward," she hissed and propped the portrait against the wall. "You'll talk to that Skeeter bitch, but not to me? I thought you'd relish the chance to speak your mind without *interruption*."

Suddenly, she saw Black backing into his portrait, hands held out in front of him. "Enough! Woman! Put that wand away! I am a Headmaster of this school, and I will not be treated with dis--"

"Miss Granger?" called a crisp and unmistakable voice.

"Professor McGonagall!" Hermione cried.

"Stop, for Merlin's sake! If I don't leave my shoe in, you won't be able to hear her!"

"Oh, do be quiet, Phineas, I'm hardly hurting you. Miss Granger, where are you? I've been combing the countryside for you, and no one seems able to tell me where you are. Potter and Weasley said that you were with Severus, which makes no sense, of course, but they wouldn't say more--"

"Professor, I can't tell you where--"

"Surely, you weren't expecting a straight answer from Miss Granger. She is notoriously--" Black began.

Dumbledore began to speak. His voice was distant but clear, and it cut through the bickering of McGonagall and Black. "She has retreated, of course. The war has taken its toll on all of us. But those who live need you, Hermione. Your friends need you. I am sorry about Severus. I know that the two of you--"

"Don't," Hermione said quietly. "I want to speak to Professor McGonagall."

"You've grown more like him," Dumbledore said, the twinkle evident in his voice, as if he meant to imply that he had given her a gift, a piece of Snape she could carry with her always. "He rarely allowed me to speak of you at all; in fact, he--"

"Stop."

"Miss Granger," Black said, his voice a warning.

"My dear," Dumbledore began.

"You sent him to die. You knew that the moment Voldemort learned of the wand that he would be as good as dead."

"Miss Granger, I know you are in pain; You've lost an ally, a friend. These are the crushing, inevitable costs of war. Severus knew that when he turned spy for our side; he knew the risks--"

"An ally?" she hissed. "A friend?" A small part of her mind begged her to stop, begged her to remember that she was alienating the one man whose testimony might clear Snape's name, but she could not stop. All her fear and helpless rage had found a target, and she took aim. "*You disgust me.* You pretended to care for him, but he was your pawn, same as he was Voldemort's, and you--"

"Miss Granger, I beg you to listen to me."

"But you failed."

Silence seemed to radiate from the canvas.

"Your precious plan failed. Severus ensured that Harry would take the mastery of the Elder Wand. He protected us in Malfoy Manor, helped Harry defeat Draco, and got us out alive. He risked everything to do what you would not--to make sure *Harry lived.*"

"You cannot imagine that anyone wanted to see Harry live more than I did, Miss--"

"And then I saved his life." There was cacophony on the other end of the portrait. She distinctly heard Professor McGonagall gasp, and a chair being pushed away from a desk. Phineas Nigellus loudly cleared his throat, and Dumbledore's rumbling voice began once more.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your potion--your Vita Secundus! The potion you had him brew to make sure that Harry would live long enough to die at the right moment--"

"Miss Granger--Hermione!" Dumbledore shouted, but she plunged ahead, undeterred.

"It doesn't work on the Killing Curse. But it works on snake bites."

"Severus lives?" Dumbledore said incredulously. "Severus *lives*? Miss Granger, I wonder if you have any idea of the danger that he is in if he is alive. Where is he? Steps must be taken immediately--"

"A fact you might have known if you had been willing to grace us with your presence yesterday! And I am taking steps, thank you. I am--"

"Albus, you will leave your portrait or stop talking now," Professor McGonagall said. "You're just making a mess of things. Hermione, calm down. Now, I understand that Severus is alive. Where are you? Are you hurt?"

"Neither of us is badly hurt. We are safe. It's just that... the Ministry is aware that Severus is alive. There will be a trial. Kingsley said he thought two weeks."

"Are you in Azkaban?" McGonagall asked sharply.

"No. No, not Azkaban. Not yet. But Severus has no magic. It was a condition of being allowed to remain where we are, and I need money, but I can't go to Gringotts--"

"Slow down. I can take care of Gringotts. Now, explain to me from the beginning. What did Kingsley say?"

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It was perpetually cold in Spinner's End. Partly, it was that the house was draughty and poorly sealed, and the chilly spring air seemed to settle and deepen in the few small rooms, permeating her skin and making Hermione feel that her very bones were cold. But partly it was simply the atmosphere of the house, a symptom of the impasse between herself and Snape that held her in its grip and made her cautious and wary.

Snape roamed through the house or sat at the window all hours of the day, watching, watching, though she knew not for what. Occasionally, when she ventured into the living room, he turned and watched her just as silently, watched as she pulled on a second jumper, watched as she hunted in the galley kitchen for a knife, watched her. He never asked her to cast a Warming Charm or to prepare a meal, and for some reason, she found his silence a challenge and vowed that she would do no magic unless he asked her specifically to do so. It was not just that she did not want to offend him, that she did not want to remind him of what had been taken from him, but that she did not want to coddle him, nor force her care upon him against his will. Enough was forced on him.

And let him be cold if that was how he was going to behave. Let him be hungry. Let him feel the silence that swirled through the rooms like a sharp, biting wind, and let it make him as frightened and uncomfortable as it made her.

She felt her ears had been tuned to some strange, relentless frequency that had her starting at the sound of bedspring or a swish of fabric on the stairs. She was aware, painfully aware, of his every motion through the house, though he said as little as was humanly possible and rarely stayed in the same room with her for more than a few moments.

For Hermione, the days that passed between the end of the war and the trial were a strange mirror of the year that had come before--hours and hours of charged, fearful tedium, punctuated by sudden trips into the outside world that left her frightened and reeling.

She had met with Professor McGonagall. Mindful of Kingsley's warning, she had showered and braided her hair, used her wand to tailor a set of her school robes into something passing for fashionable, and Apparated into Diagon Alley. McGonagall had met her in front of the ice cream parlor that had once belonged to Florean Fortescue. When she had arrived, the elder witch had held out her hands, seizing Hermione's, and had kissed her quickly on the cheek. She led Hermione to a table outside the shop and sat down, pretending not to notice the people on the street who gaped openly at them, or the photographer who snapped his pictures from the cover of a nearby bush.

"How is he?" Professor McGonagall had asked.

"The same."

McGonagall clucked disapprovingly and slid a small velvet pouch across the table to Hermione. "I brought you this. It isn't much, but it should be enough to hold you until you can access--"

"Thank you," Hermione said, looking down. "I'm very sorry to have to ask this of you--"

"Nonsense," Professor McGonagall said in her brisk way. "We'll sort it out when this business is finished. By the way, I have heard from both Luna Lovegood and Woodward Ollivander. They received your owls and have made arrangements to meet with the Minister. Have you heard from Kingsley?"

Hermione had been about to reply when a bald, pudgy wizard in heavy gray robes approached the table.

"Miss Granger?"

She looked up sharply and narrowed her eyes.

"Yes?"

"I am Dempster Wiggleswade. I write for the Daily Prophet. Can you confirm the recent rumours that you--"

"Mr. Wiggleswade, this is not a good time."

"A simple yes or no, Miss Granger. Were you married to Severus Snape, former Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and--"

"It's Madam Snape," she said, lifting an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry?"

"It's not Miss Granger, it's Madam Snape, and if you will excuse me, I am having lunch with a friend."

Wiggleswade took two large steps backward, grinning hugely and scribbling in his notebook. "Indeed, *Madam Snape*. Very sorry to have interrupted. You ladies have a lovely day."

Hermione turned back to Professor McGonagall, who nodded approvingly.

"I don't know what made me do that. It was probably a dreadful idea."

"On the contrary. You have nothing to be ashamed of, Hermione. I think it's best that you not seem to be hiding from it. I chose this spot particularly for its visibility."

Hermione pressed her fingers to her temples for a moment. "Has Dumbledore... has he agreed to testify?"

"Yes, and Phineas asks that you bring your portrait of him as well." Oddly, Professor McGonagall seemed to be trying not to smile. "Rarely have I seen a wizard more conflicted. I rather think he wants to apologize to you, but cannot bring himself to do it. He keeps insisting that he only meant to bring honor to the house of Slytherin."

Hermione gave a tired huff, and the corners of her lips turned up sadly.

"Do you know Severus's tailor?" McGonagall said, apropos of nothing.

"His tailor? No. Why?"

"Because I think it would be appropriate for him to have some new robes for the trial."

"New robes?"

McGonagall sighed. "I think it would be best if he did not look like your professor."

"Oh. Well, yes."

"Yes. And try to impress on him that appearances--"

"Kingsley has already gone over that."

"Very well. Will you contact me if you need anything?"

"Of course. And thank you so much, Professor. You've been more than--"

"Minerva. And think nothing of it."

Professor McGonagall had squeezed her hand quickly before rising. "Tell him I said... Well, tell him I said that I'll have to make rather a spectacle of him."

Hermione had looked at her quizzically, but she was already walking away, wiping her eye on her tartan sleeve.

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She came and went. She fixed a sandwich and left it on the drain board. She yelled behind her closed bedroom door, and still Snape lay on his bed in the darkness or sat in the living room with a book in his lap, his long, pale index finger marking a page he had not read and did not intend to read.

Each time she left, she approached him and stood silently until he raised his eyes to her, and each time she said exactly the same thing.

"I am coming back."

He never responded, never even blinked to indicate that he had heard her.

*I am coming back.*

It was a gift, like the robes she had laid at the end of his bed, black woolen robes in exactly the cut of the ones he had worn to Narcissa Malfoy's victory ball. Like the sandwich that he left until it drew flies and finally ate when his hunger outweighed the urge to simply rot in place.

It was a gift, like her presence here, and when he thought of it, the blackness that sat inside him like a stone rose up until it choked him.

He wanted to pick it up and hurl it back at her, to bury it at the bottom of his closet like he had the robes, to hide it, somehow, from the weak and cowering part of himself

that needed her to say it, the part that, without it, would sit impish and chattering in the corner of his mind that she was gone now, up and left, and that he would be alone until he died of starvation or began to eat his own flesh.

But what did she want from him? Hermione and her wide, heart shaped face, looking at him all the time, listening for him. What was she coming back for?

She said she wanted to cut his hair.

She said, "Please, Severus, they'll be able to see more of your face if I do, and I think it would be good if they could see your face."

She said, "I made eggs," and then left them cooling on a plate and nearly ran from the room in case he might be more apt to eat if she weren't watching.

She said, "I brought the Daily Prophet. There's an article about Polyjuice," and left him to read a paper whose cover blazed with the words *Potter calls Snape a Hero*.

*Hermione Granger: That's Madam Snape, to you.*

*Is Snape Alive?*

Who was this Snape they wrote about?

She said, "I am coming back," and left him again for a world that would not let her be. The paper was filled with pictures. Hermione looking over her shoulder as she entered Madam Malkin's. Hermione with Minerva in front of Florean Fortescue's. Hermione with her arms full of books outside Flourish and Blotts. Hermione at the Ministry, in the street, buying a newspaper, grocery shopping, looking at owls in the window of Eeylops, surrounded always by people staring, people sneering, people asking--and he sent her out there again and again, and she went, never saying anything more than, "I am coming back."

Never saying, "Please don't make me."

But he could see it. He knew her face so well: the way her left eye twitched when she gathered up her bag; the set of her jaw; the way she squared her shoulders and drew herself up so tall before she opened the door, as if she were walking into battle every time.

She went, and he was helpless to stop her. As helpless as he was to protect her from it.

But thinking these thoughts was pointless, as pointless as breathing, and so, mostly he thought of nothing. He saw leaves breaking out on the trees by the side of the road. He swept dust from the bookshelves with his fingertips. He lay in bed and traced the shapes that the water stains made on the ceiling with his eyes. He thought of nothing.

He washed, finally, on the sixth day, the day that she had gone to meet with Potter to finalize her plans for the trial--plans, it seemed, that had nothing to do with him. She consulted him, of course. She sometimes went on at great length about what she wanted to say, about who had agreed to testify, about how she wanted to enter the courtroom, but he had nothing to add. The end of the trial would be completely outside his control, and so he saw no need to trouble himself with trying to control the beginning of it.

He washed, not to please her, but because the putrefying scent of the battle and his own sweat had begun to invade his not-thinking, and he wished to be rid of it so that he might be left alone with his own mind once more. His robes he cast into a cracked wicker hamper in the bathroom, knowing that he would never touch them again. He scrubbed his white shirt with a bar of soap in the sink and hung it on the towel rack to dry. From his parents' closet, he unearthed a dingy pair of his father's old denims, and he thought spitefully that he would rather wear his bastard father's trousers than the fine woolen ones that Hermione had bought him to impress a courtroom.

He found that he quite liked the shower. The stinging points of water filled the bathroom with constant sound and sensation that drove out everything else, until he felt that he was nothing but a bead of water himself, banging, banging against the porcelain. Finally, the water grew cold, and as he could do nothing to warm it, he got out.

Clean and soothed, he padded to the bedroom and lay down once more.

Hours passed. Hermione was a long time in returning.

Finally, he heard the sound that he had not realized that he'd been listening for as the door opened and shut. He heard her lay her bag down on the sofa and shed her shoes. He heard the pad, pad, pad of her feet on the steps. He listened as she paused outside his door--listened to her listening--and pad, pad, padded back to her room.

He knew, from his own fevered awareness, that sleep had not been visiting this house. Hermione tossed on the flimsy cot in his room, sometimes wandering the house, sometimes running the tap in the bathroom and then returning to her room. He heard pages turning and scribble of her quill on parchment. He did not know why he could not sleep, only that perhaps his waking life was so much like it that his body felt no need for the real thing. It did not seem to matter much.

Just before dawn, he heard her rise and begin to pace the corridor. What thoughts did she think so late at night? What kept her from sleep when her days were so filled with motion?

A sliver of light appeared at the edge of the room and widened as his door opened. He saw her, small and thin in the light of the hallway, clad in a large t-shirt that reached her knees. Her hair was free and wild around her head.

"Are you awake?" she whispered.

He said nothing.

She shut the door, and although the change from light to darkness had blinded him, he could feel her inside the room. She tiptoed to the bed and climbed in, careful to stay on her own side. He heard her set her wand on the table beside the bed.

"Goodnight, Severus," she said. It seemed loud in the darkness.

"Goodnight," he said formally and rolled away from her to face the wall.

He felt her shift and settle, wiggling down into the mattress. She turned onto her right side until she faced the door and shoved her arm up underneath the pillow. She sighed a long, deep sigh that seemed to come all the way from her toes, and he felt the weight go out of her, seemed to physically feel the change as she fell into sleep. Her breathing was deep and heavy, and he matched his to hers for something to do to keep his mind quiet.

Breathe in.... breathe out.

Back to back, they lay, with her wand within arm's reach, pointed at the door.

That night, he slept like the dead.

# Chapter Forty-Four

Chapter 44 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: I'm taking some liberties with the Wizengamot (and law in general) here and in future chapters. I'm letting the Wizengamot act somewhat like the Crown Court with an indictable offense (or eight) and somewhat like the Wizengamot, and I've blended some wizard and Muggle charges together. Many, many thanks to Persevero and to my father for aiming me toward and away from certain charges and defenses. All liberties taken and mistakes made are fully and completely my dunderheaded own. As always, I am in debt to Shellsnapelover, RedOrchid and OpalJade for their faithful betaing of this story. Special thanks to Irishredlass, whose support got me through this week and this chapter.

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On the morning of the hearing, Hermione slipped from their bed before dawn. The mattress creaked and shifted, and he opened an eye and watched as she tiptoed from the room.

There were sounds in the house that he had become accustomed to--female sounds. The sounds of heeled shoes and the suck of a lipstick tube as it opened. The swishing sound of a comb through her wet hair. This morning the house seemed alive with them, and he felt the alien tingle that told him that there was charm work going on in the bathroom. He sat up.

Snape put on his white shirt and buttoned it all the way to the top as he had not since the day he had finally removed it. It was grayish in places and obscenely wrinkled from wrist to shoulder, so he rolled the sleeves to his elbows and stepped into the denims that were slightly too short for him. Let her charm her hair to impress them; he would go exactly as he was. For that was to be the point of the thing, was it not? To find out who he was? To unearth all his secrets?

It was not as if a new set of robes would be the thing that set him free, and what he could not explain to her was that to wear them would be to admit that he cared what they thought of him, that their judgment meant something to him, and he would not undo the work of a lifetime in a single morning. Let them think whatever they wanted to think; they always had. He would not shame himself with trying.

He tucked his hair behind his ears and sat down on the edge of the bed to lace his boots. He could hear her clicking down the stairs and rummaging in the kitchen. He sat quietly for a moment, listening to her moving through this house and thought vaguely how strange the world was. Hermione Granger was cooking breakfast in his childhood home. He heard juice poured and eggs cracking into the frying pan. Today he would appear before the Wizengamot.

He rose and headed for the kitchen with the intent to tell her not to bother. Her eggs were abysmal, and he simply would not be able to stomach anything this morning besides. Shackbolt was due at seven to escort them to the Ministry, and somehow the thought of the man having to take his arm and Apparate him into the Ministry like a Squib made his stomach feel small and hard inside him.

But as he descended the steps, he saw her. Her hair was not charmed sleek and straight as he had expected, but pulled into a thick knot at her neck, and her robes were long and black and severe, buttoned from throat to foot. She stood taller than usual, whether through some Illusion or high heeled shoes he could not yet tell, but the thing that struck him most was an indefinable air that clung to her like a fine mist. There was a woman in his kitchen.

Her brow was furrowed, and her lips were pressed together firmly. She wore makeup, but it could not disguise the tightness of her features and the evidence of the strain she had born for the last two weeks, for the last year. Her hands moved deftly over the countertop, slicing mushrooms and throwing them into the pan where they sizzled among the eggs. She worked without looking up, though he knew that she must be aware of his presence.

He felt frozen there upon the steps looking at her. This was not the girl who had stood in his doorway in the middle of the night.

And what struck him in the gut as he stood there was that he now knew what her gift to him had been. It was not the way that she had bought only food that she knew how to prepare without magic. It was not the robes, or the newspapers, or the way she let him slink through the house like an unperson. It was not the way she lay between him and the door so that sleep could finally come, or even the way she had gone out into the world for him like some avenging angel. It was the girl in the doorway, her shirt hanging down to nearly knobby knees, her hair a disheveled cloud of curls. It was the fact that no one but him would ever see that girl again. What they would see was the woman who stood in his kitchen. She had given him something no one else could have, and no one else could take away.

He turned and climbed the stairs again. Without considering what he was doing, he dug the robes from where they lay at the back of his closet in a crumpled ball of wool.

In the bathroom, he found a small and rather useless looking pair of scissors among her things. He worked carefully, trimming his hair away from his face, but finally he had to admit that he could not do the back himself. He stalked to the kitchen and wordlessly held the tiny shears out to her.

"Oh, Severus," she said, almost under her breath. She took the scissors without further comment and finished his hasty haircut. It was choppy, and perhaps slightly longer on the left side, but he had no wand with which to even it, nor to smooth the wrinkles from his robes, and she did not volunteer.

The eggs were burned when she turned back to them, and she apologized and hastily scraped them into the bin, but he only shrugged and went to the window again.

Shackbolt appeared with a pop onto the front step and knocked on the door. Snape did not rise, but watched Hermione as she opened the door and welcomed the Minister inside. If she wanted to be the official face of the Snapes, he would let her.

Shackbolt strode into the sitting room and held out his hand. "Severus. Good morning," he said.

Snape did not cross the room to take his outstretched hand. Instead he said, "Shall we skip the pleasantries and get on with it? You are anxious to begin, I'm sure."

Shackbolt cleared his throat. "Yes, I suppose the sooner we begin, the sooner this will all be over. Witnesses for the defense have been checking in all morning. Unnecessary, of course, as this is only the preliminary hearing. Still, I'm sure you will be glad for the show of support. The Weasleys have already--"

"Indeed. I imagine there are quite a few families who wouldn't miss this for the world."

"Severus," Hermione said in a warning tone.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Yes?"

She did not continue, but stared back at him stonily.

"Yes, well, I'm sure Hermione has already gone over this, but just so that we're all clear... We will Apparate into my office at the Ministry. From there we will proceed to Courtroom Ten."

"Courtroom Ten?" Snape drawled. "Just like old times, then?"

"Dumbledore's portrait is permanently fixed in Courtroom Ten," Shacklebolt said, almost apologetically. "We're not--it's not meant to be reminiscent of--"

"No, of course not," Snape said.

"Thank you, Kingsley," Hermione said. "I think we're ready."

The three of them walked to the front step of Spinner's End. Hermione took Snape's left arm and Shacklebolt his right, and between them, they did for him what he had done for himself since he was seventeen years old.

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The Minister's office was jarring no matter how many times she visited it. Hermione supposed that it was because she always expected it to be impersonal--the bland representation of a government official, not the colourful expression of a man she knew. Or perhaps it was that she had grown accustomed to the muted countenance of Spinner's End, and the vibrance of the place seemed to burn her eyes.

Kingsley seemed to feel that they would like a moment alone, a concession that made her simultaneously grateful and nervous. He hastened from the office, telling them that he was going to see that the courtroom was ready for them, and shut the door behind him. She turned to look at Snape who appeared somehow dwarfed inside his rumpled robes. He did not wear them the way he had worn the green brocade of the same cut, and it seemed strange to her that she longed for the man who could rise up inside his clothing like the right hand of the Dark Lord. Where had he put that part of himself?

"I do not think..." he said after a moment, "I do not want you to have false expectations."

She nodded. There seemed no appropriate response.

"It may be that things are said about you that--"

She huffed impatiently. "Honestly, Severus. Do you imagine that I haven't heard every possible thing that people are saying about me? In Madam Malkin's alone, three witches called me a whore, and one said I should be rotting in Azkaban like the other Death Eaters. I am fully prepared for what may be said."

Snape flinched slightly. "Hermione, I--"

"You don't have to say anything. This is not your fault."

"No," he said heavily. "But it is not yours either."

Her eyes closed involuntarily as she accepted his gift into herself.

"I will not ask their forgiveness. Do you understand me? I will not court their good opinion like a schoolboy."

"I know that."

"I do not wish you to think that because I have agreed to wear this ridiculous--"

She held up her hand. "I know. May I straighten your robes?"

He nodded almost imperceptibly.

She drew her wand from her pocket and pointed it at him. He stood as still as a statue, and she felt such a wave of sympathy for him that her knees nearly buckled. It was not what she might cast at him that left him so rigid, but simply the evidence of her magic. When she had finished, she reached up and adjusted his collar, though it sat flush and stiff against his neck.

Kingsley tapped slightly on the door as he opened it.

"Are you ready?"

Snape followed him silently from the room, and she walked just behind him. They took the lift to the Department of Mysteries and then descended a series of stone steps to a long corridor that reminded Hermione forcibly of Snape's dungeons at Hogwarts. At the end of the hallway there was a heavy wooden door.

"When I open the door, everyone will stand. Severus, you will walk to the center of the court and take your seat. Hermione, you will join the other witnesses for the defense on the lowest tier. I will take my place as Head Prosecutor, at which point the court will be seated. At that time, the charges against you will be read. Do you have any questions?"

"Kingsley, you *do* believe--" she began.

"No questions," Snape said curtly.

Kingsley reached out and seized the heavy iron handle and pulled the door open. Hermione looked up at Snape, who stared through the open door, his face a perfect mask of indifference. She breathed deeply and drew herself up as high as she could as Kingsley stepped aside to let them pass, and she slipped her hand inside Snape's. For a moment, his hand was completely limp, and she wondered if she would continue to hold onto it--if there were more dignity in persevering or letting go--but suddenly his fingers laced through hers, and he squeezed her hand tightly. Beneath the pressure, she felt him nearly vibrating. She stared straight ahead in an unconscious mimic of him.

Together, they stepped through the doorway.

The room was enormous, like an enclosed stone amphitheater, with rows of seating raised one after the other around the circumference of the circular courtroom. The members of the Wizengamot sat clustered together in the higher rows opposite the door, and the witnesses for the prosecution and defense sat in the lowest seats, across from one another. To her left, Hermione saw Arthur Weasley, Bill and Fleur, Ron, George, Harry and Ginny, Luna Lovegood, Mr Ollivander, Professor McGonagall and Kreacher. They were such a motley group, and so determined looking, that they reminded her of the first meeting of Dumbledore's Army--all those brave faces, having no sense of what they might actually be fighting, but determined at least to try to stand up to it.

There were whispers in the courtroom as they entered, but Hermione did not look anywhere but at the faces she knew best, drawing comfort from their fixed expressions. She had to release Snape's hand to let him take his place in the large chair in the center of the room, its arms covered in chains. She turned quickly away from it, hearing the chilling sound of the links binding her husband to his seat. She slipped into the defense's row beside Luna Lovegood, who stared around the room with serene interest. She glanced into Luna's face, hoping to catch her eye, but Luna's gaze had fixed on a portrait that hung behind the Minister's head. Dumbledore sat easily inside his frame, his legs crossed and his hands resting on his knees. He looked as maddeningly calm as ever.

Kingsley rose from where he sat, surrounded by the plum-clad witches and wizards of the Wizengamot.

"Good morning," he said, his amplified voice ringing through the cavernous room. "Preliminary Hearing of Severus Snape on the eighteenth of May, nineteen hundred and ninety eight. Interrogators: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic; Gawain Robards, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and Tiberius Ogden, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. Court Scribe: Percy Ignatius Weasley. These proceedings will be open to the press; however, no photographs may be taken inside the

courtroom."

Hermione glanced to her right and saw a cluster of reporters by the door, Rita Skeeter and Dempster Wiggleswade among them. Rita Skeeter was staring at her with keen interest. Hermione looked quickly away.

"Please be seated. I trust I will not have to ask for silence. We will now present the charges, and Mr Snape will be given the opportunity to respond. The Ministry of Magic hereby charges Severus Snape with the following War Crimes..."

Hermione's eyes locked with Snape's as Kingsley's voice droned on and on.

"...Murder by Unforgivable Curse; Membership in a Terrorist Organization; Conspiracy to Commit Murder; High Treason; Espionage..."

Snape blinked steadily. His dark eyes never left hers, and his face gave no sign that he heard Kingsley speaking at all.

"...Aiding and Abetting the Use of the Unforgivable Curses; Use of Magic in the Presence of Muggles; Unauthorized Use of Memory Charms; Destruction of Property; Accessory to Kidnapping..."

Hermione struggled to keep her eyes open and her face impassive. As she stared at him, she felt as if she could send her thoughts directly into his mind, and she thought fiercely, "Do not listen to that; it means nothing. Close your mind; it means nothing..."

"Mr Snape, you may now answer the charges. How do you plead?" Kingsley's voice cut sharply across her litany of thought.

Hermione's eyes dropped, and her very cells seemed to stand still. Her heart did not beat; she did not breathe. Severus had never told her how he intended to plead. It was mad, inexplicable, she knew. Harry had hounded her for days, reminding her over and over again that all her research was for nothing if Snape meant to plead guilty, but she simply had been unable to bring herself to ask him what he planned to do.

Now it was time to see if she was right, or if she was very, very foolish.

Many nights she had lain in bed, either in the cot in the room Snape had relegated her to, or beside him in the master bedroom, and thought of this moment. Somehow it had seemed to her that she knew him, that she knew something fundamental about him that traveled through the air in the room as they slept, some residue that he left behind when he touched her, something amorphous but real that was simply Severus. Mr Weasley had taken her aside the night before and gently asked her why she refused to speak to Snape about his intentions, and all she had been able to say was, "Because I know him. He needs to come to this on his own or not at all. And if I don't give him any reason to thwart me, he won't."

That was not the real heart of the matter, and she knew it. But, in fact, the key to her husband was something rather hard to measure. Snape loved truth. Even when he was mistaken about what the truth was, he was obsessed with finding it, obsessed with revealing it, and whatever he said today, it would be because he believed it to be perfectly true. Did he consider himself a Death Eater? Did he think that he had *murdered* Albus Dumbledore?

The seconds seemed to tick by. The courtroom was silent, and slowly Hermione raised her eyes to her husband's face. She knew that everyone stared, that everyone watched him for some movement, some sign. But he looked only at her, and very quietly, but very clearly, he said, "Not guilty."

She exhaled so sharply that for a moment she was afraid she might vomit, but her distress was almost completely unnoticed in the din that erupted from the stands. Luna touched the back of her hand lightly.

"That was very brave of him," she whispered into Hermione's ear, which seemed funny, given all the things Severus had done that might be considered brave, but she nodded tightly at her friend.

Kingsley admonished those present to stay in their seats and remain quiet as he stood. "May it be entered into the record that Severus Snape has officially entered his plea. The trial will commence Monday morning, June the first, at nine o'clock a.m. Mr Snape will now be returned to confinement." He motioned to two Aurors that Hermione did not know, and they descended from their pew to join Snape in the center of the room. Kingsley signaled for Hermione to approach.

"Why isn't he in Azkaban with the other criminals?" Skeeter shrieked from the doorway. There were several cries of assent from the upper seats.

Kingsley cast a Shield around them.

"I will remind you that the court is under no obligation to answer your questions, Ms Skeeter. You will maintain decorum, or you will be asked to leave," Kingsley said. "However, I will tell you that in deference to the invaluable help that Mr Snape is providing the Ministry in identifying the Death Eaters and their various activities during the war, I have granted him permission to reside outside of Azkaban for the remainder of the trial. Rest assured that Mr Snape is without magic or means of escape. His location is perfectly secure. That is all for today."

Kingsley touched his wand to the chains that bound Snape to the chair, and they lifted. Flanked by the Aurors, with Kingsley in the lead, they made their way from the courtroom. Hermione was very glad for the Shield Charm that surrounded them, but despite its presence, she ducked several times as people launched themselves at her.

"Was Ms Granger of age when you married?"

"Hermione! Look at the camera! Are you a Death Eater?"

"How many times are you going to switch sides, Snape?"

Severus did not bow his head, nor hide behind his hair. He simply walked on, expressionless. Hermione strode beside him, her legs straining to keep up.

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The knock sent something that felt remarkably like magic singing down his spine, all the way to his toes. He was on his feet in less than a second, and his hand groped wildly around in his pocket for his wand.

"Go upstairs," he hissed at Hermione.

"What? Severus, *you* go upstairs," Hermione whispered back, drawing her own wand.

The realization that he had no wand--and that it would be useless to him even if he did--parried briefly with the fear of who was on the other side of the door for a moment, two different terrors struggling for dominance in his mind.

She was heading for the door, and he cut her off at the pass. "Are you being *deliberately* foolish? Do as I say!"

"You need to listen to me," she said, low and calm. "The likelihood that whoever is outside has come to hurt *me* is small. I'm armed, and I'm perfectly capable of--"

He longed to wrench the wand from her fist and banish her to the upper floor or shake her until she saw he was not going to be disobeyed--that he was opening that door, and she had best be far away when he did.

"Severus? Hermione?" called a voice from behind the door.

He turned toward her on his heel in a move that would have been quite impressive had he been wearing a robe and not his father's old denims.

"Why is Arthur Weasley at the door?"

"How should I know?" she said hotly, reaching past him and letting the balding wizard into the house.

"Hello, Mr Weas--"

"What are you doing here?" Snape barked.

"I brought the papers," Weasley said calmly, holding out two rolled bundles of parchment. "And I wanted to see how you were."

"Indeed," Snape said nastily. "I noticed Molly failed to join us today."

Weasley met his eyes. "Molly is at home, mourning our son," he said.

Hermione stepped between them and laid her hand on the man's arm. "How is she?"

"About like you'd expect," Weasley said, deflating slightly. "Anyway, I didn't know if you'd heard. They're bringing the Malfoys in from Azkaban."

"The Malfoys?" Hermione said with alarm.

"Come now, Hermione," Snape said. "Surely, you didn't think that Lucius and Narcissa would want to miss the fun? I'm sure they have plenty of fond recollections to share."

"It's my understanding that they want Draco's testimony in particular."

"I see. Well, I thank you for the happy tidings," Snape said acidly, snatching the papers from the other man's hand. "And now, if you'll excuse us, Hermione and I were just sitting down to dinner."

Weasley looked slowly around the room, as if to point out that no meal was in evidence, before saying, "Thank you for inviting me in, Severus. I wish you the best of luck. Hermione, we'll see you tomorrow."

Hermione followed Weasley out, presumably to apologize for his behavior, Snape thought, as he stalked to the couch and unrolled the papers. One was the Prophet, the front page alive with a moving photograph of the two of them exiting the courtroom. Hermione looked as if she was nearly running to keep up with him, and he felt a vague stab of guilt over that. *Notorious traitor, Severus Snape, leaves the courtroom with his child bride*, the caption read. The headline: *Snape Switches Sides Again*.

*No*, he thought, *I suppose he wouldn't want me to miss that*.

But the second paper was the Quibbler, and before Snape could throw it down in disgust and begin to berate the other wizard's taste in reading material, he saw the words, *Severus Snape Saved my Daughter*.

Bloody Xenophilius Lovegood.

What had he done in that courtroom? The whole thing would be over now if he had only said the word. The papers would shout it from the rooftops—"Guilty," says Severus Snape!—for a few days, and then the world would forget him again.

He heard the door slamming and Hermione's shoes clacking on the stairs. He stood up and snuffed the sconces with his fingertips.

She had every right to be angry. The papers would crucify her. Over and over again, for however long this took.

Snape climbed the steps in the darkness and paused outside the doorway to the bedroom. Without his magic, he could not sense her as clearly as he had in the past, and he did not want to open the door to find her absent.

He imagined trying to explain it to her. Why had he done this?

Because he wanted them to have to know. They did not have to believe—in fact, he was sure that they would do their very best not to believe—but he wanted them to *have to know*, to be burdened with the knowledge of what he had done. He wanted them to know that while they had wrung their hands and eaten meatballs in the Weasleys' kitchen, he had followed orders. And while they constructed safe houses, he had writhed under the Dark Lord's whip. He wanted it to haunt their dreams.

This was not true, or at least not entirely so, he knew, but he refused to think it through any further. Because he'd had to do it, he thought angrily. For the same reasons he had done anything these long, cruel years. Because there was no other choice.

She was already in bed when he entered the room.

When he eased between the sheets beside her, she did not move.

"Please don't do that again," she said quietly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Arthur Weasley. His family is in great pain, and yet he is trying to help us."

Snape fumed for a moment before replying. "I was not to blame for Fred Weasley's death."

"No one is saying you were, Severus! Merlin, why does it always have to be about who is to blame? Can't we just feel sympathy for them without it having something to do with guilt?" She flounced over onto her side and huffed into the pillow.

Snape lay stiffly on his back in the darkness. She was deluding herself. Of course it had to do with who was to blame. Everything did.

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Walking in the second time was no different from walking in the first. Hermione's hand folded itself into his moments before the door opened, and he walked slowly into the room as if it didn't matter that in a few short steps, he would be bound to a seat in the center of the room with hundreds of eyes fixed on him. It was not terribly different from appearing before the Dark Lord—as public and as dangerous—but without his magic, he had no Occlumency with which to shield himself, and so he turned his disciplined mind to the task of registering almost nothing. He stared straight ahead.

"Good morning," Shackbolt began. He stood at the Minister's platform, his arms spread wide as if to welcome the accumulated witches and wizards to a formal celebration. "Please be seated."

"As you know, Severus Snape has been charged with numerous offenses related to his time as a member of the terrorist group led by the Dark Lord Voldemort, hereafter

to be referred to as the Death Eaters. It is the court's first aim to determine Snape's role within the Death Eaters, his participation and knowledge of their activities, and the extent of his service to Voldemort. To that end, we will begin with questions concerning the night that he took the Dark Mark."

Dumbledore's voice suddenly rang through the courtroom, and Snape raised his eyes almost lazily to the portrait that hung from the far wall, though he could not help but be aware of the anxious shifting going on in the seats surrounding him.

"Do I need to remind this court that Severus Snape has already been cleared of all charges resulting from the first war? Unless it is your intent to try him again, I don't see how this line of questioning is relevant."

"Dumbledore!" Shacklebolt angrily retorted. "While the court appreciates your presence, and you will be given the opportunity to testify, I must remind you that I am the Interrogator. Speaking out of turn will not be tolerated. No charges have been presented from the first war. But I do not consider Snape's status as a Death Eater irrelevant. These questions are necessary to determining whether he joined and remained with the Death Eaters of his own free will."

Snape listened to their bickering with only half his mind. With the other, he took in Lucius Malfoy, who was being led into the courtroom by two Aurors. Lucius's hair was dingy. Not dirty, not stringy--it was clear that Azkaban was not what it once was, and Lucius's eyes were not hollow or empty, but their same icy gray--but his hair had lost its glossy shine. It was sad, really, Snape thought absently. Like seeing a Veela marry, or some other beautiful thing defiled. He noted that Lucius was fitted with a heavy gray bracelet identical to his own.

Lucius sat in a chained chair beside Snape's in the center of the courtroom--sat in it as if it were a throne. Nothing about his mannerisms had changed at all.

"Please state your name for the court."

"Lucius Malfoy."

"Mr Malfoy, were you present on the night that Severus Snape received the Dark Mark?"

"I was."

"What can you tell us about the process? Did all new Death Eaters take the Mark?"

"There were family legacies," Lucius said. "Witches and wizards who were inducted immediately upon coming of age. Others... whose bloodlines were less pure... were asked to serve a time of apprenticeship. After that, if the Dark Lord was satisfied that the recruit was worthy, he would bestow the Mark."

"And it was a formal ceremony? The applicants knew exactly what would occur?"

"It was, and they did."

"And were the recruits pressured to go through with the ceremony in any way?"

"As I have said, some of us were encouraged to join by family connections. There were *expectations* among the most powerful Pureblooded families, and I regret that I--"

"Mr Malfoy, if you will," Shacklebolt said. "Was Severus Snape pressured to join the Death Eaters?"

Lucius chuckled, and Snape thought briefly that it was really too bad that the Dementors were no longer utilized at Azkaban.

"Gracious, no. Severus was all but frothing at the mouth to join up. I daresay he thought there would be wealth in it. Have you seen that house he grew up in? He was exceedingly anxious to rub shoulders with those of us of... greater means. It was a bit unseemly, as I recall."

"I see. And were there other recruits who were more reluctant?"

"Others who got so far as a Marking ceremony? Not that I recall."

"You never saw a recruit leave a Marking ceremony?"

"No. By the time the Dark--Voldemort, that is--had prepared an apprentice for the Mark, he liked to be certain."

"But it's very painful, is it not? I was under the impression that it was like a brand of some sort. No one feared the pain?"

"Perhaps," Lucius said disdainfully as though the Muggle connotations of the word 'brand' had offended him. Snape could feel Lucius looking at him, though he did not turn his head. He knew the look that Lucius wore. *I will go if I have to, the look said, but I'll be damned if I'm not taking you down with me.* But most seemed to feel that it was an honor to take the Mark. Not everyone was asked."

"And Snape told you that he felt honored?"

"Not in so many words. But I recall that he arrived at the Manor two hours before the ceremony."

"The ceremonies were held in Malfoy Manor?" Kingsley asked sharply.

"Occasionally," Lucius said, and Snape thought he heard a tinge of discomfort in the man's voice.

"But the ceremony in which Snape took the Mark was held in your home?"

"Yes."

"Interesting. Can you tell the court a bit about what was required of newly Marked Death Eaters?"

"It was Lord Voldemort's custom to assign a job. Severus was usually sent to spy on Dumbledore, as he had only recently left Hogwarts and could ostensibly be seeking the Headmaster for some legitimate reason."

At this, Tiberius Ogden spoke. "So Voldemort had Snape spying from the beginning?"

Snape could hear the smile in Lucius's voice. "Severus has always had talent in that vein, and the Dark Lord liked to use his followers' gifts."

"You feel that Snape was a talented spy?" Shacklebolt broke in.

"Oh, Severus may not be the most attractive man," Lucius said, "but he has a talent for getting what he wants from people. It has something to do with that manner of his. People assume that no one that unpleasant could be holding anything back."

A tinge of something like amusement crept into Snape's secluded mind. Lucius *would* want a parting shot, at least.

"Thank you, Mr Malfoy. That will be all for now."

The Aurors arrived from somewhere behind Snape to unlock Lucius from his chair. He heard the courtroom doors open and close, but he did not look around him.

"Let it be noted that the court has heard the testimony of Lucius Malfoy regarding Severus Snape's induction into the Dark Lord Voldemort's employ," Shacklebolt said. "We will redirect our questioning to Mr Snape." He seemed to collect himself for a moment before turning back to Snape.

"How old were you when you joined the Death Eaters?"

"Eighteen years old," Snape said. He offered nothing further, but sat rigidly in his seat.

"Then you joined shortly after leaving Hogwarts?"

"Two months thereafter."

"Mr Snape, did you have many friends at Hogwarts?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Would you have considered yourself a popular student?"

"Forgive me; I was under the impression that this was a trial, not a psychological evaluation," Snape said acidly.

"Will you answer the question, or shall I hold you in contempt of court?" Shacklebolt replied evenly.

Inwardly, Snape sighed. This was what he had expected; this was what he had feared. They had him where they wanted him now, and they would not rest until they could shame him.

"I had several acquaintances within my house."

"Name them, please."

"Avery. Mulciber. Rosier."

"And did you have friends outside of the Slytherin house?"

Snape stared forward without speaking for a long time. He knew that Shacklebolt had viewed his memories in the Pensieve, and he knew the answer that the man required now. He did not want to give it. He did not want to hand over this particular part of himself for their inspection, for their ridicule or their pity. He looked hard at the Minister.

"I did."

"Can you name them, please?"

"Lily Evans."

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Hermione went rigid. She could feel Harry looking at her from her left side, but she did not meet his gaze. She had begged Kingsley not to show the Pensieve memories to the Wizengamot, arguing that every idea represented therein could be covered in testimony by the players themselves. She was here, Harry, Minerva, Dumbledore. He could ask anything he liked, she had pleaded, if he would not show the memories themselves. She knew, in the same way that she had known how Severus would answer the charges, that if he were forced to share himself that nakedly, he would not recover from it. Kingsley, it seemed, had kept his word.

Severus, she thought, looked blind. His eyes were dead as he answered their questions, and she knew that he must be nearly speechless with horror if he was allowing himself to feel anything at all.

"And how did you become acquainted with Lily Evans? She was a Gryffindor, was she not?"

"She was. We met before Hogwarts."

"So you were childhood friends."

"Yes."

Tiberius Ogden broke in once more. "Forgive me, Minister, but how is this relevant to the case at hand?"

"It seems to me that young people are rather influenced by the people closest to them," Shacklebolt said mildly. "It should be noted that Snape had only one friend outside of Slytherin--and incidentally, only one friend who did not become a Death Eater."

Ogden did not look appeased, but he said nothing more.

"How would you characterize your relationship with Albus Dumbledore at that time?"

"He was the Headmaster. I was a student."

"Was your relationship friendly?"

"I was a Slytherin."

"I'm sorry; I'm not following. Could you elaborate?"

"Dumbledore treated me as he did the rest of the members of my house: with suspicion."

"So your relationship was antagonistic?"

"I was often punished."

"Can you give an example?"

"During my sixth year, I was given three months of detention for leaving school grounds after hours."

"And you felt that was an unfair punishment?"

"I had been lured into the Whomping Willow by Sirius Black. He intended me to find Remus Lupin in his werewolf form at the end of the tunnel."

"And Black's punishment?"

"He was forbidden to visit Hogsmeade the next weekend."

"So you felt persecuted by Dumbledore."

"No more so than any other member of my house."

Tiberius Ogden seemed unable to contain himself any longer and redirected. "Malfoy characterized you as 'eager' to join the Death Eaters. Would you agree with that assessment?"

"Yes."

Hermione flinched. This was pure Severus, and she had expected nothing less. But still, she longed to jump up and stand between him and Ogden, to try to explain.

"What drew you to Lord Voldemort?"

"Power. Wealth. An interest in the Dark Arts."

"I see. We are given to understand that you rose through the ranks rather quickly. Was that the case?"

"Yes."

"Was that due to your talent, as Mr Malfoy called it, for spying?"

"I suppose that had something to do with it."

"What else would you say 'had something to do with it'?"

"I had a talent for Potions. And I did as I was told."

"Can you give the court an example?"

"The Dark Lord asked that we engage in petty acts of thievery. Mugglebaiting, I believe, is the term. I became adept at stealing automobiles. It amused the Dark Lord."

"I see. So you grew to hold a relatively powerful position among the Death Eaters?"

"I did."

"Would you have considered yourself a favorite?"

"So far as he had them."

"And so you found the power you had hoped for with Lord Voldemort?"

"I suppose."

"And yet you say you left the Death Eaters and joined Dumbledore, a man you claim treated you unfairly, in August of 1980."

"Yes."

"And what motivated that decision?"

"The Dark Lord... threatened someone I cared for."

"Your mother?"

"My mother died in 1978."

"Your father?"

"Hardly. My father was shiftless imbecile who left my mother when I entered Hogwarts."

"Mr Snape, are you deliberately avoiding the question?"

"I was not aware that I had been asked any questions outside of those I just answered."

"Who was so important to you that you would be willing to risk your life to leave the Death Eaters?"

"Lily Evans."

The courtroom erupted with whispers, and Hermione steeled herself for what was coming, half hoping that Snape felt nothing and half hoping that he would give some tiny flicker of humanity--something for them to seize on outside of the blank mask, the toneless delivery.

"We will have quiet in this courtroom," Kingsley shouted. Gradually, the hum abated, and Kingsley focused on Snape once more.

"Mr Snape," Kingsley said, "I apologize for the interruption. You said you joined Dumbledore because Voldemort threatened Lily Evans."

"Yes."

"But she was Lily Potter by then, if I am not mistaken."

"Indeed," Snape said.

"Were you romantically involved with Lily Potter?"

"No."

"But she was important enough to you to risk changing sides."

Snape said nothing.

"Mr Snape?"

"Yes?"

"I said, she was important enough to you to risk changing sides?"

"She was."

"I am not sure that I understand."

"Lily Evans--Lily Potter--was... dear to me. I approached Dumbledore because I had hoped that he might have enough power to protect her."

"You have already testified that you were held a prominent position among the Death Eaters, that you were, in fact, a favorite of Voldemort's. He would not spare Lily Potter on your behalf?"

"He agreed to spare her if it was my wish."

"But then why--"

"Because the Dark Lord was unpredictable at the best of times, and Lily Potter was not. I knew that she would not allow her husband and son to die without a fight."

"And you believed that Voldemort intended to kill James and Harry Potter?"

"At that time, he knew of the Prophecy. He intended to murder the Potters before their son became a threat to him."

"And how did Voldemort receive word of the Prophecy? Our records in the Department of Mysteries indicate that the Prophecy was delivered to Albus Dumbledore alone."

"Lucius Malfoy has already testified that I spied on Dumbledore at the Dark Lord's request."

"So you gave Voldemort the information that put the Potters at risk?"

Without realizing it Hermione dug her nails into her forearms so deeply that she began to bleed. Watching this was like watching them cut him open and hold his heart up to the light. She had never hated herself more in her life.

Snape's head tipped forward and lock of his hair slipped from behind his ear and brushed over his cheek. She could see the furrows in his forehead deepen, and he shut his eyes.

"I did."

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That night he had forced her to go to bed first. She had sat beside him, quiet as the dead, in front of the fireplace in the sitting room until he thought he would go mad. She had been waiting for him to speak, he knew, waiting for him to say something, anything, about what had happened that day.

Dumbledore had spoken next, had told them what he had demanded in return for protecting Lily, and how the plan had failed. Dumbledore told them of his grief and of his promise. He told them of his Patronus.

There had been questions about the validity of Snape's remorse--if he had been a man who needed a master, if he had simply stayed with Dumbledore because Voldemort had fallen.

Perhaps it was true. Perhaps he had never made a decision on his own in his life. It could be that even now he obeyed. They said *answer*, and he spilled forth his entrails for them to read like fortunes. And here was Hermione, wanting something, always wanting something from him.

He sat there, staring into the fire, until finally she had stood, shoulders round with defeat, and left him alone.

His exhausted mind drifted back to the courtroom. The reporters had screamed his name, demanded to know how long he had loved Lily Potter. Weasley did not have to bring the paper. He knew what the headline would read. *Snape Loved Another Man's Wife*. He wanted to be like us, they would say. He wanted what we had.

*Disgusting*. He shut his eyes.

When he opened them again, the room was lit only by the glowing coals of a fire gone down. Hermione stood before him in her nightgown, her hands held out to him.

"Go back to bed," he said thickly.

"Come with me."

"No."

She stood there resolutely, her chin thrust out, her hands still offered.

"No, Hermione."

"Then I'll stay here."

She sat down beside him, and he sighed heavily. But when her head fell against his shoulder, he did not shake her off, and when her hand slipped into his, he did not yank it back.

## Chapter Forty-Five

*Chapter 45 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Dear readers, we're so close now, I can taste it. The outline says three more, though you should have learned by now not to believe anything I say. My unending thanks to RedOrchid, Shellsnapelover, and OpalJade. This chapter is for my dear friend Lulabelle72.

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Hermione watched as Kingsley rose from his seat and applied the Sonorous Charm to his throat.

"The court will now recommence. The twenty-fourth of June, nineteen hundred and ninety eight: the Ministry of Magic vs. Severus Snape. Today, the court will continue to examine Severus Snape's allegiance to the Dark Lord Voldemort and his inclusion in the terrorist group known as the Death Eaters. In particular, we would like to focus now on the disappearance and subsequent murder of Hogwarts Professor of Muggle Studies, Charity Burbage, and information that may have passed from the Order of the Phoenix to the Death Eaters after the first war."

Hermione's eyes sought Snape's, but he did not look at her. *Professor Burbage?*

"The court calls Malcolm Yaxley for questioning regarding the events of July nineteenth, nineteen ninety-seven."

A broad shouldered man was led into the courtroom by two Aurors, who seemed more intimidated by him than they had been by Lucius Malfoy. Hermione wondered if it was the man's size that disturbed them, or the fact that he lacked Malfoy's cool gentility. This man looked as if he would be better suited to a Muggle biker bar than to a wizarding courtroom, and bracelet or no, there was a dangerous, untamed air about him.

"Please state your name for the court."

"Malcolm Yaxley."

"Mr Yaxley, were you present on the night that Charity Burbage was murdered?"

"Yeah, I was there."

"Please tell the court who else was present."

"All the highest ranking Death Eaters," Yaxley said, somewhat proudly, Hermione thought. She wondered briefly if he still believed that the Dark Lord would rise again. She had expected that all the Death Eaters would at least pretend at repentance. "Myself, the Malfoys, Snape, the Lestranges, Dolohov, Travers."

"Severus Snape was present?"

"Of course."

"By which you mean to imply that Snape was one of the highest ranking Death Eaters?"

"Yes. Snape was a great favorite of our Lord's." He said this somewhat disdainfully.

"And where did this gathering take place?"

"At headquarters."

"Which was..."

"Malfoy Manor."

"I see. So there was a meeting of the Death Eaters in Malfoy Manor. And Charity Burbage was present?"

Yaxley gave a dry laugh. "Yeah, she was present. She was the entertainment, so to speak."

"Can you elaborate?"

"He levitated her above the table. Hung her up there for us all to see. So we would know what was expected of us."

"This is Voldemort you are speaking of?"

"The Dark Lord."

"And what did he expect of you?"

"He wanted us to teach the Muggle lovers a lesson."

"I see. And how did Snape react when he saw his former colleague?"

"Snape never reacted to much."

"Did he give any indication that he might try to free her?"

"Oh, she begged him. 'Please, Severus,'" Yaxley imitated her voice before chuckling deep in his throat. "But Snape barely even looked up."

"So she remained there. Levitating, as you say."

"Until the Dark Lord killed her."

There was silence, for a moment, in the courtroom. Kingsley looked rather ill, and he turned and stared pointedly at the Wizengamot, as if he'd made some point that he wanted them to note. Only Yaxley seemed at ease in the silence.

"What was the subject of the meeting that evening?"

"Snatching Potter. We knew he would be moved from his safe house. It was our hope to take him in transit."

"The Order of the Phoenix had trusted very few people with the knowledge of when Harry Potter was to be moved. In fact, we had given erroneous information to several people in order to lay a false trail. Who provided the date of Harry Potter's travel to Lord Voldemort?"

"Snape, of course. Said he was quite certain. Said he had a source but wouldn't say who. The Dark Lord knew, though."

"Did Snape give any other information to Lord Voldemort that night?"

"Snape passed him a newspaper. I never did know what it said."

"Thank you. That will be all."

Hermione was unable to look around the courtroom when Kingsley was speaking. For her, the world narrowed down to a small window, admitting only the questioner and the questioned. She could not even tear her eyes away long enough to look at Severus. But when the Aurors came to remove Yaxley, she was able to glance around her. Harry sat on her left, looking murderous, and Ginny held onto his hand very tightly. She whispered something in his ear that Hermione did not catch, but it seemed to her that until then, he had been about to interject, to ask to testify.

Harry leaned his head toward hers and spoke directly into her ear. "How are you listening to this? Knowing what they're *not* saying?"

She shrugged a trifle bitterly. "I have to," she whispered back, not turning to face him.

The witches and wizards of the Wizengamot sat stiffly in their seats. A few murmured among themselves, but most simply looked pale and determined.

"The court will redirect its questioning. Mr Snape, why did you fail to help your colleague, Charity Burbage, at Malfoy Manor on the night of July nineteenth?"

"I was a spy. To have come to the aid of Ms Burbage would not have saved her, not in a room full of Death Eaters and the Dark Lord himself, and would have succeeded only in destroying my cover."

"So you remained silent to protect your own life."

"No. I remained silent because acting would have done no good. However, by continuing to spy for the Order, there was a possibility that I could prevent even graver acts of evil."

"Under whose orders were you spying? To whom did you report? According to the testimony of Malcolm Yaxley, it was the Order's secrets you were relaying to Lord Voldemort."

"Again, it was necessary for me to maintain my cover. By passing privileged information to the Dark Lord, I maintained the illusion that--"

"You have not answered the question, Mr Snape. You claim that you were trying to prevent crimes from taking place, and yet you failed to act, failed to report the actions of the Dark Lord and his followers to the appropriate authorities, but you wish us to believe that you were working for an organization whose leader you--"

Dumbledore spoke loudly from the wall above Kingsley's head, and Hermione's eyes lifted to the old man at once. She had rarely seen Dumbledore look so angry or so vehement as he shouted from his portrait, all semblance of calm abandoned. Hermione felt an odd flame of hope flare inside her at the sight of Dumbledore so undone.

"I am forced to remind this court again that Severus Snape has already been tried by the Wizengamot!"

"We are not discussing crimes committed during the first war," Kingsley retorted.

"This very court exonerated Severus Snape based on evidence that he had turned spy for our side at great personal risk! The court at that time accepted that Snape's actions as a Death Eater were outweighed by the good of the information he could provide us. The court gave its tacit agreement to overlook Snape's activities because it recognized him as a spy for our side. It recognized that in this case, the greater good was served by Snape's actions. You cannot revoke the decision of the court--you cannot retry this man under new rules! He has acted under this court's authority!"

"Insofar as Snape acted as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix, he is protected by the court's ruling. However, the court's aim at this time is to determine *for whom Snape was spying*. As we heard, he passed confidential Order information to the Death Eaters."

"Did the Order of the Phoenix share the true date of Harry's move with Snape?" Dumbledore asked.

"Certainly not. At that time, Snape was--"

"Then he did not share your information, Minister. And he did not share a rather important part of that plan, did he? The Death Eaters were not expecting seven Harry Potters that night."

"Well, no," Kingsley appeared reluctant, but a dark gleam in his eye and the way he stalked impressively, his multicolored robes swirling in front of Dumbledore's portrait, led Hermione to believe that this conversation was going exactly as he had hoped.

"Mundungus Fletcher supplied that particular idea to the Order, did he not?"

"He did."

"Yes, he did," Dumbledore said, finally sitting back in his chair and crossing his legs once more. "Because Snape suggested it to him."

Hermione could hear the sounds of quills scratching furiously. Percy Weasley sat at the scribe's desk by the door, doubled over his parchment, writing as fast as he could. He did not pause to look up at Dumbledore and Kingsley, though Rita Skeeter's quill was writing quite independently of her, and she was watching the exchange at the back of the courtroom with nearly predatory interest.

Severus himself sat impassive. His eyes flicked between Dumbledore and Kingsley, but his expression did not change.

"He suggested the very thing that could allow Harry to escape unharmed, while still giving *just* enough real information to keep his position strong," Dumbledore said.

Kingsley did not respond, giving, it seemed to Hermione, the very deliberate impression that Dumbledore had won that particular battle.

"What was in the newspaper?" Kingsley said at last, turning back toward Snape.

"It was a Muggle newspaper," Snape said. "It reported the deaths of Helen and Richard Granger."

"Explain," Kingsley said sharply.

"The Dark Lord had ordered me to kill the Grangers. I brought the newspaper as proof of sorts."

"That you killed Hermione Granger's parents?"

"I did not kill Helen and Richard Granger," Snape said. Hermione's head snapped up. She thought... she thought she had heard anger in his tone. "I Obliviated them and relocated them to Australia."

"So you allowed Charity Burbage to be killed, but you would not kill the Grangers?"

"I did not kill Charity Burbage," Snape said, and this time Hermione was certain that he was angry. She did not know whether she was delighted or terrified. "I did not kill anyone whose death I could avoid."

"Why would Lord Voldemort order you to kill Hermione Granger's parents?"

"You are asking me to speculate on the desires of a madman?"

"Why not the Weasleys or Potter's aunt and uncle?" Kingsley said, undeterred.

Snape sighed. "Because he suspected my relationship with Miss Granger. I imagine that he wanted a show of loyalty."

"The newspapers have made much of your relationship to Hermione Granger. And yet the Ministry finds no record of your supposed marriage."

"Our marriage was witnessed by Albus Dumbledore and Alastor Moody. The records were kept at the Ministry until Moody's death at which point they were... removed."

"So your marriage was witnessed by two men who are now deceased. That seems rather convenient. And you say that the marriage papers were removed--and subsequently destroyed, I assume? Did you remove them from the Ministry yourself?"

"I did not."

Hermione rose, her heart fluttering erratically in her chest. "Forgive me, Minister, for interrupting you."

"Miss Granger, the court is--"

"But I have our marriage papers."

All eyes turned to Kingsley. "Approach, Miss Granger."

"Again, I must apologize, Minister Shacklebolt, but it hasn't been Miss Granger for almost two years."

Kingsley lifted his eyebrows slowly and gave her a long, appraising look. "Approach, *Hermione*," he said.

Hermione climbed the steps leading to the Minister's podium. She withdrew a roll of parchment from her bag. As she handed it to him, she said under her breath, "Kingsley--I thought--"

"Trust me," he said so quietly that she hardly heard him.

"The court will adjourn to examine the marriage records of Severus Snape and Hermione Jean Granger. We will reconvene tomorrow morning at nine a.m. That is all."

"Kingsley," she began again.

"Bring Black's portrait," was all he said before he charged down the steps toward Snape.

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The light in the bathroom was harsh, and his face in the mirror nearly frightened him, his hair chin-length and ragged, exposing features that were both hollow and sharp. He turned away from the sink so that he would not have to look at himself as he did this, as he released a body that simply didn't seem to understand that release was not an option.

He dropped his shorts and took himself roughly in his right fist, tugging in quick, staccato bursts *Fuck this. Fuck this. Fuck this.*

But what he was seeking would not come, and he braced himself against the back wall of the bathroom with his left hand, leaning forward into the motion of his right, hips jerking against a touch that was not at all what he wanted, what he craved.

What was wrong with him that the sleeping touch of the girl could arouse him so ferociously?

He had tried to shove her away, but she had simply settled more deeply into the crook of his arm, and when he had freed himself from the pressure of her body, hot with sleep, and left the bedroom, she had said nothing.

His fist pumped harder, and the pain blended with pleasure, but he felt no closer to what he was seeking *Come on*, he thought. *Come on.*

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The bathroom door was ajar, and it pained her that he did not know that she was there, that whatever told him instantly when she entered a room had faded along with his magic. She wondered if it was love, if love and magic were so intertwined that to take away one was to take away the other, if the fact that he would rather do this here, alone, was simply one more sign that she had refused to see.

And, too, the fierceness with which he touched himself stung her, that there was no tenderness in the world for him, that he would not let there be, even here.

She touched the door, and it swung further open, admitting her into the close, bright room.

"Let me," she whispered.

He swung around so quickly that he stumbled and nearly fell over the toilet, his hand grabbing blindly at the towel rack for something to cover himself with. His face was contorted with rage, his lips pulled back over his teeth, and the pale skin of his chest was blotched with red that traveled up his neck and burned high on his cheeks.

"Get out," he snarled.

She took an involuntary step back, but did not run.

"Severus--"

"Get out!"

"Severus, please. I'm your wife; I want to--"

"You want to what?" His voice was louder for its crisp quietness as he cut her off. "You want to feed me, to choose my clothes, to apologize for me when my behavior hasn't lived up to your standards. You want me to cut my hair, to go to court, to come to bed. Now you'd like to control this, as well? Is there any part of my life that you could bring yourself to let alone? Or will you have it all exactly as you like it?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes and took a large step forward. "You think," she said, each word bitten out sharply, "you dare *delude* yourself into thinking that I enjoy this?" She stepped forward again, forcing him to retreat. "You think I want to control you?"

Something seemed to break inside her for a moment, and her lips trembled, though her voice did not waver as it rose in pitch. "You think I cook because I want to mother you? That I buy you clothes because I don't think you're capable of dressing yourself? All I want from you..." she paused and her hands clenched into fists. "All I want from you is one little sign. One tiny gesture that tells me that you can still see me, that I'm still here. That you wouldn't rather be dead on the floor of the Shrieking Shack."

He lunged forward, pinning her to the sink with his arms. His face was so close to hers that their foreheads were almost touching. They were both panting with rage. He looked nearly rabid as he stared into her face, his eyes so black and wild, and she might have wondered if he would hurt her if she didn't so badly wish to hurt him first.

"You think this is fun for me?" she hissed. "You think I like this, that I would choose this for you, you fucking--"

His head dove toward hers as if he intended to stop her with his mouth, and she flicked her chin up angrily like a cat swishing its tail. He dove again, and this time he caught her bottom lip in his teeth as she jerked her head back. Their teeth clicked together, and his body pressed up against hers almost painfully, driving her back into the sink. There was a second of tussle, of her hands fighting their way up between their bodies as he struggled to keep her in his grip, before she fought free and caught his hair in her fists. She wrenched his head to hers, and their lips collided. For a moment, they were less kissing than continuing their argument, and he tore at her nightshirt as she scored his back with her nails, pulling him closer to her.

She drew huge breaths in through her nose, as he seemed to have no intent of releasing her mouth, and she let go of him momentarily to hoist herself onto the lip of the sink. He stepped between her legs, pulling them up and hooking them over his hips, and he took her arse in his hands and ground himself against the cotton that separated them.

She growled into his mouth, and he moaned in response, and whatever it was that had brought them here abruptly changed into something else. He shuddered, and she fancied for a moment that she had won the argument. Their lips broke apart, and she leaned against him, pressing her chest against his and her face into his neck. Her arms wrapped around him, and he returned her embrace clumsily but tightly. They remained there, panting, for a moment.

"I do not want this to be a gift," he whispered. "I cannot bear any more gifts from you."

She made a sound deep in her throat, a sound of protest, something furious and needy at the same time. Her eyes were narrow and dark, and she said, "Do you think I need no comfort? This is not a gift."

She reached down and yanked the fabric of her knickers aside. The brush of his flesh against hers made her weak with hunger, drunk with need. Power thrummed between them; she could feel it in her skin, in her unsteady heartbeat. He grasped the sink on either side of her, making a cage of his body, and his cock nudged gently at her opening until he found purchase against her and began to slip inside her, inch by inch.

She was breathing deeply, almost motionless, as if she had focused entirely on the sensation of their bodies joining. When he began to move in earnest, she leaned forward, pressing their faces together and holding his head to her with one of her hands.

"Take me to bed," she whispered.

He slipped his hands beneath her, and she tightened her arms around his neck. He lifted her from the sink and carried her through the darkened hallway into their bedroom.

But in the half-light of the open door to their bedroom, he froze. He had placed her on the bed, and knelt at the end of it, himself, but when she had begun to wiggle free from her knickers, she had felt him grow rigid and motionless.

"Severus," she said.

"I cannot do this."

He was hard, ragingly hard, still; his cock was flush and pink, and yet he turned from her and began to move from the bed.

"What are you doing?" she said, the words wrenched out of her.

"Leaving," he said stiffly.

She sat up and seized his ankle, as it was the part of him nearest her, and the surge that traveled through her and into him was unmistakable. She heard him hiss with surprise.

She felt helpless against what was coming, what had just been unleashed by the press of her skin against his. She had tread so carefully; she had been so gentle, but now she had no patience left for a man who claimed to love her but was determined to break her against the wall of his own abasement.

"I deserve better than this, Severus."

His face worked angrily, and he sputtered for a moment.

"Now you resent me for what I cannot give you?"

"What is it that you think I want? We are fed, clothed, sheltered, hidden. We are, perhaps, safer than we have been in years. I care nothing for what you think you 'cannot' give me. I want what you *will not* give me."

"I have nothing for you," he said, pulling his ankle free from her grasp and making his way from the bed.

She picked up her wand and used it to slam and ward the door. She lit the bedside lamp. He whipped around, his face incredulous, murderous.

"What do you think you're--"

"Coward," she growled. "Liar! You stand there like I can't see what you want, how badly you want this. You think I don't want you that badly? You think I don't need you? I am your wife--"

"Yes, I am well aware of that fact, Hermione," he said, each word ground out into its own sentence. "As is the entire wizarding world. Can you imagine what the papers are saying today? How *eager* the court must be to look into this room and see--"

"I will not be punished here for other people's ignorance," Hermione shouted. "You think I would let them in here? You think I would not guard this with my life?"

"Your name will be synonymous with traitor, with whore. They will drag you down with me. I cannot--" His voice broke off abruptly. "This is not what I meant for you."

She rose from the bed and crossed the room. "Severus." It was a command.

He did not look at her.

"Severus." She reached up and turned his face to hers. "This is not what I meant for you either."

His shoulders slumped very slightly, and he brought both hands to his face, rubbing it. "I know that," he said almost inaudibly.

"Come to bed."

"Hermione," he said, his voice so weary that it pained her.

"I won't take what you do not want to give me. Just come to bed." She turned away from him, suddenly exhausted, flicking off the light and climbing onto the mattress.

He slipped between the sheets beside her, and for the first time in weeks, he did not take care to remain on his own side. She could feel the sharp planes of his shins

beneath her toes, the sparse hairs against her skin. She drew her feet down his legs until their knees bumped. Without a word, he parted his legs, and one of hers slipped between. Her hand snuck out to rest on his hip. It would have to be enough.

Minutes ticked by like drips of treacle, and in the dark, it was impossible to know how much time passed. Enough time for her to wonder if it could be enough, if she could live the rest of her life on scraps if he truly meant to ask that of her. Enough time to know that it did not matter whether if she could live with it or not, that she would not leave him; and she began to arrange her mind into quietness, to take the empty, burning anger and fit it into a dark corner of herself where she might learn to overlook it. It was possible that they slept for a time before she was aware of his voice, so close to her ear, cutting through the heavy silence.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

He kissed her, hesitant at first, just a brush of his mouth over hers, and then long and slow and deep, and she closed her eyes and let the sensation of it wash through her like a drug. She could taste the ridges of his palate, the blunt edges of his teeth; she could feel the flutter of his eyelashes against her cheek.

He licked her lips and suckled first one and then the other into his mouth as if he were eating her, as if he were trying to end his hunger at last. His arms finally pulled her in, erasing the last of the space between them. Her nipples brushed against his chest as she shifted her hips to accommodate their new position. Slowly, she felt the thrum return, the power in her rising like something alive, like something waking, and she longed to touch the heart of that feeling, to lay her hand on the wire, as it were, and feel it surge through her like lightning.

He entered her without hesitation this time, his body sinking into hers, and she looked up into his shadowed face, only barely distinguishable in the darkness.

"Please," she said, though she had no idea what she was asking for. "Please."

Her knees drew up.

He drove into her slowly, but with increasing abandon, and the feeling of his hips as they twisted between her thighs was sending her careening over the edge of her own pleasure, but instead of feeling satiated, she simply felt more desperate for him than before. She bucked her hips, grinding her body down against the base of him.

"Fuck, fuck, Hermione, don't let go," he said. "Don't let me go."

She was not entirely sure what he meant, but that seemed all right, as the words were not really the point. "I won't," she promised. "I swear."

Something seemed to spiral between them, some ouroboros of pain and desire that grew with every thrust until she was weeping openly and clutching his back with both hands in a fevered attempt to bind him to her permanently.

Suddenly the lamp beside the bed began to flicker on, and he stopped abruptly. She stared wide-eyed into his face. His eyes looked bruised and shocked. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

"It's... it's not me, Severus," she said, wonder choking her voice and stealing its power. "It's you."

She removed her hands from his back and held them up to his face, as if for him to verify that the magic was not coming from her.

"It's you," she whispered again, and he collapsed over her, his climax roaring through him, and he trembled in her grip. The light went out.

"Oh, God," he said into her hair. "Oh, God, Hermione."

She stroked his shoulders, his back, whatever she could reach. And if her neck was damp when he lifted his face, there was no one there to see it, no one to tell it, and the secret of it would stay with her forever.

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Snape watched Hermione as she ascended the steps to the Minister's podium with Black's portrait held awkwardly in her arms. He allowed himself the briefest moment of admiration for her, admiration tinged with awe, tinged with unholy sadness, as he watched his wife who had risen from their bed that morning as if nothing unusual had happened at all.

He had lain there silent and terrified, having no idea what she might expect from him now, or in what further inventive ways he might disappoint and destroy her, hating himself with every hushed breath both for what he had done and what he had not done the night before, while she rose and carefully untangled her hair with a comb as if he were not there at all.

And now she climbed the steps with her head held high as she had somehow managed to do each day that they had appeared here. He saw her whispered conference with Shackbolt, saw her nod briefly and fake a smile, watched as she returned to the floor. Their eyes locked for a moment, and though her expression did not change, he felt somehow pierced by her gaze, and he looked away.

And so it began again, every day exactly the same, with Shackbolt standing before them like some absurd and colourful bird. He spread his wings.

"The court has verified the marriage documents of Severus Snape and Hermione Granger. It seems that they were wed in the Headmaster's Office of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry on the nineteenth of September, nineteen ninety-six, on the evening of Miss Granger's seventeenth birthday. The ceremony was performed and witnessed by Albus Dumbledore and Alastor Moody. The court intends to begin its questioning with former Hogwarts Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black, who was present for both the planning and execution of the marriage between Mr Snape and Miss Granger."

Black's portrait was propped improbably against the Minister's podium, and Black himself looked both terribly pleased and a trifle nervous.

"Please state your name for the court."

"Phineas Nigellus Black."

"Were you present at the wedding of Severus Snape and Hermione Granger?"

"At the time of their marriage, I had been deceased for seventy-one years. However, I was present as a portrait in the office of the Headmaster."

"Indeed," Shackbolt said, looking a bit annoyed already. "In your estimation, did Mr Snape and Miss Granger enter the state of matrimony by choice?"

"Well, no one held them at wand point, if that is what you are asking," Black said.

"Were they joined in matrimony because of some previous indiscretion?"

"Certainly not!" Black said. "Severus Snape would never tarnish the good name of the Slytherin house by consorting with a student. He was urged to go through with it by Albus Dumbledore."

"For what purpose?"

Black craned his neck, but he could not see Dumbledore's portrait, as it hung behind him. "Dumbledore had several reasons."

"Do I need to remind you that you are no longer bound to keep Albus Dumbledore's or Severus Snape's secrets under the Headmaster's Oath?"

"No, no, I simply felt that perhaps Dumbledore's reasoning would best be explained by the man himself. Anything I say is bound to be a paraphrase of his intent--"

Shacklebolt seemed to relent. "At this time, it will suffice to say that Dumbledore asked Snape to marry Miss Granger."

"Yes," Black said, clearly relieved.

"And Miss Granger?"

"It was presented to her as an option."

"Just an option? She was not coerced in any way?"

"Dumbledore appealed to her... Gryffindor sensibilities," Black said with a slight sneer. "But he did not force her."

"She agreed of her own free will?"

"In fact, at the end, she convinced Snape."

"Snape was reluctant?"

"Snape--Professor Snape, that is--was concerned for her honor."

"I see. But eventually they both agreed."

"Yes. And Professor Dumbledore and Alastor Moody performed the bonding spells."

"Were you witness to any further interactions between Snape and Miss Granger?"

"I did not see Professor and Madam Snape together again until the very end of the war. However, I acted as their go-between for the year that Madam Snape was in hiding." Once again, Snape was tempted to smile at the obvious pride Black took in the statement.

"That is very interesting. Can you give the court an example of the type of message passed between Mr Snape and Miss Granger?"

"Madam Snape would occasionally inform the Headmaster of where she and Harry Potter had been, that he might give seemingly useful information to," he dropped his voice, "Voldemort."

"Indeed? Miss Granger informed him of her location?"

"At first she only told him where she had been. But there came a time when she began to share her current location."

"When was that?"

"After Christmas Eve."

"Can you give the court a reason for this change?"

"Madam Snape and Mr Potter visited Godric's Hollow on Christmas Eve, where they were accosted by the... Dark Lord. As I understand it, Professor Snape was barely able to warn her away in time to save their lives. After that, she consistently supplied him with their location."

"To your knowledge, did Snape ever visit Miss Granger while she was in hiding?"

"I know of only one time, though there may have been more."

"Can you be more specific?"

"New Year's Day. The Headmaster traveled to the Forest of Dean to deliver the sword of Gryffindor to Harry Potter."

"He brought them the sword of Gryffindor? But how is that possible? The sword of Gryffindor was supposed to be in the Lestranger's vault in Gringotts."

"Professor Snape made a very convincing copy of the sword, which was indeed stored in the Lestranger's vault. The true sword he hid inside the Headmaster's Office."

"Fascinating," Shacklebolt said. He looked thoughtful for a moment. "He delivered a weapon to Harry Potter."

Black gave a self-satisfied smile. "Yes."

"How would you characterize the interactions you witnessed between Snape and Miss Granger?"

"After the initial interaction, you mean?"

"Yes, after their marriage."

Black seemed to stare at Snape for some time before he answered. "Friendly."

"Friendly?"

Black looked directly at Snape and said nothing. The silence grew long, and it seemed that Shacklebolt was about to repeat the question when Snape twitched his head very slightly in the affirmative. Black took a deep breath and answered, "It was obvious to me that they had great mutual regard."

"Can you give an example?"

"After the incident at Godric's Hollow, Professor Snape returned to the office badly injured. In fact, he was delirious with blood loss. However, his very first action, before even tending his wounds, was to ascertain the safety of Madam Snape."

"And Miss Granger?"

"She had been calling into the portrait for hours looking for him."

"Do you believe that Severus Snape shared the intelligence that he received from Hermione Granger with the Dark Lord Voldemort?"

"I was not privy to Professor Snape's meetings with the... Voldemort. However, in his interactions with Albus Dumbledore, Professor Snape was extremely protective both of Madam Snape and the information he received from her. I have no reason to believe that he shared anything more than was necessary in order to remain a spy."

"You believe Snape to have been a spy for the Order of the Phoenix?"

"I witnessed hundreds of conversations between Professor Snape and Dumbledore. I am absolutely certain of it."

"I see. The court may call on you again in the future to testify to the interactions between Snape and Dumbledore. However, this concludes our current line of questioning. Thank you for your time, Professor Black."

"Certainly," Black replied haughtily. "Would it be possible to return me to the house of my ancestors at this time? It has been... unpleasant... traveling about the country in a handbag."

"The court sympathizes with your discomfort, but you will be asked to remain here for the duration of the trial. Afterward, we will make arrangements to return you to the Black family home."

"Thank you," Black said, sounding full of affronted dignity as his portrait was carried away.

"The court calls Hermione Granger to testify," Shacklebolt said, and Snape felt every muscle in his body tense as if he had suddenly been struck. He turned his head sharply to look at her as she rose from her seat in the witness's area. She looked calm, if pale.

"Miss Granger, if you would be so kind as to move to the center of the courtroom."

Hermione shot Shacklebolt a dubious look, but strode to the center of the room. She stood on Snape's left side, less than an arm's length away, and faced the Minister. He felt the oddest urge to take her hand, to fortify her for whatever was coming, though such a thing would be ridiculous even if he were not chained to his chair.

"Miss Granger, were you coerced into marrying Severus Snape?"

Hermione paused, and Snape felt his throat tighten.

"I was not."

"You are testifying that as a sixth year student, you wished to marry your Potions professor?"

"I am testifying that I was not coerced into doing so. I was asked, and I agreed. Wishing, as you say, had nothing to do with it."

"You say you were asked. Who did the asking? Did Severus Snape propose the idea to you?"

"He did not. Professor Dumbledore requested my services as part of a plan."

"The court is interested to hear the details of Albus Dumbledore's plan, but we will focus, for the moment, on your marriage. Did you feel pressured to go through with the ceremony?"

"I did not."

"Miss Granger, if you will forgive me, your story seems unlikely. You were a student presented with a plan that included being irrevocably bound to a much older man, and yet you insist you were not pressured to take part?"

"Nor was I pressured to accompany Harry Potter on his quest to destroy Voldemort. It was wartime. I did what was necessary."

"I see. Miss Granger, you are well aware, I'm sure, that I cannot undo the bonding spell between yourself and Mr Snape. A wizarding marriage cannot be undone, per se. However, there are spells that can override--"

"That will not be necessary."

"Miss Granger, you have behaved with the utmost grace, but the wizarding world cannot ask you to continue your life hindered by what you yourself have called a plan made in wartime. A simple check at St Mungos would be all that is needed to--"

"Severus Snape has never shown me the least impropriety," Hermione said hotly, and Snape felt color rising to his cheeks against his will, and her words from the night before echoed in his mind. *You think I would let them in here? You think I would not guard this with my life?*

"In extreme cases such as these, Miss Granger, the check could be overlooked. An Unspeakable could be called to perform the spell--"

"No."

"Miss Granger, there is no need for this; the court sees your loyalty to--"

"For the last time, no. And if you will please show me the respect of calling me by my proper name, Minister Shacklebolt."

Snape had been unable to look at her face throughout the exchange. Partly this was because of where she stood, and partly it was because he feared what he would see in her eyes. So he trained his gaze on Shacklebolt and was pleased when the man seemed to take a full step back in the face of her anger.

"Of course. One more question, if you will. Was there anyone else--anyone at all--who knew of your marriage besides Albus Dumbledore and Alastor Moody?"

Hermione was silent for a moment. "The Hogwarts house-elf called Dobby knew, but he died while rescuing us from Malfoy Manor," she said quietly. "And, then, too, I think, Luna Lovegood."

"A house-elf was entrusted with your secret?"

"Dobby was my husband's preferred house-elf," Hermione said, "and he was my friend. We did not have to tell him. He could see our rings."

"You wear a magical ring?"

From the corner of his eye, Snape could see Hermione removing the circlet from her finger and holding it up to the court.

Shacklebolt nodded slowly. Snape held his breath as she replaced the ring on her finger.

"I see. The court calls Luna Lovegood to testify. Thank you, Miss--Madam Snape, you may be seated."

Snape felt as if someone had just hit him with a particularly strong Sapping Curse as Hermione and Miss Lovegood crossed in front of him. He could not explain the maelstrom of emotions that attended her testimony; he felt rocked with fury and elation and something that he could or would not name, something pale and delicate. They had given her an escape route, and she had not taken it.

"Miss Lovegood, please tell the court how you learned of the marriage of Hermione Granger and Severus Snape."

"From the newspaper," the Lovegood girl said dreamily. "I'm sure you saw it. It was that dreadful article by Rita Skeeter. Of course, you never can trust what you read in the Daily Prophet. I wasn't absolutely sure it was true until I saw Hermione with the document yesterday."

"Forgive me, Miss Lovegood, if the court has called you in error. You are testifying that you did not know of their marriage during the war?"

"Oh, I knew that they were partners. I just didn't know they were married."

"And how did you know that Mr Snape and Miss Granger were partners?"

"Because after Malfoy Manor--after Professor Snape sent Dobby to rescue me--he came to Shell Cottage to heal Hermione. He knew where to find her."

"You believe that Severus Snape sent a house-elf to rescue you from Malfoy Manor?"

"Yes. He found me there, and he sent Dobby to get Mr Ollivander and me."

"Interesting."

"Yes, I thought so. I hadn't realized he was on our side until then."

"And you say he came to Shell Cottage to heal Miss Granger?"

"Yes, he was very agitated when I found him. He couldn't see the house, you know, so he couldn't find her. I imagine he was thinking all sorts of terrible things about what might have happened to her."

"How did he heal Miss Granger if he couldn't see the house?"

"I took him inside."

"You led a Death Eater into the Fideliused home of an Order member?"

"Oh, no. I would never do that. But Professor Snape isn't a Death Eater."

"Miss Lovegood, you heard his testimony yourself."

"You can use whatever words you like, I suppose. But no Death Eater would have sent help for me just so he could look like a spy. I'm not anyone. I'm not Harry Potter or Hermione Granger. But he came back for me, just the same."

Snape turned to look at the willowy girl beside him, and he was shocked by the force of his memory of Shell Cottage, of her small white hand reaching for his in the dark. Shacklebolt allowed for another of his heavy silences.

"Thank you for your testimony, Miss Lovegood. You may return to your seat. The court continues to be interested in information that may or may not have been passed by Severus Snape to the Death Eaters," Shacklebolt intoned. "To that end, we will call several other witnesses..."

Luna Lovegood touched his arm lightly, as she had in the dungeon of Malfoy Manor, as she passed him on her way back to her seat. Her fingers barely grazed his sleeve, and yet he felt burned by her gesture, and the pale yellow feeling rose up inside him again. He looked at Hermione.

Kreacher was called to the center of the court and asked about breaches of security at Grimmauld Place as Severus Snape stared at his wife. Hermione watched Kreacher and the Minister, her eyes dancing between them as if she were watching a rather intricate game of chess. He wondered how much of this she had planned, whose chess game this was. But it did not matter. What she asked of him, he would do. For a moment, that seemed very certain, and he wished he could cross the room and tell it to her. Whatever she asked.

And then he glanced at Dumbledore, who sat, pretending to doze, in his portrait. The sight of the old man seemed to dampen the strange feeling in his chest. No matter what was said here today, the witches and wizards gathered behind the Minister waited for one thing only.

As if the man had read Snape's mind, Tiberius Ogden cut Shacklebolt off in the midst of a question about the deterring enchantments placed on the former headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

"How long will we be asked to sit here listening to the ramblings of portraits, children, and house-elves? I recognize that you are new to the position, Minister Shacklebolt, but this court does not have all year to consider this case. Tell us, when do you plan on questioning Severus Snape about the murder of Albus Dumbledore?"

## Chapter Forty-Six

Chapter 46 of 54

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: As usual, everything you recognize belongs to JKR. I make no money. My deepest gratitude to Shellsnapelover, RedOrchid and OpalJade who beta my work with such grace, always seeming to know when to push and when to hold my hand. Thank you, my friends.

---

The courtroom was tense and silent. Kingsley did not have to raise his arms nor call for quiet, as the Wizengamot sat as straight and stiff as if they had been immobilized. Minerva fairly vibrated from her seat next to Hermione, her thin lips pursed together so tightly that they were nearly invisible. Every now and then she would pat Hermione's knee briskly and say, "It's going to be just fine," which only served to make her more anxious than before.

Narcissa Malfoy was first on the docket as Kingsley had told her three days before *Dispense with the Unbreakable Vow from the beginning*, he had said. *Don't let it become a shock later*. Hermione had agreed, but now, as she watched the lithe and regal form of Madam Malfoy entering the courtroom as if escorted on the arms of her

admirers, rather than Aurors, her lungs felt cold and brittle.

Narcissa took her seat, crossed her ankles and laid her forearms gently upon the arms of the chair, a little moue of distaste crossing her features as the chains bound her firmly in place. She wore the same shapeless gray pajamas that Hermione had seen on Lucius Malfoy and Yaxley before her, but Madam Malfoy wore them as if they were made of silk.

"July the twentieth, nineteen hundred and ninety-eight. The Ministry of Magic vs. Severus Snape. Today the court intends to address the murder of Albus Dumbledore and Snape's activities during the second war."

Hermione could hear the hiss and swish of quills starting up, and the members of the Wizengamot seemed to sit up a bit straighter, straining toward the center of the courtroom. Severus sat tall and impassive in his seat. Hermione had smoothed his hair behind his ears before they had entered. His profile was sharp and clear and welcome to her eyes.

"We will begin with the testimony of Narcissa Black Malfoy. Madam Malfoy, if you please, where were you on the sixteenth of June, nineteen ninety-six?"

"Visiting Severus Snape in...." her throat worked, "his home in Manchester."

Hermione breathed a heavy sigh of relief. The woman did not seem able to speak the words 'Spinner's End.'

"Was it a social call, or did you have official business to discuss?"

Narcissa raised her chin a bit higher. "I had learned that the Dark Lord intended my son, Draco, to murder Albus Dumbledore. I was, very naturally, distressed."

"You wished to preserve the Headmaster's life?"

"Draco was still underage. He had not yet even completed his schooling. I knew that he would not be powerful enough to complete the task assigned to him. And I knew that the punishment would be... severe."

"I see. So your concern was that your son would be killed for his inability to carry out his orders?"

"Yes."

"And why did you turn to Severus Snape?"

"At that time, Severus Snape was employed at Hogwarts under Albus Dumbledore. I knew that the Headmaster trusted him, believed him to be a spy for the Order of the Phoenix. Draco was a favorite pupil of Snape's. I thought... I thought he might wish to protect Draco, to use his influence and access to the Headmaster to aid him."

"So you went to ask for his assistance."

"Yes."

"Were you alone?"

"I was accompanied by my late sister, Bellatrix Black Lestranger."

"Your sister also wished to plead Draco's case?"

Narcissa paused for a very long moment. She seemed to be choosing her words quite care carefully. "My sister was very selective in her associations. She thought Snape... untrustworthy."

"Your sister mistrusted Severus Snape? Did she think him a traitor to the Dark Lord?"

Narcissa twitched her head, sending her long silvery hair sweeping over her shoulder. "My sister was deeply devoted to the Dark Lord and a harsh critic. She felt that Snape had not shown the level of commitment..."

"Did she think him a spy?"

"She did not use those words."

"Why, then, did she accompany you to the home of Severus Snape?"

"She intended to stop me."

"I see. But you ignored her protests?"

"I was sorely in need of Snape's help."

"And what did you ask of Severus Snape?"

"I asked him to watch over my son as he attempted to fulfill his duty, to keep him from harm, and to... complete the task if it seemed Draco would fail."

"And did he agree?"

"He took the Unbreakable Vow."

There was a gasp from the upper seats of the courtroom. Hermione sat still and quiet. She had known this was coming. Both Kingsley and Snape himself had prepared her to hear it, but still it sounded harsh and damning as it rang through the courtroom in Narcissa Malfoy's genteel tones. She remembered a night that seemed as if it belonged to another lifetime: Slughorn's Christmas party. The night she had first heard of the Unbreakable Vow. She looked at Snape. She knew the conclusions she had leapt to that night.

"Did he seem eager to take the Vow?"

"He was not reluctant."

"Do you believe that he wished to kill Albus Dumbledore?"

"He spoke derisively of Dumbledore. He said that the old wizard was already injured, that his reflexes were growing slow. I thought at the time that he believed it would be easy to kill Albus Dumbledore."

Kingsley smiled a slow, self-satisfied smile.

"Thank you, Madam Malfoy."

"My son--" Narcissa began as the Aurors approached her chair. "My son did not kill Albus Dumbledore. He did nothing; he was just a child--"

"Your son will testify this afternoon, Madam Malfoy."

"But you must see that Draco is not--"

"Draco will have his day in court. Today, we are not prepared to hear--"

"My son is innocent! *Snape* killed Dumbledore!"

"That will be all," Kingsley said firmly, and a flick of his head told Hermione that he had given the Aurors permission to silence her if necessary.

Kingsley rounded on Snape.

"Narcissa Malfoy testified that you made a vow to kill Albus Dumbledore."

"I beg to differ," Snape said smoothly. "Narcissa Malfoy testified that I made a vow to help her son, to protect him, and to take on his task if it seemed he would fail."

"His task was to kill the Headmaster," Kingsley said, undeterred.

"Indeed," Snape said. "However, having already made a vow to Dumbledore that I would kill him, the vow to Narcissa seemed relatively innocuous."

The courtroom erupted. The uproar following Narcissa Malfoy's statement seemed barely a whisper in comparison. Hermione could hear Tiberius Ogden's voice roaring for silence, and the distinct shrill of Skeeter's voice as she used the distraction to edge closer to the action. Kingsley stood silently, looking ahead, as if he could not hear the noise at all.

Hermione watched her husband, who sat as impassive and calm as the Minister. She had hoped for this; she had prayed to see his hands come up to shield his face, to know that he would fight, would not just keep silent and await their judgment, and yet, she was afraid. If he fought, and they lost... but she would not consider that.

When Ogden had succeeded in silencing the crowd, Kingsley said, "I shall remind you that you have promised to answer these questions truthfully."

"In my stores, you will find a suitable amount of Veritaserum if you doubt me."

"You know very well that Veritaserum cannot be used in a courtroom."

"These are your rules, Minister. Let it be noted that I offered."

"Snape! I will do the noting, thank you."

"As you wish."

"So you are testifying that Albus Dumbledore asked you to kill him."

"I am."

"For what purpose?"

Hermione watched Snape's face carefully. She saw the moment of decision cross his features for a split second.

"He knew of the Dark Lord's plan to have Draco Malfoy kill him and wished to spare young Malfoy's soul," Snape said with a slight sneer. "And he wished me to remain in the Dark Lord's good graces, to succeed him as Headmaster and thereby protect the students."

"He wished to install you as Headmaster," Kingsley said incredulously.

"No, he wished Voldemort to install me as Headmaster, which he would not do unless he believed me to be a faithful Death Eater."

"And he wished to protect Draco Malfoy's soul?"

"He said that he would not see an innocent's soul torn in two on his account."

"And your soul, Snape?"

Snape's features twitched very slightly as he said, "I'm sure he thought my soul blemished enough that one more stain would matter little."

"When did he propose this plan to you?"

"On the second of June, nineteen ninety-six. He returned to Hogwarts that night having suffered a severe curse--a curse that, unchecked, would have been fatal. In fact, he very likely would have died within the year due to its virulence despite my efforts. I was called to his office to try to contain it, which I did, trapping it in his left hand. When he had recovered enough to converse, he informed me of his intent."

"You say he had suffered a severe injury?"

"Yes."

"Was this the same injury about which you spoke to Narcissa Malfoy on the night that you took the Unbreakable Vow?"

"It was," Snape said simply.

Kingsley allowed a weighty pause, and he turned slightly toward the Wizengamot. After a moment, he returned to Snape.

"Why did you take the Unbreakable Vow?"

"It was what Dumbledore would have wanted. It kept me firmly within the ranks of the Death Eaters. It may have gone a fair way toward persuading Bellatrix Lestrange to trust me. And it really mattered very little. Dumbledore and I had already made our agreement. I was already bound to do so."

"You were bound? Did Dumbledore ask you to take the Unbreakable Vow?"

"Dumbledore was satisfied with my word."

"I see. The court is interested in Dumbledore's plan."

"Then I suggest you speak to Dumbledore."

"In a moment. What you claim he asked of you--who knew about it?"

"No one."

"No one? But surely someone would have to know--to prevent you from being killed by an Order member, or--"

"Did you know?" Snape asked steadily.

"I--no, but--"

"No one knew."

"But surely he must have foreseen today's events. Why would he provide no alibi for his trusted--"

"Neither Albus nor I had much hope that I would live through the war. However, he did endeavor to provide me with help... in the unlikely event that I were to live."

"And that help was..."

"He married me to Hermione Granger."

Kingsley talked over the murmur that swept through the Wizengamot. "You testified only a moment ago that no one knew of the Headmaster's plan."

"No one did. My wife was told only that I would commit some atrocity that would make it appear that I had betrayed the Order, and that only she would know differently."

"Why Hermione Granger?"

"If your experience with her has not been enough, I am sure there are a multitude of Hogwarts house-elves willing to testify to her... tenacity... where justice is concerned."

The corners of Hermione's lips turned up. Snape's tone was acerbic, and yet beneath it, she sensed the kind of warmth with which he had harangued her long before the shadow of the trial had touched their lives. But her pleasure was cut short by Dumbledore's voice as he interrupted yet again.

"Forgive me, Minister Shacklebolt, for my intrusion. But Severus Snape is not telling you everything."

Hermione's hand strayed unconsciously to her wand pocket, and her mind hummed with waiting. Her heart beat; her breath came steady and sure. If Dumbledore would take her on, he would not find her the malleable schoolgirl who had stood in his office and agreed to act out his plans.

"The court will hear from Albus Dumbledore. Continue."

Dumbledore sat forward. "Severus has not lied to you. No, he has told you the absolute truth and the entirety of what I asked of him on June the second. But he is not telling you what he later learned to be the real reasons behind his marriage and the act that I asked him to commit."

"So you admit that you asked Snape to kill you."

"Oh, yes. I all but insisted."

Ogden broke in, standing suddenly, his chest thrust out and straining against his plum coloured robes. The man looked furious, demented with rage. "I would like to remind this court that Albus Dumbledore's request affects the law *not one whit!* If 'he told me to' were a defense, this court would have no reason to try any of the Death Eaters!"

"No, Ogden, it does not," Kingsley said calmly. "But perhaps we might hear from Dumbledore, just the same. Unless you have some objection to hearing the testimony of the former Head Warlock of this court?"

"Of course not," Ogden hissed. "I simply want it to be clear that no wizard has the legal right to consent to his own harm--not even Albus Dumbledore."

"Your point is noted. Now, Albus. You said that there were further reasons behind your requests?"

"Indeed. As many of you undoubtedly know, I defeated the Dark wizard Grindelwald in August of 1945."

"Will this deteriorate into a history of Dumbledore's achievements? As I said, it makes no difference who did the asking--Snape used an Unforgivable--"

"My dear Tiberius. Undoubtedly, you have seen many wizards try to escape their rightful punishments before this court. However, you should be reminded that each case is different and should be approached with an open mind and willingness to act in the spirit of the law. I should like to finish my testimony."

Ogden grunted in response, while Hermione sat in what could only be described as a confused stupor. *Dumbledore meant to tell them about the Elder Wand?*

"As I was saying, in 1945, I defeated Grindelwald and took his wand. It was a wand of extraordinary power, a wand of legend. A wand I knew that Voldemort would learn of eventually and wish to possess."

"Forgive me if I am not following you. You asked Snape to kill you because you believed you had a powerful wand--"

"The Elder Wand passes only by conquering its master. You cannot steal the wand, nor give it freely. Its allegiance must be won. It is said that the Elder Wand is unbeatable. It brings its master great power."

"So you intended Snape to take the wand by killing you?"

"Yes. I meant him to keep it for Harry Potter."

"And Miss Granger?"

"I intended Snape to communicate with Harry through Miss Granger."

"But why not tell them of your intent?"

"Because I was afraid of their capture or discovery. Severus Snape is a marvelous Occlumens, and through his instruction, I am certain that Miss Granger--pardon me, Madam Snape--is a fine one also. But the Dark Lord has ways. I was afraid that something of the plan would be discovered and ruined before it began."

"But what was the plan exactly?"

"The papers have already made much of Voldemort's Horcruxes. A foul bit of magic--and one I am sorry to see publicized, but the news travels on, I suppose, regardless of our best intent. Harry Potter and his friends were hunting Voldemort's Horcruxes--to make sure that when Harry finally faced Lord Voldemort, he would be as mortal as any man."

"But how did the wand figure--"

"Harry himself was a Horcrux. His scar was imbued with a bit of Voldemort's soul, though Voldemort did not intend it, nor even recognize that he had placed a portion of himself within the boy. I had hoped to see the mastery of the wand end up with Harry. I knew that Voldemort would come looking for the wand itself, that he would have no compunctions about removing it from my tomb. I had hoped that he would believe himself the owner and try to use it against Harry Potter, its master, thus destroying the Horcrux and leaving Harry alive."

"You intended for Harry Potter to take the mastery of the wand from Severus Snape?"

"It was my hope that my death would give Harry the impetus necessary to... seize the wand from Severus. I was certain he would not have found it within himself to take it from me."

A low hum began to rise from the stands, the sound of shifting, of breathing, of active listening.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"In Snape, the mastery of the wand would remain hidden. Voldemort would come to my tomb looking for it, and in seizing it, he would believe himself the master."

"But if Voldemort realized--"

"Then Snape would have had a very short time to appear before Harry."

"And Snape's life--"

"Would almost certainly have been forfeit either way."

There was a bit of a murmur in the crowd, though nothing that compared to the sound that had roared through the courtroom when Snape testified that he had vowed to kill Dumbledore, and Hermione burned with helpless fury that the thought of the death of Dumbledore would rouse these people, but the thought that Dumbledore had just as quickly sent her husband to die registered little, if at all. Hermione thought that Kingsley looked vaguely shocked, despite the fact that he had heard this story several times.

"I see."

"However, my plan was compromised. Draco Malfoy disarmed me before Severus had a chance to carry out the plan. He therefore took the mastery of the Elder Wand."

Kingsley, still looking rather shaken, said, "Thank you for your clarification, but I am going to stop you there for a moment. The court calls Draco Malfoy to testify."

The heavy doors of the courtroom opened once more, and Draco appeared, flanked by the Aurors. He looked frightened. Frightened and terribly young, Hermione thought, and she wondered briefly what she looked like to him.

"Please state your name for the court."

"Draco Malfoy."

"Were you present on the Astronomy Tower on June the fifteenth, nineteen ninety-seven at midnight?"

"I was."

"Who else was there?"

"Just Dumbledore at first. Then the Carrows. Fenrir Greyback." Draco glanced quickly around the courtroom, as if to see which of the aforementioned might be watching.

"What were you doing on the Astronomy Tower after curfew?"

Draco's head dropped forward slightly. "I had been given an assignment."

"A school assignment?"

"An assignment from the... from Lord Voldemort. He wanted me to kill the Headmaster."

"Alone? That seems a very important task for someone as young as yourself."

"I had help. Other Death Eaters--"

"The castle was very heavily fortified. How did you manage to smuggle Death Eaters into the school?"

"Vanishing cabinet," Draco said quietly. "We'd found it the year before. It was broken, but its mate was at Borgin and Burkes. I fixed it in the Room of Requirement."

"I see."

"Then I set off the Dark Mark over the Astronomy Tower," Draco said, apparently unable to stop now that he had begun. "I knew that he would go straight there when he arrived back onto the grounds. I had Imperiused Madam Rosmerta at the Three Broomsticks. She carried a charmed coin. She told me when Dumbledore was on the way. I joined him moments after he'd arrived. I disarmed him. I--I--"

"You had Albus Dumbledore alone and wandless on the Astronomy Tower," Kingsley prompted gently.

"I did."

"And then what happened?"

"I... The others arrived. They were all yelling, distracting me. Snape came."

Hermione watched as Draco looked helplessly at Snape.

"Snape came, and he--Dumbledore said, 'Severus, please,' and Snape..."

"Snape did what?"

"He hit him with the Killing Curse," Draco whispered.

"Thank you, Draco. That is most helpful. Only a few more questions now. Did you take Albus Dumbledore's wand that night?"

"No. No, we left in a hurry. I never saw Dumbledore again."

"Did you tell the Lord Voldemort that it was not, in fact, you who cast the Killing Curse?"

Draco looked at Severus once more, and Hermione could swear there was shame in his eyes. "I did. I told him that Snape had rushed in and stolen my glory."

"I see. Thank you, Mr Malfoy. That will be all."

Draco turned toward Hermione as he exited the courtroom. The fingers of his left hand twitched a bit as he passed her, and she lifted her chin very slightly in response. She was not sure what had been communicated, but something had passed between them.

"Draco Malfoy's testimony confirms that he indeed disarmed Albus Dumbledore before Severus Snape cast the Killing Curse. It also confirms that Voldemort would not have suspected that Draco Malfoy had taken the mastery of Dumbledore's wand."

"Did you doubt my word?" Dumbledore said, sounding vaguely amused.

"This is a complex case. The court reserves the right to cross check every witness's testimony," Kingsley snapped.

"Of course," Dumbledore said mildly.

"When did you inform Severus Snape that your plan had gone awry?"

"I believe that we discussed it in March of the following year."

"You waited until March to reveal your plan to Snape? But why? You would have known even before you... were killed that something had gone wrong."

"As I said, I did not wish my intentions to be discovered by Voldemort. And it seemed to me that having the wand hidden beneath yet another layer of secrecy could only benefit the war effort. Even if Voldemort came to understand the workings of the wand, he would kill the wrong man in order to get it."

"But if Snape was not the master of the wand, he could not pass it to Harry Potter."

"That is true."

"So you were willing to risk Potter's life?"

"Forgive me, Harry," Dumbledore said, glancing into the crowd before returning his gaze to Kingsley. "But Harry Potter is but one man. The war endangered all of wizarding society as we know it. Surely, you can see how vital it was that Voldemort not come into possession of an unbeatable wand."

Kingsley did not speak for a moment. The silence in the courtroom was a palpable, living thing. Hermione looked up at the Wizengamot. The witches and wizards there seemed frozen with shock, their faces blank and waiting for the moment at which Dumbledore would rephrase, would say those words when they did not mean that he had agreed to the sacrifice of Harry Potter. Slowly they seemed to blink and look at one another cautiously. Kingsley's voice rang harshly against the silence.

"But the wand did not act against Harry Potter," he said. "How did you secure its mastery for him?"

"I didn't," Dumbledore said simply. "About that, you will have to ask Severus Snape."

Hermione sucked in a breath along with what seemed the entire courtroom. Dumbledore had stood by his statement.

"Mr Snape?" Kingsley said, making another of his dramatic turns and facing Snape, palms open.

"I became aware of the Elder Wand in March of this year. I consulted with Woodward Ollivander and then with Dumbledore. My wife, Hermione, was privy to my conversation with Dumbledore, and it was actually she who came up with the plan to visit Malfoy Manor and try to secure the mastery of the wand for Potter."

"The court calls Woodward Ollivander to testify."

Hermione watched as Ollivander explained the rules of the wand that had reared up to dictate the end of the war, to dictate everything. It seemed strange to hear about it in public, this thing of secrets. She wondered if the notion of it had ever been inside a courtroom before, or if this was one of hundreds of times. She craned her neck to watch the Wizengamot as Ollivander relayed the history of the wand--its path from Gregorovitch to Dumbledore--and was surprised to see how placidly they sat, as if discovering that Death's own wand had been passing between them were an everyday occurrence.

Her eyes drifted to Snape, lighting on his face and tasting the mood there. He was alert, perhaps even restless. He seemed to tense as Kingsley questioned Ollivander about who had come to him for information on the Elder Wand.

"You do not remember speaking with Snape about the Elder Wand?"

"No. Miss Lovegood says that he Obliviated us following his interview. The charm, it seems, was not as strong on her, or perhaps being young, she was better able to throw it off than I. For days, she insisted that Snape had been to see us, though I told her it was the darkness beginning to take her mind--half remembered dreams and fear, the swirling black so dark the mind begins to invent... and yet a house-elf came back for us. The very same house-elf that Miss Lovegood insisted had brought Severus Snape."

"What causes you to believe that he came for information on the Elder Wand?"

"Again, I must rely on Miss Lovegood. But it seems telling that Potter arrived at Malfoy Manor within the week."

"The court will hear testimony concerning the events at Malfoy Manor. Harry Potter, please come to the center of the courtroom."

Harry rose quickly and strode to the center of the room beside Snape.

"How did you learn about Dumbledore's wand?"

"In his will, Dumbledore left Hermione a book. In it there was a symbol. Not quite a rune. I recognized it because Xenophilius Lovegood had worn the same symbol around his neck at Bill and Fleur Weasley's wedding. We went to Mr Lovegood for an explanation, and he told us that it stood for the wand among other things."

"I--you have heard that for a time I shared a connection to Voldemort's mind. I knew that he had become obsessed with wandmakers and that he had visited Grindelwald at Nurmengard. From there it was just a little jump to Dumbledore."

"And Miss Granger presented you with a plan to enter Malfoy Manor and try to take the mastery of the wand?"

Harry smiled. "Hermione has a way of making you believe that you thought of things yourself. But, yes."

"What was your plan?"

"We had learned that Voldemort's name carried a Taboo. I said the word, hoping that we would be picked up by Snatchers and delivered to Malfoy Manor."

"That seems foolhardy, Mr Potter."

"It was. And I admit that I was rather rash about it once the idea had taken hold. I'm certain that Hermione would have fine-tuned the plan significantly. But it was clear the

moment that we arrived that we had help."

"Explain."

"Well, for one thing, when Draco Malfoy was called to identify us, he couldn't do it--he'd been Confunded, I believe. Then, after Bellatrix Lestrange had cancelled all our protective enchantments and disguises with Finite Incantatem, someone hit me with a Shield Charm. And Dobby arrived to help us before we could call him."

"And you believe this helper to have been Severus Snape?"

"I do."

"Who else was in the Manor?"

"The Malfoys, Bellatrix Lestrange, Fenrir Greyback. Two Snatchers. Dean Thomas and Griphook of Gringotts. Wormt--Peter Pettigrew. And in the basement, Mr Ollivander and Luna Lovegood."

"You feel certain that none of those people could have been your benefactor?"

"Quite certain. Dobby arrived before we'd even been to the basement and ferried Mr Ollivander and Luna to Bill and Fleur Weasley's. And while we were in the Manor, Snape secured for us a bit of Bellatrix Lestrange's hair and the key to her Gringotts vault and gave it to Hermione. She knew he was there, though I did not. He made it possible for us to destroy the next Horcrux."

"And you were successful in capturing the mastery of the wand from Draco Malfoy?"

"I'm standing before you now because Snape's Shield Charm made it possible for me to overtake Draco Malfoy."

"Thank you, Mr Potter."

"You realize, don't you, that without Snape, I might not have lived to face Voldemort? Nor survived it when I did?"

"The court will draw its own conclusions. I thank you again for your testimony."

"You're welcome," Harry said dubiously and returned to his seat.

"Mr Snape, you testified earlier that you learned of the Elder Wand in March. Was that when you sought out Woodward Ollivander?"

"It was."

"And how did you discover the existence of the Wand?"

"I was informed by my colleague, Minerva McGonagall."

"But if Minerva McGonagall was not aware of Dumbledore's plan, she would have believed you to be a traitor to the Light. Why would she have brought so powerful a wand to your attention?"

"She realized the danger to my life. And she had begun to suspect that Dumbledore's death was not quite what it had seemed."

Kingsley stroked his chin for a moment, looking pensive, before he said, "The court calls Minerva McGonagall."

Hermione watched as Minerva rose shakily to her feet, her posture stiff, and her bun so severe that it seemed to be holding her face in a permanent expression of extreme displeasure.

"Please state your name and occupation for the court."

"Minerva McGonagall, Professor of Transfiguration and Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Professor McGonagall, you are also the Head of the Gryffindor house, are you not?"

"I am."

"How long have you known Severus Snape?"

"I taught him myself when he was at Hogwarts. And we have worked together closely since he returned as a professor in nineteen eighty-one."

"How would you characterize your relationship with Snape?"

Minerva smiled tightly, and Hermione could not help but smile in return. "We head rival houses. Our relationship has necessarily been one of competition. And yet, I like to think that we have found enjoyment in our respective roles."

"Would you say that you were friendly?"

"In so far as Snape is friendly with anyone," Minerva said, the trace of a smirk on her lips.

"How did you feel when you learned that Snape had killed Albus Dumbledore?"

She paused. "There are no words for that feeling," she said quietly.

"Would it be safe to say that you felt angry? Betrayed?"

"Among other things, yes."

"Then why would you approach Snape with information about the Elder Wand?"

"I... Albus left me a Deluminator in his will. One of its functions is to locate the lost. I am ashamed to say I thought it would lead me to Harry Potter. I clicked it several times that year. It only ever led me to Severus."

"In March... Snape and I had an argument. I asked him why he had done it, and he told me he thought it had been perfectly obvious. I went back to my chambers, and I thought about it. What reason could he have had? What possible reason could he have had to hurt Dumbledore? And why would he stay at Hogwarts afterward, knowing that he would have to work with us? Why didn't he sack the lot of us--fill the school with Death Eaters? And then I knew."

"You knew?"

"That he had not betrayed us. That Albus must have asked, that they must have agreed--"

"And you came to that conclusion based on an argument?"

"Yes--well, and Severus's time as the Headmaster."

"Please elaborate."

"I'm terribly ashamed that I didn't see it. I was just so angry, so--but that is immaterial. Snape, from the moment he became Headmaster, took control of all the discipline at Hogwarts excepting House points. He oversaw the curriculum of all the staff members, even those of the longest standing--"

"And this convinced you that he had not betrayed you?"

"It's hard to see, at first, I know. He plays the part of the bastard too well for his own good. But there were Death Eaters on staff--Death Eaters who could have punished our children--but he insisted that all punishments be turned over to him. Neville Longbottom and Ginevra Weasley tried to steal the sword of Gryffindor from his office and were merely given detention with Hagrid. Hagrid! And by controlling all of our syllabi, he could control theirs, and to Voldemort, it would appear that he had taken complete responsibility for the overhaul of the school."

"So you are saying that you felt that Severus Snape was protecting the students of Hogwarts from the Death Eaters?"

"Yes! I cannot imagine--I truly cannot imagine, Minister, what it would have been like if--Oh, and ~~were~~ hard on him. We did thwart him every chance we got. The things I said personally--" She turned away from Kingsley for a moment and seemed to focus her watery gaze on Snape. "Oh, Severus, I *am* sorry."

Hermione almost laughed at the look that crossed her husband's face. There seemed a war going on there between self-righteousness, amusement, horror and a strange sort of gratitude. Minerva turned back to Kingsley.

"But he would simply warn us in that very Severus way that we should be careful lest he turn us out--and now I see... now I see that we were much safer where we were."

"So when you had come to your conclusions, you approached Snape about the Elder Wand."

"Yes."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I told him that I thought Albus had put his life in great danger. There had been rumours for years among the seekers of the wand that Albus Dumbledore had it, and if there were never any attempt to take it, I imagine it was because Dumbledore was so revered and so formidable a wizard. But it seemed to me that if the rumours existed, it would only be a short time before Voldemort had heard them. And then he would come looking for Snape."

"You did not seek Dumbledore to confirm your theory?"

"I was far too angry to speak to Dumbledore at that time."

"Angry?" Kingsley's eyes narrowed, and to Hermione he suddenly looked very fierce, as if he knew he held the trial now in the palm of his hand and intended to squeeze.

"You do not ask a man to go through what Severus must have gone through--you do not make him an outlaw and a pariah among his friends and force him to... I'm sorry," Minerva said, pausing to blot her eyes with her handkerchief. "You cannot ask him to do those things and then send him mercilessly to his death without even *telling* him. It is not... It is not *decent*."

Hermione bowed her head. She had not yet allowed the courtroom to see her cry, and she would not begin now, but her eyes stung, and the world swirled before them for a moment. It was neither despair nor joy that squeezed her heart, but simple gratitude that someone shared her feelings, that she did not live in a world filled with souls she could not understand. Harry seemed to sense her distress, and he moved slightly closer to her on the bench.

"I think they're turning now," he said, sotto voce. "Don't look up. I'll be your eyes. Madam Marchbanks is crying. You know that wizard who always wears the purple hat?"

Hermione nodded, still gazing into her lap where a single tear splatted against her robes. She covered the spot with her hand.

"He's looking at the portrait like he's never seen Dumbledore before. People are writing. They're listening, Hermione. Hang on."

She nodded again and blinked until her eyes were clear and then she raised her head once more.

When Professor McGonagall returned to her seat beside Hermione, the young witch slipped her hand into the elder's as she had done just before the Battle of Hogwarts. Minerva clucked lightly, but she did not let go.

"There remains one last order of business," Kingsley said, his voice sounding clear and ringing now. "The matter of the Unforgivable Curses."

Harry rose suddenly beside Hermione, startling her. "I'd like to schedule my own trial."

"Sit down," Kingsley said sharply.

"Minister, please. If you intend to try Snape for the use of the Unforgivable Curses then I'd like to schedule my own trial date. I used all three."

"Harry, I am warning you--hero or no, this is a courtroom and--"

"Crucio on a Death Eater in Hogwarts, Imperio on a Gringotts goblin, and Avada Kedavra on Voldemort himself. It was war, Minister. We all--"

"Potter, this is not the time! For the last time, take your seat, or I will eject you from this courtroom!"

Harry and Kingsley stared at each other for a long moment. Kingsley raised an eyebrow, and Harry sat.

"As I was saying. As you know, Severus Snape has been without magic since well before this trial. The Auror Department took possession of Snape's wand and through Priori Incantatem, they have been able to catalogue the spells he cast over the past year and a half.

"There were two instances of the Killing Curse. One we have heard of at length today. The other was used on Bellatrix Lestrange."

Ginny leaned over Harry and hissed, "The final battle!" and Hermione nodded. An echo of Ginny's revelation seemed to travel through the crowd.

"There were no instances of the Cruciatus Curse nor the Imperius Curse."

Hermione's breath caught in her throat as Kingsley began to descend from the Minister's podium to the center of the courtroom. He strode impressively before the collected court, his multicolored robes swirling, his expression set and determined.

If Kingsley had sometimes appeared bumbling, if he had sometimes displayed his inexperience, it was clear now that it had been an act. There was nothing laughable about the man who stood before them. Hermione wondered if it was a charm he was using, or if this had always been the man underneath, a man who did not so much resemble the Minister of Magic, but some ancient warrior-king. His voice rolled through the courtroom like a battle cry.

"Witches and wizards of the Wizengamot, you have heard much testimony over these last few weeks concerning Severus Snape's role in the second war against Voldemort. The events on the Astronomy Tower of Hogwarts School cannot be denied. The question that we must now ask ourselves is whether greater evil was prevented by Snape's actions than the crime that was committed. Was he motivated, was he driven to act to prevent great harm from coming to children? Did he act with the intent to strengthen the Light?"

Hermione heard Ogden's voice before she saw him, though he was pushing past other wizards as he hastened from the stands. It was simply so difficult to look away from Kingsley, as he seemed to be radiating some kind of very bright light.

"That is not the way the law works, Minister!" Ogden shouted, red faced and puffed with anger. "Whatever Snape may purport to have done, he was a member of the group that threatened those children! You cannot join a group and then claim to murder in order to prevent--"

"You are assuming that Snape was a Death Eater," Kingsley said, seemingly unperturbed, while Hermione's hands were like ice and her stomach had clenched into a knot so tight that it seemed she could not swallow.

"You heard his testimony! He was a Death Eater! He sits before you with the Mark upon his arm! There is no question of whether--"

"Ah, but I think that is exactly the question, Judge Ogden. In the eyes of the Ministry, Snape has not been a Death Eater since nineteen eighty-one when he defected and turned spy."

"Roll up your sleeve!" Ogden thundered.

"Snape, that will not be necessary," Kingsley said, turning to Severus.

"Roll up your sleeve!" Ogden said again.

Hermione watched, and her fingers trembled as if she were Snape as he unbuttoned the sleeve of his robe, revealing the smooth white flesh underneath.

"It means nothing," he said. "The Mark disappeared when he died. Lucius Malfoy would have no more Mark than I."

"The Mark is gone," Kingsley said, looking, if it were possible, even more triumphant and assured than before. "The Mark is gone, and all that remains are the actions of this man. You have heard what Albus Dumbledore asked of Snape--"

"It makes no difference, as I have already pointed out to this court!" Ogden was nearly frothing at the mouth, but Kingsley continued talking, his words seeming to somehow drown out the other man.

--though he knew that it would bring him ignominy and likely death. You have heard that Dumbledore asked Snape to place his life between the Voldemort and the students of Hogwarts School, between Voldemort and Harry Potter, and you have heard the choice that he made. The question that Judge Ogden raises is the only question left for you to consider.

"Was Severus Snape a Death Eater?"

Kingsley's voice seemed to reverberate of the stone walls of the courtroom, enveloping everyone within them in a blanket of warm, powerful vibration.

"Was he? Was Severus Snape a Death Eater? Did he betray the Light? Or was he the reason that Harry Potter lived to defeat Voldemort?"

Hermione tore her eyes from Kingsley for a moment to read the faces of the witches and wizards above her. There were those who seemed unmoved, whose jaws remained set, but there were many whose eyes shown with rapt attention. There were brows furrowed with questioning, and she thought she had never seen such a beautiful sight in her life.

"The court will adjourn to allow the Wizengamot to reach a decision. We will reconvene on the first of August, nineteen ninety-eight to hear the verdict. That is all."

She closed her eyes as she felt the people around her begin to stir and rise. A tingle ran down her spine, raising goose bumps on her arms. *Please*, she thought. *Just... please.*

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Hermione stood in the doorway, watching Severus as he knelt by the fireplace. He wore his customary house clothing--the denims, which had once looked so odd to her eyes, and his graying button down shirt, open at the collar and rolled to his elbows. His hair was tucked behind his ears. Behind him on the coffee table sat a glass and the remains of a sandwich. It was clear from his posture that he had no idea that she was there at all. Beside him on the hearth lay the matches he would use to light the fire. Despite the heat outside, the house seemed perpetually dank and chilled, and occasionally they would sit side by side on the sofa before the fireplace and let the dancing flames lull them to sleep.

She supposed that, tonight of all nights, they would need the help.

She watched him quietly, learning this new man who was her husband. Regardless of what might have been, in the castle for instance, or far from here, renamed and revisioned as other people, this was the Snape she had now. This was her husband in repose, attending to the task of lighting a fire.

Tentatively, he reached out his right hand and flicked his fingers. Hermione's heart seemed to lurch, and her throat felt thick and heavy. He flicked again. Nothing. He sighed and reached for the matches as she entered the room.

He stood abruptly, abandoning the fire unlit.

"I was intending to retire," he said, not looking at her.

She stood there for almost a half a minute before she realized that he was asking her to join him.

"Yes," she said, careful to keep her face impassive. "We'll need the sleep."

He headed, without another word, to the stairs, and she followed. The hall was dark and shadowy, but he did not turn on the lamps, and when they entered the bedroom, he undressed and got into bed without speaking. She joined him, lying on her back in the darkness. His hand crossed the invisible line that ran down the center of the bed and took hers. She squeezed.

"Do you have the will?" he said after a moment. His voice seemed loud in the quiet of the house, and his words baffled her.

"The will?"

"Yes," he said formally. "I left a will."

"Oh. Oh, yes. I mean, no, I don't have it, but yes, I knew that you had. Arthur Weasley had it. I believe he destroyed it."

Snape was silent for a long time.

"I am sorry to hear it. It seems you have made a friend of Kingsley Shackbolt. I had hoped... I had hoped that he might be convinced to honor it when I am--"

"Severus, don't."

"Hermione." He rolled toward her, and she could just make out his face, pinched and earnest. "You have been... formidable. You have done better than I could have ever dreamed, better than perhaps I deserved. It is imperative that you know that it will not be your fault. No one could have--"

"Stop," she said quietly. "Let's not invite trouble. Let's wait and see what happens."

"You know what will happen. You are not a foolish girl; you have never been one, no matter what I might have said to the contrary. You know our world, and you know that they will never--"

"When will you learn to stop saying goodbye to me?" she said, too weary to be truly fierce. "If we lose, I will appeal. I will appeal over and over and over again until they give in because they are so damned tired of my face. What do I have to do to convince you that I will not let this happen?"

"You are thoroughly Gryffindor, Hermione," he whispered, and if there was sorrow in his tone, there was also a kind of rueful affection. "So convinced that you can change the world by your own power, so willing to charge out into the fray. Listen to me. I do not wish you to beat yourself to death against a wall that cannot be moved. I do not want to be your life's work. You deserve better things than courtrooms and newspaper articles and judgments."

"Which is why we will do what needs to be done and then get on with it."

He was silent for so long that she thought he might have nodded off. She was glad. Perhaps he had needed to offer her one last option, and having done so, felt able to close his eyes. She squeezed his hand again gently.

"I do not know how to get on with it," he said so softly that she strained to make out the words. "I have spent my entire life in Voldemort's shadow."

There was nothing to say. What did she know about what happened next? As little as he did or even less. Whatever came out would be trite at best. She rolled toward him and tucked herself into his arms. He accepted her without a struggle, and they waited out that long night together.

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A/N: Hello again! I've never done an end note before, but I wanted to say that Kingsley's defense was built around the idea of Duress or Duress of Circumstances (Necessity), which unfortunately does not really apply in a murder trial (nor to a Death Eater)--and hence at the end he tried for Jury Nullification, trying to get the Wizengamot to focus on the issue of whose side Snape was on rather than whether he was guilty of the crimes he was charged with. All of this is dreadfully inexact, of course, and all slaughtering of the law are my own. Sadly, I could not find a real defense for Snape. Dumbledore, it seems, screwed him very, very thoroughly.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

*Chapter 47 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: You know the drill: none of it is mine. Special thanks to my betas, RedOrchid, Shellsnapelover and OpalJade. As we get nearer to the end, it gets harder, and they come through every time. I love you, ladies. Thank you.

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Hermione stood in the kitchen of Spinner's End, staring into the open drawer before her. Neat nests of forks and spoons greeted her eyes, a pile of knives, and yet she had no idea why she had opened this drawer, now or any of the three times before that she had pulled it open, feeling it stick slightly, listening to the protest of the silverware within. *It's very Muggle*, she thought, *silverware in a drawer*. Which was senseless, of course, as wizards used flatware, same as anyone else. And yet, she could not remember ever having seen it stored in quite this way except at home--a plastic caddy holding everything in its own little compartment. She shut the drawer again.

She had not slept the night before, not really. She had listened to the sound of Severus breathing; she had felt the firm pressure of his chest, slightly damp where her cheek pressed against it, rising and falling. He had not slept either, she knew, for she had never felt him sink into the mattress, nor felt his breath grow deep and slow. But it had been enough like rest that the night had seemed to pass quickly and thoughtlessly, only to dump her mercilessly out into the predawn, assaulted once more by the quickening of her heartbeat and the knowledge that they would hear the verdict today.

She opened the drawer. There was something in here that she wanted, but she could not think what it was.

She could hear Severus approaching, the slap of his bare feet against the treads of the stairs, and she pictured his long and slender feet, the blunt edges of his toenails, the sparse black hair contrasting against the palest of pale skin. She could feel him looking at her, but she could not meet his gaze.

He reached in front of her and shut the drawer. "Eat," he said, and she noticed that there was a slice of toast on the counter, which presumably accounted for the drawer. She had intended to slice it.

She picked it up whole and bit into it in order to have something to do. Crumbs fell onto the countertop.

He picked up the piece of charred bread that remained and looked at it dubiously. "You couldn't have finished the job and burnt the whole house down?" he said, amused.

"I--I'm sorry. I don't--"

"I did not marry you for your skills at housewifery," he said, with the ghost of a smile, as he picked up his mug of tea (almost certainly cold now), turned, and headed back toward the stairs.

*No. No, surely not*, she thought ruefully. And yet, though he had not intended it, underneath she heard the reason that *he had* married her. She was supposed to get him out of this. She had promised. She had promised, and she couldn't even make breakfast.

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Kingsley's face was unreadable. He knew. She knew he knew, she was certain of it, and yet there was nothing, no hint in the set of his mouth or color of his eyes, that told

her what she needed to know. He shook her hand with the same warm pressure as he always had, and she sensed neither eagerness nor reluctance in the way he grasped Snape's arm to Apparate him into the Ministry.

Hermione's perception seemed suddenly to have an unnatural crispness: the stones of the hallway walls were each uniquely pitted and somehow indelibly printed upon her eyes. The worn carpet runner that covered the floor was also deserving of her attention--the way the red faded to a kind of fibrous pink in the center, where countless wizards had tread upon it. And yet, at the same time that she saw everything, she saw nothing, and she jumped slightly in her seat, surprised to find Kingsley already calling the room to order.

The courtroom was packed to the gills. More than twice the number of witches and wizards were present today than had been here at their last gathering, and the press swarmed around the exit, snapping photographs of those who were entering. Hermione saw the collected staff of Hogwarts, Molly Weasley coralling the entire Weasley clan, Neville Longbottom and his gran, Andromeda Tonks with baby Teddy on her hip. She could not shake the nagging feeling that these people had all come to watch her fail, that they had come to take pleasure in Snape's defeat.

As the crowd settled into the stands, Kingsley's voice rolled once more through the courtroom.

"The first of August, nineteen hundred and ninety-eight. The Ministry of Magic vs. Severus Snape. I wish to thank the court once more for its careful consideration of the facts of this complicated case and all those who gave the court their time and testimony. The Wizengamot has reached its decision."

The last of the whispers died away. Hermione looked at the faces of the plum-clad witches and wizards of the Wizengamot, seeking some sign of what was to come, but their faces were careful and blank, and their eyes stared ahead at the stone wall at the far end of the courtroom.

"To the charge of Membership in a Terrorist Organization, the court finds the defendant not guilty."

"To the charge of High Treason, the court finds the defendant not guilty."

"To the charge of Accessory to Kidnapping, the court finds the defendant not guilty."

The charges seemed to whir past, and Hermione was breathing in great hitching gulps. Harry held her left hand so tightly in his own that she dimly wondered if her bones would crack, and yet the pain did nothing to keep her focused.

"To the charge of Espionage... of Aiding and Abetting the Use of Unforgivable Curses... of Use of Magic in the Presence of Muggles... of Conspiracy to Commit Murder, the court finds the defendant not guilty."

*Conspiracy to Commit Murder, Conspiracy to Commit Murder.* She tried to grasp the words as they floated through her mind. *But that must mean--*

"To the charge of Murder by Unforgivable Curse, the court finds the defendant not guilty."

Harry was shaking her violently; the courtroom was alive with whispers; she could hear the press jostling one another for floor space. Hermione's eyes had not left Kingsley's face. They weren't done yet.

"To the charges of Willful Destruction of Property and Unauthorized Use of Memory Charms, the court finds the defendant guilty."

The air rushed out of her, and she sat back suddenly in her seat. Harry had not given up his joyous tugging on her hand. "It's just Destruction of Property, Hermione, and Memory Charms--it's nothing! They're not going to send him to Azkaban over Memory Charms, for Merlin's sake! You won!"

So she had. She had won where it counted, and yet, Severus had been right after all. They would not allow him to walk out of this courtroom without their mark on him. It seemed they would not say unequivocally that he had been right. Destruction of Property and Memory Charms--they would exonerate him of a murder, but not a few Memory Charms?

"I want silence in this courtroom! I will not hesitate to eject anyone who cannot comply--even members of the court itself," Kingsley roared, glaring over his shoulder at the Wizengamot.

When a tentative quiet had descended, he said, "The court sentences Severus Snape to nine hundred hours of compulsory unpaid work to be served brewing potions for St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. This court is adjourned."

Her eyes darted to the portrait, but Dumbledore was already gone.

Kingsley began to descend from the podium, and the crowd seemed to rise like one enormous body, but Hermione sat frozen to the bench until Harry pulled her to her feet. He grasped her in a one-armed hug and tried to steer her toward the Weasleys, who were congregating toward the rear of the courtroom, but she shook him off, transfixed by what was happening in the center of the room.

Witches and wizards swarmed throughout the cavernous room, and yet they left a wide circle around Snape and the Minister, as if now that the show had drawn to a close, they preferred not to consort with the players.

Kingsley reached Snape at last and released the chains on the chair. Hermione watched, her mouth slightly agape, as he touched his wand to the bracelet on Snape's wrist and caught it deftly as it fell away. She flexed her own fingers unconsciously in response. Snape stood slowly and took the hand that Kingsley extended to him, and she could almost feel it in her own. Through the din, she heard their words as if they were whispered in her ear.

"...just to complete the paperwork. Potions are to be delivered directly to St Mungo's. They will be expecting a shipment once a week. I have list of their requests. Nothing too complicated, of course, not that you'd..." Kingsley trailed off. "Do you have adequate brewing facilities where you are? Or do you intend to move somewhere--"

"No, my family home will suffice."

"Very well. I assume you'll want to remain under the protection of the charm for the time being?"

"Indeed."

"Well, then, I suppose that's all. If you would be so kind as to stop by my office before you go. Oh! Merlin, I nearly forgot. Your wand," Kingsley said, drawing it from his pocket.

She began to move the moment Snape's fingers grasped his wand. There was a brief golden glow there--it seemed almost a magical release on the parts of both wand and hand at their reunion.

"Thank you," Snape said, and she did not know whether he was thanking Kingsley for the return of the wand or something else, but Kingsley seemed to take no notice and cast a Shield Charm on Snape as he retreated.

Snape turned to look at her as she stepped onto the courtroom floor, and she struggled to keep her face perfectly blank. She would let him tell her how to react to this. She would rage if rage was what he needed, or she would bear her failure with quiet grace. Bitterness, anger, acceptance, calm--whatever he asked of her.

He raised his wand, and she hesitated for a fraction of a second, but then he swept it down over his body, and she heard him say *Protego Horribilis*. Her own words came back to her across nearly two year's time. *So I can touch you because I mean you no harm?*

He had admitted her inside the charm.

As she approached him, she fought her face, which was crumpling against her will. She turned away slightly to hide her tears, but he caught her by the shoulder, and suddenly she was in his arms, her hands clutching the back of his robes, listening to the snuffling of his breath through her hair. She could feel the magic pounding through him, boiling through his blood, and he felt, beneath her hands, as if he were physically growing larger. She clung to him, partly in some feeble attempt to contain what was happening, and partly because she feared her knees would not hold her if she let go. Beneath her horror, beneath her anger, there was something fierce and bright threatening her heart. It had not died. He felt her, and she felt him.

Flashbulbs exploded around them.

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August was the hardest month.

Snape returned to Spinner's End with an almost crazed need to get on with things. It had seemed clear to him in Shackbolt's office as he signed the papers, as he listened to the Minister's simpering apologies that no, they had not found the Grangers, and no, Snape could not leave the country until his sentence had expired, that the only way forward was through.

It did not occur to him until the second week of brewing Anti-Allergy Potion and Acne Cream--boxes of ridiculous potions that he could have made as a second year--that Shackbolt had done him a favor.

His gloved hands moved easily over the bubotubers, using the flat of his knife to juice them and collecting the thick white pus into phials with his wand. Pierce, squeeze, siphon. It was work. He had been given work, something to do to remind him who he might have been if all of this had not happened, something to do to keep his mind from what had. And too, Snape thought, it would make his potions safe. Hospitals would use them. When this was over, there was a better chance that he might work again.

He closed his eyes and tried to absorb the horrible idea that he might truly owe Shackbolt.

He could hear Hermione moving upstairs. He had not liked the look in her eyes of late. Before the trial, when she had stared at him, it had been a watchful, careful kind of staring. Had he eaten, would he come to bed, would he balk if she suggested the gray waistcoat? That kind of staring. Now she looked at him as if she were waiting for something, waiting for some message he did not know how to deliver. At night, she lay quietly in his arms, but she did not sleep. He had thought that after, once it was over, that she would rest, that she would put down the burden of him and begin to heal, but he sometimes thought that she looked worse than she had a month ago. Thinner, tighter. More desperate. She was foundering.

He knew. He remembered the feeling intimately, his first weeks at Hogwarts after the Dark Lord had fallen the first time. Dumbledore had wanted him near, had wanted him within the boundaries of the school, but there were no children yet, no duties, and all he had ever had were duties. Assignments. He had felt as if someone had unstrung him, and he had paced his chambers like something caged until the first staff meeting, where the rest of them had looked at him like a very dangerous child.

A very dangerous child. He supposed that was what other people saw when she went out. But in was no better than out, because in there was nothing to do, nothing to occupy that restless mind. He knew, and yet he had no idea how to help her find what she needed to go forward, how to help her decide who she would be, if not a student, if not a Muggle, if not a warrior.

The days ran into one another, piling up into something that began to resemble a routine. If he brewed for at least seven hours a day, it would only take nineteen weeks to complete the mandatory labor. January. He could travel by January. Each morning, he woke, showered, availed himself of the now-magical toaster, and proceeded to the basement, where he would remove his Stasis Charms and light the cauldrons. He worked until mid-morning, when he paused for tea and looked about the house for Hermione. He would make tea, and they would drink it, sitting quietly at the kitchen table. It was the best part of his day, though he felt small and meager admitting that to himself. Afterward, he would work until he was famished, or until the boxes bearing the potion of the week looked full enough to be considered embarrassing.

Because it didn't matter if he was grateful for the work. He would embarrass them anyway.

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September was moderately better. She went out sometimes, to the Burrow, she said, or to visit Potter who had taken up residence at Grimmauld Place. Sometimes she took tea with Minerva. Once, she had very shyly brought the Lovegood girl to Spinner's End, but they had stayed less than a half an hour before Hermione looked near tears, and they Apparated away again. He had wanted to tell her that it was all right, that he did not want to keep her here as if it were a prison, but she had been quiet and skittish for a week afterward.

He had repaired the squeaking boards of the stairs because he enjoyed knowing when she was coming without them. It was a strange pleasure, because it burned almost like pain in his heart, and each time that he looked up, expecting to see her, and actually found her there, he felt staggered with something that he could only think of as gratitude. He had not learned to stop the panicked feeling he had when she left, even though he told himself sharply each time that he was being ridiculous. If she had wanted to leave, she would have accepted Shackbolt's *generous* offer to annul their marriage.

He enjoyed the work, he admitted to himself, and not just because he was doing something magical again, firmly seating himself inside the life he had chosen. It had been years since he'd been asked to brew, and he enjoyed the precision of a knife through ingredients, the thrill of being exceptional at something again, even if it was something as mediocre as hospital potions. He had worked his way through the A's--through anesthetics and Anti-Fungal Paste for the Quidditch players and, somewhat ruefully, through antivenins--filling box after box, until they were sometimes stacked precariously to the ceiling before they could be delivered to St Mungo's. He could have Transfigured them, but he enjoyed seeing the results of his work, enjoyed particularly picturing the Healer who would receive his shipment on Monday, the ring of keys suddenly transforming into huge, bulging boxes of potions.

He had been grinding porcupine quills against a stone for a Boil Curing Potion when he became suddenly aware that she was standing in the doorway, watching him. He did not acknowledge her immediately, but finished powdering the quills and carefully scraped the powder into the middle cauldron.

"If you are going to stand there gawking at me all afternoon, you may as well make yourself useful," he said and pushed the grinding stone across his worktable toward her.

She hesitated for a moment before casting a Cleansing Charm on her hands and coming to the table. "How many?" she asked.

"Do them all. They're no use whole, and the powder will keep," he said. He looked at her carefully, trying to gauge her mood. "And I intend to make more Boil Cure Potion than St Mungo's can hold. Nine hundred hours for this list? I could stock all of Britain."

She smiled a quick, tight smile and took up a quill, grating it in long strokes over the stone. "That explains the boxes," she said, and he thought there was something... something alive in her eyes.

He stepped behind her and closed his right hand over hers. "Observe," he said and ground the quill against the stone in a quick, circular pattern. The powder rained down under their hands.

"Much faster," she said.

"Indeed."

He stood behind her for a moment longer, enjoying her proximity and the scent of her hair, before he released her and set about dicing an obscene number of horned slugs. The work was soothing, and he hoped it would soothe her too, that she might find some peace in the repetition, or in the simple creation of something.

He watched her working with a pleasure that he had never had as her teacher and never allowed himself when he was her husband and her teacher both. A deep line appeared between her brows, and yet the corners of her lips turned up, and she flushed with the effort of doing a thing perfectly. She was a rare person, he decided. She worked as hard at grinding porcupine quills as she had at saving the world. He wondered if it was wrong to love her when she was in so much pain.

"Enough," he said finally, when her side of the table was buried in white powder. "Come and help me with these slugs."

He handed her a thin silver knife, and they established a routine in which she would bisect the slug and pass it to him to be diced. At first they worked slowly, feeling out a rhythm, and then it became like a game, in which she tried to create a pile, and he diced as quickly as he was able to stay ahead of her. They worked until the pattern began to break down, and their hands bumped more and more frequently. Finally, he caught her wrist and pressed it lightly between his fingers for a moment.

"Now, you stir," he said.

She picked up his stirring rod and began to turn the first mixture counterclockwise. When the potion had turned a pale, buttery yellow, she withdrew the rod quickly and dried it with a spell. He decanted the middle potion into phials, labeled them, and set them in a box with the others. He could give her this, he thought. He could share this with her if she needed it. Briefly he wondered if this was what marriage was, just saving each other over and over again.

"The rest can wait," he said, casting a Stasis Charm over the other two cauldrons. "Do you wish--that is, are you hungry?"

"Hungry?" she said, looking startled, as if she were coming out of a dream. "I suppose."

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By the time he had made his way down the list to the Invigoration Draught, Hermione was meeting him in the basement in the mornings, her sleeves rolled up and her hair twisted into a thick braid down her back. She never began without him, but waited for him to instruct her, and that morning, he gave her the ginger roots to peel and slice and the pomegranates to juice, and he took the beetle eyes, as he remembered from class that she had always grimaced as she'd counted them out.

She worked quietly, as she always did, carefully slicing the ginger paper-thin and translucent. He counted and separated, counted and separated, using the flat of his knife to scrape the wet black eyes across the table. Suddenly, he was possessed with an odd notion. He looked at her, considering. And then he flicked an eye at her.

She shrieked and wiped it from the side of her face, leaping, and swinging her hand in the air as if it had been contaminated, but she was smiling at him, and just as quickly as he had decided to do it, she seemed to arrive at a decision of her own. She picked up a pomegranate and chucked it at him clumsily. It hit the table with a mushy thwack, and juice flew into the cauldrons and onto his shirt. The cauldrons immediately began to belch a sweet pink smoke, but he ignored it. The potions were ruined, but the smoke was not harmful. He reached behind him and snatched up a handful of moonstones and began to toss them at her, one by one. She danced and dodged, her laugh ringing through the close basement, and she caught him in the face with a hunk of ginger.

"Severus! Severus! That's not fair! No more eyes!" she cried, ducking below the table for a moment. Beneath it, she must have come upon the tank of flobberworms, because suddenly two of them came flying through the air, and her face was twisted with disgust as she emerged from below the table, though her eyes glowed triumphantly.

She laughed hysterically as he peeled one of the creatures from his shoulder and returned it to the tank.

"I would have thought you above using live animals," he said stiffly, but he could not keep the smile from his eyes, and she clutched the corner of the table, doubled over with laughter.

"Oh, god. Oh, god, Severus, you should have seen the look in your eyes when that--" She could go no further, wheezing with her attempts to breathe. Finally, after many minutes, she stood upright again. "We wrecked the potion," she said gravely, the smile still lingering around her mouth.

"I beg your pardon," Snape said, smirking. "I believe *you* wrecked the potion."

"What? And I suppose I flicked that beetle eye at myself?" she said.

"It fell," he said. "I bear no responsibility for this mess. Although I dare say St Mungo's can live with one less crate of Invigoration Draught."

"It's cruel what you're doing, you know. Those poor people in intake," she said, her eyes crinkling.

"I have no idea what you are going on about. St Mungo's requested potions. I am merely providing them."

"I don't think there's anything *merely* about what you're doing," she said, but there was no reproach in her tone, and she took his hand and led him up the stairs for tea. As they emerged into the kitchen, he allowed himself to hope that she was coming back to him, that what he was giving her might be enough.

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One morning in November, the day that they were due to begin the Memory Potion, they sat side by side on the couch in the sitting room. It was past time to begin their brewing, but it was Saturday, and why that should matter when every day consisted of the same activities, he did not know, but for some reason, he felt it was acceptable for them to linger over breakfast on the weekends. They could always put in the extra hours after dinner.

He had his feet up on the coffee table and a cup of tea balanced on the arm of the couch, and he was idly looking at the pages of his book without really reading them. He was content to sit there with her, listening to her turning the pages of the Daily Prophet, from which they were mercifully absent. Hermione had talked him into allowing home delivery, as even if someone had the tenacity to determine which owl bore their delivery and tracked it to Manchester, they would still be unable to find the house once they arrived, and it made her happy for some reason, so he had acquiesced. Now she was pestering him about connecting them to the Floo Network, which he felt was another matter entirely, but she kept insisting that it was dangerous to continue sending their owl with ever larger rings of keys to St Mungo's.

"What if they were to Transfigure in the air?" she said every time. "Barney could be killed!"

He rolled his eyes. Why he had allowed her to name that ridiculous bird Barney, he would never know. The only good thing about connecting to the Floo Network, that he could see, was that she would no longer have to pick up his supplies from the apothecary. It amused him that St Mungo's continued to approve the vast amounts of ingredients he ordered, and yet he disliked sending Hermione out almost daily to pick them up.

"What are you rolling your eyes about now?" she asked, smiling. "I haven't done anything exasperating yet today."

"Ah, but the day is young," he said, leaning his head back against the couch and turning toward her.

She nudged him with her foot. "About that," she said. "I was thinking. Let's skive off today. Let's... I don't know. Let's go to Flourish and Blotts."

He stiffened slightly. "Hermione, this house is full of books, and it is not as though either of us has a salary right now."

"We don't have to buy anything. We could just look. Or we could just go to a park--a Muggle one, Severus, not a wizard one--we could just walk around, get out of the house a bit."

"It is November, if you hadn't noticed. It is cold outside."

"Well, then, we could go to Grimmauld Place. It's still under the charm. Harry would be glad to see you; *people* would be glad to see you, Severus. We could owl Minerva; she could meet us--"

"Hermione," he said, a faint edge of warning creeping into his tone.

She looked at him for a long time and then stood up and carried her cup to the kitchen. "It was just a thought," she said, turning and climbing the stairs.

He sighed. He knew what she wanted; he knew that she longed to be normal again, and he did not know how to tell her that this was the only time in his life that he had ever felt normal. It was not that he had a terrible objection to leaving the house. Not entirely. It was just that here, sometimes, some days, when they had been working so easily together, when dusk fell soft and heavy in the sitting room, and the fire crackled, and she laughed... sometimes he could forget how people looked at him outside, forget what it had felt like to sit chained to a chair with hundreds of eyes on him. Here, in the house, he had known the tentative stirrings of happiness, and he was afraid to push the boundaries of anything, for fear that he would upset some precarious balance and find it all destroyed.

But much more than that there was the matter of January. During the long, silent horror of August, he had sworn to himself that he would work every single day, that he would bear no distractions. He had promised her silently that he would complete those nine hundred hours as fast as he was able. He could not give her back most of what had been taken from her, but he would give her what he could, and that meant that he had to work.

He laid his book down on the coffee table and headed for the basement.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

*Chapter 48 of 54*

Hermione is forced to lead a double life when she agrees to Dumbledore's plan to protect Professor Snape. Inspired by the Marriage Law. Warning for student/teacher relationship, though Hermione is of age.

A/N: Here we are at the end, at last. My most heartfelt thanks to Shellsnapelover, RedOrchid, OpalJade and Lulabelle72, without whom this story and my life would be infinitely poorer.

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When December came, unusually frigid and snowy, they had just finished the last of the Pepperup Potion. Snape had insisted that Hermione test it, as she had seemed... gray... since the weather had begun to change, and he teased her mercilessly when the steam came roaring out her ears, until she demanded that he sample it as well. He had done it, and submitted to her laughter, because he had hoped that perhaps a game would do what he feared the potion would not.

But when her giggles had subsided, she had slapped her hands together sharply and said, "All right. What's next?"

He had not known that it was possible to ache for someone else who stood right in front of you, who belonged to you, who was going nowhere. He wished that he could tell her that they were less than a month away, that he would fix this. That he had a plan.

And so he had owled for the last of the money in his vault and counted it out quite carefully, and now she was on her way to Hogsmeade to shop for Christmas presents with exactly what was left over after repaying Minerva and budgeting for one more month's daily expenses. And one trip brief trip to Australia.

She had balked when he'd pressed the money into her palm and insisted that it was not necessary, but she would be spending Christmas Eve at the Burrow in a week, and he had told her that he did not like to think of sending his wife to them with nothing, glaring at her until she had acquiesced.

He climbed the steps to the room they shared, and pulled his heavy traveling cloak from the closet. Minerva had sent everything over from Hogwarts, and though he now had all the robes he could want, he had found he did not wish to wear them, and had gone about in shirtsleeves for the last several months. But now the robes would be necessary.

Buttoning his waistcoat felt strange and unfamiliar, nearly restrictive, and he wondered how he had ever brewed wearing so much clothing, so much weight. He shrugged the cloak on, and steeled himself for what he was about to do.

Snape was returning to Hogwarts.

He opened the door and stood in the chilly December air for a moment. He knew he must hurry--that there was much to be done before she arrived back at home, but something arrested him on the steps, and he realized that he had not felt the wind on his face in almost four months. And suddenly it struck him that his life was a strange amalgam of things that had come before and the trappings of this new life here with her.

He took a deep breath and Apparated away.

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Minerva could not hide her surprise, nor her pleasure, when he turned up at the gates. She pursed her lips together and looked at him sharply. She clucked and fussed and demanded to know whether he had been eating. She berated him for hiding himself away, and asked anxiously after Hermione as she hurried him through the gates and up to the office he had hoped never to see again.

When she reached for the doorknob, he stopped.

"I do not wish to--"

"Oh. Oh, my goodness, yes. Just a moment."

He could hear the murmur of her voice through the heavy office door, which suddenly swung open in front of him. He stepped inside, feeling relieved that it was so changed, and that the portrait was empty as the opened door had seemed to promise.

Minerva settled at her desk after ushering him into a wing backed chair and offering him a drink.

"What is wrong? Is it Hermione?" she asked.

"Hermione? No, of course not. Hermione is fine."

"Forgive me, Severus, but I never expected you to set foot in this place again."

"It is not my preference," he said stiffly. "But as I'm sure you must be aware, the terms of my sentence are nearly fulfilled. I will require employment."

"And you want to come back?" Minerva said, shocked. "I--of course, of course, Hogwarts would be more than pleased--"

"Do not be asinine," Snape said. "I would rather be savaged by a mantichore."

Minerva looked slightly offended. "Well, I don't know if it's as bad as all that."

"The last four months have done little to remind me of the joys of teaching, nor the charms of this castle," he said. "No, what I wish from you is a reference."

There was a quill in her hand nearly before he had finished speaking.

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Hermione nudged the door open with her hip, as her arms were laden with packages. Nearly half of them bore Severus's name, a fact that had touched her more than she had been able to say. The Burrow had been close and warm and nearly overwhelming compared to the spartan countenance of Spinner's End, and yet she had longed for home terribly during the few hours she had been away. She had longed for Severus, and for the kind of easy quiet they had in one another's company. She loved the Weasleys, loved Harry, and yet it seemed to her that the entire evening had had a kind of forced conviviality. No one felt the hearty good cheer they pretended at. They were all worn people, trying to rebuild their lives after a catastrophe, and the pretending, the struggling for happy conversation had tired her. Reminiscing seemed off limits; tonight, they had kept firmly in the present, and everyone had drunk liberally, giving the evening a desperate, high pitched quality.

She would have begged off sooner, but Kingsley had approached her after dinner, and asked to speak to her alone.

"I'm home," she called, edging into the sitting room, where she found herself stopped cold by the sight of her husband sitting on the couch beside a Christmas tree of absolutely gargantuan proportion. Snape feigned nonchalance, but beneath the façade, she saw his naked hope and trepidation.

Her first thought was of how many charms he must have used just to get that thing into the house. The second was the sudden thrill of certainty that he had gone out; he had gone somewhere to get that monstrosity. And the third was something less than a thought, but the recognition of her parents' star atop the tree, its dull, tarnished sides looking perfectly Muggle and more beautiful than anything she had ever seen.

Her eyes filled with tears, and she stood there without speaking, without doing anything but looking at this tree he'd brought her, so obviously a gift, and the tiny bit of her past on top of it.

"I didn't--" he began haltingly. "I don't know if it's right. I have only known the ones at Hogwarts."

She could not speak. She shifted her focus to the man who had risen to stand before her, his hands open.

"There's so much in the box, and I was not... I was not sure where it all went."

"The box," she said stupidly. *The box.*

"Forgive me for invading... for going through your things."

She shook her head to dismiss his apology.

"You shut yourself in that room so often. I began to wonder what had such a hold on you."

She nodded.

He stepped forward and took the packages from her arms. "Say something."

"Lights," she said.

"Yes. I rather thought so," he said, and she had the brief but amusing thought that he was babbling. "But I was not sure what you would prefer, and I did not want to charm it until you said... Hermione, if you hate it, I'll banish it."

She raised her wand and conjured the lights she remembered from her childhood, the large, heavy bulbs that twinkled long and slow. "Of course I don't hate it," she whispered as she sank onto the couch. "Where did you get it?"

Severus extinguished the sconces, plunging them into the soft, warm light of the tree. The shadows on the ceiling flickered and changed. He put the packages on the floor before it.

"The Forbidden Forest. Hagrid chose it. Minerva said it was far too large, but it looks like the Hogwarts trees--"

"You were at Hogwarts? When?"

"While you were shopping. Monday, was it? Just before we finished the Strengthening Solution."

"But why didn't you tell me? I would have gone with you."

"Woman, have you never heard of a surprise? And besides... I had other business there."

"Sit, Severus. What on earth are you talking about?"

He sat gingerly, as if he were afraid she might hit him or run.

"I finished the Wound Cleaning Potion."

"Without me? But I thought you were going to show me how to lacerate the--" She stopped suddenly. Wound Cleaning Potion was the last potion. "Wait, you finished the Wound Cleaning Potion?"

"Astute as always," he said, smirking. "And now, with my penance to society paid... I thought I had best secure myself some form of employment."

She waited silently. She would go where he went. If he told her they had to live in that place again, she would go, but she could not imagine it.

"Severus?" she said at last.

"Slug and Jiggers. The pay is meager, but they were willing to hire me, and for that I am... grateful."

She let out a breath that she had not realized she had been holding. "For a moment, I thought you meant--"

"No."

She nodded, and her blood quickened at the thought that they might stay here in Spinner's End. By Floo--oh, now she had the leverage she needed!--by Floo, he could commute without having to endure the public. She touched his hand lightly, and was gratified when he immediately folded it into his own.

"They would like me to begin in two weeks," he said. "I asked that there be enough time beforehand that we could make the trip to Australia."

Something inside her shivered and stopped. It was not that she had not realized that they would go. She had known it the moment he asked in Kingsley's office after the trial. But she had not allowed herself to think of it. She had not wanted to hope too hard or pin her happiness on something that could still go so dreadfully wrong. And so she had spent the last few months trying to build a world that she could live in regardless, but now she saw what he had meant in crowning the tree, this night, the way that he had.

"I do not know if I will be able to find them, Hermione. And even if I did, I do not know if it can be undone. But I want to try. I want to try to give you that much."

*Idiot*, she thought, half fiercely and half affectionately. She clutched his hand and turned to face him.

"Don't you ever speak to me that way," she said quietly, and he looked as if he had been slapped. "Like I'm some debt that can't be repaid. I will not have it. I am not Dumbledore, not Shackbolt... not... not anyone but me."

His eyes were dark and guarded. They both knew what she had not said.

"I love my family, and I want them back so badly. But, Severus--listen to me. If we can't find them... No," she said, taking his jaw in her hand and turning it back toward her. "Look at me. If we can't find them, it doesn't change anything here. I'll still be your wife. I will still love you."

He shook his head slightly, and she withdrew her hand.

"I wish for you to be happy," he said, and she marveled that he could sound so stiff and so broken, all at once.

"Then tell me that when we get back, you'll teach me how to properly lacerate daisy roots. Tell me that we can connect to the Floo Network, and that if I choose to work for Kingsley you will harass me about it until we're a hundred, but that you won't really hate it. But don't you dare think that you have to earn my happiness."

His eyes closed, and the look that passed over his face was unreadable. It was as if something she had not known was there had fallen away.

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He could see the world she spun in the air, as ethereal and strange as the tree that stood in the corner of the room, and he wondered if he dared to reach for it. It seemed to him that they would have to begin the beginning, that he would have to find it in himself to try again, and he felt flush with fear at what it might cost him, at the chance that he might try and fail.

He looked into her earnest face and pictured her as she had been outside a tent on a different snowy December evening, unbroken. He watched his hand as it moved tentatively to touch her, and the familiar burn of their flesh meeting was terrifying in its power. For a moment his heart quailed, and he nearly drew his fingers back, and then her hand covered his, in silent acceptance of his invitation. Terror and desire mingled in his bloodstream as he reached for her, and he was comforted by the fact that she trembled, too, as he folded her into his arms.

The shadows on the walls changed and morphed, soft reds and greens and golds. Snape could feel Hermione's shuddering breaths against his chest. He stroked a hand over her hair, and she tipped her head back to look at him. His eyes closed as he exhaled the last of his resistance and lowered his mouth to hers. For her, for this, he would try.

**Mr.**

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**Mr.**

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**Mr.**

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**Mr.**

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**Mr.**

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*Chapter 54 of 54*

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